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Sufism in the United States: Spiritual Development, Social Needs, and Its Political Significance in American Foreign Policy

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Abstract: Following September 11, 2001, U.S. foreign-policy discourse increasingly portrayed Sufism as a form of "moderate Islam" associated with tolerance and counter-extremism. However, treating Sufism's internal development and external political representation separately risks reducing it either to private mystical practice or to an instrument of state policy. This study examines the transformation of Sufism in the United States into an organized religious and social movement and its relationship with American public diplomacy. Using a qualitative literature review with a historical-critical approach, this study draws on literature, historical records, institutional reports, and policy documents. It focuses on four themes: the development and transformation of Sufism in the United States, its response to spiritual and social needs, its role in religious pluralism and interfaith relations, and its political significance in American foreign policy. Results show that Sufism in the United States responds to needs for inner peace, belonging, tolerance, and community engagement through Sufi centres, education, and charitable activities. The 2003 Nixon Centre symposium illustrates how policymakers incorporated Sufism into discussions of religious diplomacy and counter-extremism. Nevertheless, theological diversity, anti-colonial histories, and the Sufi-inspired Gülen Movement highlight the autonomy of Sufi communities. This study argues that although institutionalisation increases Sufism's public visibility and diplomatic relevance, Sufism cannot be reduced to a tool of U.S. foreign policy.

Contribution: This study shows how Sufism's institutionalisation in the United States balances spiritual autonomy, social engagement, and political representation beyond its use as a foreign-policy tool.

Keywords: American; Sufism; social need; politics; foreign policy

Introduction

Sufism has developed a significant presence in the United States as part of the broader history of Islam in North America. Its roots are associated with both the presence and writings of enslaved Muslims and the arrival of Sufi teachers in the early twentieth Century. The arrival of Inayat Khan in 1910 is often identified as an important milestone in the documented development of Sufism in the United States. As time went on, Sufism grew because of the efforts of various teachers. Sufi orders, conferences, organizations, and community institutions produced a wide variety of spiritual and group activities.[1] The growth of Sufism in the United States, therefore, cannot be understood simply as the transplanting of an already existing religious tradition; it also involves institutionalization, adaptation, and transformation within a diverse American social environment.[2] The increasing presence of Sufism also needs to be understood in relation to the spiritual and social needs of American communities. Existing literature shows that some people are drawn to Sufism because of its focus on spirituality, inner peace, dialogue, acceptance of diversity, and the search for meaning.

Sufism therefore operates not only at the level of individual religious experience but also through communities, educational activities, charitable initiatives, lectures, spiritual gatherings, and institutional networks[3]. These developments demonstrate that Sufism has gradually acquired a social dimension alongside its spiritual function. At the same time, Sufism has taken on a different meaning in American political and foreign-policy discourse. Particularly after the events of September 11, 2001, Sufism increasingly appeared in discussions concerning religious moderation, counter-extremism, Muslim community engagement, and the political role of religious actors.[4] The 2003 Nixon Center symposium on Sufism and US foreign-policy objectives illustrates this development, discussing Sufism as a form of Islam associated with tolerance and as a possible interlocutor for policymakers.[5] Later talks about Sufi groups, religious figures, and how countries interact with them show that Sufism became

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1 Ayse Gül Altinay, *The Myth of the Military-Nation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2004), https://doi.org/10.1057/9781403979360.

2 Marcia Hermansen, "Hybrid Identity Formations in Muslim America: The Case of American Sufi Movements 1," *The Muslim World* 90, no. 1–2 (2000): 158–97, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1478-1913.2000.tb03686.x.

3 Ahmad Muttaqin and Priyambudi Sulistiyanto, "Expanding Religious Freedom Through Organizational Forms: Kebatinan, Sufism and The Global Growth Movement in Indonesia's Spiritual Training Industry," *Al-Jami'ah: Journal of Islamic Studies* 62, no. 2 (2024): 363–85, https://doi.org/10.14421/ajis.2024.622.363-385.

4 Marcia Hermansen, *Sufi Movements in America*, ed. Jane I. Smith and Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, vol. 1 (Oxford University Press, 2014), https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199862634.013.010.

5 Zeyno Baran, ed., *Understanding Sufism and Its Potential Role in U.S. Policy* (Washington DC: The Nixon Center, 2004), 6.

a key part where religion, society, and international relations meet. This development creates an important analytical problem. Sufism is both a religious and spiritual practice, a way of organizing communities, and something that is interpreted in political ways.[6] Treating these dimensions as identical risks reducing Sufism to either an apolitical spiritual practice or an instrument of state policy. Moreover, not all Sufi orders in the United States share the same theological orientation, organizational structure, or political position. The literature cited in this study emphasizes the diversity of Sufi traditions and cautions against assuming a uniform Sufi response to American political objectives.

Previous studies on Sufism in the West can be grouped into three clusters. The first cluster maps the history, typology, and institutional life of Sufi movements in North America and Europe. Hermansen's widely used typology distinguishes "perennial" movements, which present Sufism as a universal spirituality only loosely tied to Islamic law, from "hybrid" movements, which retain an explicitly Islamic framework while adapting to American culture, and from "transplants," which mainly serve immigrant Muslim communities.[7] Later works extended this mapping. Dickson shows how North American Sufi teachers negotiate between inherited tradition and local transformation, while Xavier demonstrates how the shrine of Bawa Muhaiyaddeen in Pennsylvania anchors transnational devotional networks.[8] At the European and transatlantic level, Sedgwick shows that Sufi orders in Britain, Germany, France, and North America localize transnational religious authority in different ways.[9] Ethnographic research in Europe, such as Werbner's study of *dhikr* processions among British

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6 Khairudin Aljunied, "Restoring Sufism in the Modern Age," in *Hamka and Islam* (Cornell University Press, 2018), 85–102, https://doi.org/10.7591/cornell/9781501724565.003.0006.

7 Hermansen, "Hybrid Identity Formations."

8 William Rory Dickson, *Living Sufism in North America: Between Tradition and Transformation* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2015); Merin Shobhana Xavier, *Sacred Spaces and Transnational Networks in American Sufism: Bawa Muhaiyaddeen and Contemporary Shrine Cultures* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018).

9 Mark Sedgwick, *Western Sufism: From the Abbasids to the New Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 27; David Westerlund, ed., *Sufism in Europe and North America* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004), 35; Jamal Malik and John Hinnells, eds., *Sufism in the West* (London: Routledge, 2006), 87; Ron Geaves, Markus Dressler, and Gritt Klinkhammer, eds., *Sufis in Western Society: Global Networking and Locality* (London: Routledge, 2009), 99; Francesco Piraino and Mark Sedgwick, *Global Sufism: Boundaries, Structures and Politics* (Hurst & Company, 2019), 29.

Muslims, likewise shows that Sufi ritual produces social space and collective identity rather than only private religious experience.[10]

The second cluster examines the political uses of Sufism, particularly after September 11, 2001. Muedini argues that governments in Muslim-majority states, as well as in Britain and the United States, have sponsored Sufism as an apparently apolitical and tolerant alternative to Islamist movements, while such sponsorship often serves the interests of the state and overlooks the political history of Sufi orders.[11] Corbett's study of the "Ground Zero mosque" controversy shows how Sufi-identified American Muslim leaders were celebrated as models of "moderate Islam" and, at the same time, constrained by that very label.[12] Policy documents, including the Nixon Center conference report and RAND studies on moderate Muslim networks, reveal how Sufism was framed as a potential partner in American strategy.[13] The third cluster, much of it published in Indonesian and other Muslim-world journals, reads Western Sufism as a form of religious adaptation. Yusak analyzes American Sufism in the context of "do-it-yourself" religiosity, Efendi, Gazali, and Putri map the historical models of Sufism in the West, and Hermansen shows that the academic study of Sufism in American universities has itself shaped public perceptions of the tradition.[14]

Taken together, these studies tend to examine the spiritual-institutional and the political dimensions of American Sufism separately. The first and third clusters rarely engage with foreign-policy discourse, whereas the second cluster

[10] Pnina Werbner, "Stamping the Earth with the Name of Allah: Zikr and the Sacralizing of Space among British Muslims," *Cultural Anthropology* 11, no. 3 (1996): 309–38, https://doi.org/10.1525/can.1996.11.3.02a00020.

[11] Fait Muedini, *Sponsoring Sufism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2015), https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137521071.

[12] Rosemary R. Corbett, *Making Moderate Islam: Sufism, Service, and the "Ground Zero Mosque" Controversy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017), 35.

[13] Baran, *Understanding Sufism and Its Potential Role, 26*; Cheryl Benard, *Civil Democratic Islam: Partners, Resources, and Strategies* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2003), 31; Angel Rabasa et al., *Building Moderate Muslim Networks* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2007), 21.

[14] Nailil Muna Yusak, "A Wayfarer in a Land of the Free: American Sufism in the Age of DIY Religiosity," *International Journal Ihya' 'Ulum Al-Din* 21, no. 1 (2020): 1–16, https://doi.org/10.21580/ihya.21.1.3498; Efendi Efendi, Gazali Gazali, and Endrika Widdia Putri, "Western Sufism: A Study on Historical and Models of Sufism in the West," *Jurnal Fuaduna : Jurnal Kajian Keagamaan Dan Kemasyarakatan* 6, no. 2 (2022): 163–78, https://doi.org/10.30983/fuaduna.v6i2.5848; Marcia Hermansen, "The Academic Study of Sufism at American Universities," *American Journal of Islam and Society* 24, no. 3 (2007): 24–45, https://doi.org/10.35632/ajis.v24i3.423.

tends to treat Sufism mainly as an object of state strategy and pays limited attention to the spiritual needs, community life, and interfaith engagement that make Sufism socially meaningful in the first place. What remains insufficiently explained is how the transformation of Sufism in the United States connects its spiritual purpose, its social and organizational life, its role in religious pluralism, and its political significance, and where the boundaries of that connection lie. In particular, it is important to distinguish why Sufism attracts American spiritual seekers and communities from why government officials and policy institutions may regard it as a useful partner in religious engagement or counter-extremism.[15]

This study is significant because it places these dimensions within a single analytical framework. It views Sufism not as a homogeneous movement but as a diverse, changing phenomenon whose meanings emerge through interactions among spiritual seekers, religious communities, Sufi organizations, academics, and policymakers. The study therefore examines both Sufism's internal social and spiritual functions and its external political representation. Accordingly, this article analyses Sufism's transformation in the United States from a primarily spiritual tradition into a diversified religious and social movement, while examining how this transformation intersects with American public diplomacy and foreign-policy discourse. More specifically, the study addresses four related issues: the historical development and transformation of Sufism in the United States; the spiritual and social needs to which Sufism responds, including its role in community life; the contribution of Sufism to religious pluralism and interfaith relations; and the political significance of Sufism in American foreign policy, including its representation in diplomatic discourse, the forms of Sufi involvement, and the limits of that involvement. This study therefore focuses on the spiritual, social, institutional, and political dimensions of Sufism in the United States. Rather than assuming that Sufism naturally functions as an instrument of American policy, the study examines how Sufi agency interacts with political representation. It identifies the boundaries between Sufism as a religious-social phenomenon and Sufism as a subject of diplomatic and strategic interest.

Literature Review

Sufism and Social Needs

Sufism is generally associated with cultivating spiritual consciousness, inner purification, and seeking closeness to God. In today's American society, its

[15] Rubaidi et al., "Sufism, Sharia, & Politics: Contesting Islamic Authority in Contemporary Aceh," *AHKAM : Jurnal Ilmu Syariah* 25, no. 2 (2025): 379–94, https://doi.org/10.15408/ajis.v25i2.46792; Muttaqin and Sulistiyanto, "Expanding Religious Freedom."

importance goes beyond just personal mystical experiences. The growth of Sufism in the United States shows that spiritual practices can address wider social needs, such as those created by religious diversity, different cultures, changing ideas about who we are, and the quest for meaning in today's world.[16] One key aspect is the need for spiritual meaning and inner calm. This study's research shows that Sufism attracts people because of its deep spiritual ideas, focus on changing oneself from within, welcoming others, and the goal of purifying the soul. For people who feel unsure or want different ways to think about religion that aren't heavily tied to politics, Sufism can offer a way to think deeply, practice spirituality, and look for purpose. In this sense, Sufism responds to an individual spiritual need without necessarily being detached from the social environment in which that need emerges.[17]

A second dimension concerns the need for belonging and social connectedness. Sufism in the United States has developed through organized communities, spiritual centers, lectures, seminars, dhikr gatherings, educational activities, and networks of religious followers. These institutions transform Sufism from an exclusively personal religious experience into a form of collective life. Sufi organizations may provide spaces where individuals construct religious identities, interact with others, participate in shared spiritual practices, and develop relationships across ethnic and cultural boundaries. The existence of different Sufi centers and orders in the United States demonstrates this institutional and communal dimension.[18]

A third dimension is the need for social tolerance and coexistence. Scholarly works consistently link Sufism to receptiveness, conversation, respect for diversity, and interaction with individuals from varied religious backgrounds. Within the American setting, these traits may enable Sufism to function in a socially pluralistic context.[19] However, tolerance should not necessarily be treated as synonymous with political moderation, since spiritual receptivity and political alignment constitute distinct analytical categories. The former relates to religious and social exchanges, while the latter involves the interpretation and

[16] Tajamul Islam and Uma Chandrasekaran, "Religiosity, Values and Consumer Behaviour: A Study of Young Indian Muslim Consumers," *Journal of Consumer Marketing* 36, no. 7 (2019): 948–61, https://doi.org/10.1108/JCM-10-2017-2415.

[17] Eric Geoffroy and Roger Gaetani, *Introduction to Sufism: The Inner Path of Islam* (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2010), 55.

[18] Björn Bentlage et al., eds., *Religious Dynamics under the Impact of Imperialism and Colonialism* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 97.

[19] Bentlage et al.

political application of religious principles. A fourth aspect is the societal role of religious institutions.[20] Certain Sufi groups maintain charitable schemes, educational programs, and local community projects. These efforts demonstrate that the societal function of Sufism cannot be confined to personal spirituality. Rather, institutionally organized Sufism may help advance community well-being and collective solidarity. The transformation of Sufism in America can therefore be understood partly as a shift from individual spiritual practice toward organized religious and social activity.[21]

These dimensions provide the theoretical basis for understanding Sufism as a response to social and spiritual needs. At the same time, they explain why Sufism should be understood as a transforming movement rather than merely a static spiritual tradition. Its adaptation to American society involves creating institutions, communities, educational activities, charitable initiatives, and new organizational forms. The diversity of orders in the United States further demonstrates that this transformation does not produce a single model of American Sufism.[22]

Religion and Public Diplomacy

Religion has increasingly become relevant to international relations because religious actors and institutions can influence social perceptions, build interpersonal relationships, communicate values, and create channels of engagement that extend beyond formal state-to-state relations. Within this framework, public diplomacy can be understood as states' efforts to communicate with and build relationships with foreign societies through cultural, social, educational, religious, and institutional engagement.[23]

Religious actors can be relevant to public diplomacy because they have forms of social legitimacy and community access that state institutions may not have. Religious organizations and leaders may therefore serve as interlocutors through whom states communicate with religious communities, understand local

[20] Natalya Seitakhmetova and Sholpan Zhandossova, "Between Security and Belonging: State Policy on Religious Extremism, Political Values and the Politics of Identity," *Frontiers in Political Science* 8 (2026), https://doi.org/10.3389/fpos.2026.1818270.

[21] Etin Anwar, "Prophetic Models in Islamic and Christian Spirituality in the Thought of Ibn Arabī and Meister Eckhart," *Islam and Christian–Muslim Relations* 15, no. 1 (2004): 147–62, https://doi.org/10.1080/0959641031000163188 5.

[22] M. Shobhana Xavier, "An American Sufi Shrine, Bawa's Mazar in Coatesville, Pennsylvania," *Conversations: An Online Journal of the Center for the Study of Material and Visual Cultures of Religion*, 2016, https://doi.org/10.22332/con.obj.2016.5.

[23] Yusak, "A Wayfarer in a Land of the Free."

social dynamics, and develop broader networks of engagement. This does not mean that religious actors automatically become instruments of state policy. Rather, their involvement creates a field of interaction in which religious agency and political interests may converge, diverge, or remain separate[24].

In the case of Sufism, the relationship between religion and public diplomacy became particularly visible when American policymakers and policy institutions began to discuss Sufism in relation to tolerance, moderate Islam, counter-extremism, and engagement with Muslim communities. The Nixon Center symposium of October 24, 2003, is an important example because it explicitly examined the potential relationship between Sufism and US foreign-policy objectives and discussed ways in which Sufi institutions and teachings could be incorporated into policy thinking.[25]

The concept of public diplomacy is therefore useful for distinguishing religious identity from political representation. Sufism may represent itself primarily as a spiritual tradition concerned with ethical and religious development. In contrast, policymakers may represent it as a form of Islam characterized by tolerance, moderation, or resistance to extremism. These two representations may overlap, but they are not necessarily identical. The analytical task is therefore to examine how political actors represent Sufism, rather than assuming that political representation fully reflects Sufism itself.[26]

This framework also requires attention to the forms of religious engagement. Diplomatic engagement may involve contact with Sufi leaders, participation in religious events, support for cultural or educational activities, interaction with Sufi institutions, or including religious actors in policy-oriented discussions. The materials reviewed in this study provide examples of American diplomatic representatives engaging with Sufi communities and visiting Sufi institutions in countries such as Sudan and Egypt.[27]

However, the relationship between Sufism and public diplomacy has clear boundaries. First, Sufi orders are internally diverse and may have different theological, organizational, and political orientations. Second, diplomatic

[24] Rubaidi et al., "Sufism, Sharia, & Politics."

[25] Laleh Bakhtiar, *Sufi Women of America: Angels in the Making* (Chicago: Kazi Publications, Inc., 1996), 75.

[26] Xavier, "An American Sufi Shrine, Bawa's Mazar in Coatesville, Pennsylvania."

[27] Saeyd Rashed Hasan Chowdury, "SUFISM IN CONTEMPORARY CONTEXTS: Spirituality, Subjectivity, and the Limits of Modern Rationality," *MIQOT: Jurnal Ilmu-Ilmu Keislaman* 50, no. 1 (February 4, 2026): 1–32, https://doi.org/10.30821/miqot.v50i1.1566.

engagement does not necessarily mean Sufi organizations accept or implement state objectives. Third, religious communities retain their own agency and may resist political interpretations imposed upon them. Finally, historical examples show that Sufi movements have adopted different positions toward political authority and colonial power, including both cooperation and resistance.[28]

Thus, these two conceptual perspectives reinforce one another: the first explains why Sufism can hold social and spiritual value within American society, while the second explains why it can gain political weight in diplomatic rhetoric.[29] Together, they provide a framework for examining the evolution of Sufism in the United States, as well as for discerning the points of intersection and the boundaries between its spiritual, social, and political dimensions.[30]

Method

This study employs a qualitative literature review with a historical-critical approach.[31] The literature review design is used to collect, assess, and synthesize existing scholarship and documents on Sufism in the United States, while the historical-critical approach is used to read these materials as historically situated sources rather than as neutral descriptions. Following the standard steps of the historical method, the research proceeded through four stages: heuristics (locating and collecting sources), source criticism, interpretation, and historiography (writing the historical-analytical synthesis).[32] Source criticism was carried out at two levels. External criticism examined the authenticity and provenance of each source, including its authorship, date, publisher, and the institution that produced it. Internal criticism assessed the credibility and consistency of its content by comparing it with other sources and by considering

[28] Moh. Nor Ichwan et al., "Sufism And Quranic Interpretation: Bridging Spirituality, Culture, and Political Discourse in Muslim Societies," *Ulumuna* 28, no. 2 (2024): 655–80, https://doi.org/10.20414/ujis.v28i2.1082.

[29] Leila Chamankhah, "Dialogue with The Master: Early Shī'a Encounters with Akbarīan Mysticism," *TEOSOFI: Jurnal Tasawuf Dan Pemikiran Islam* 10, no. 1 (2020): 155–78, https://doi.org/10.15642/teosofi.2020.10.1.155-178.

[30] Feyza Akova, "Journeys to Sufi Islam in America: Self-Transcendence, Tradition, and Social Change in the Contemporary World" (University of Notre Dame, 2025), https://doi.org/10.7274/28792631.

[31] Hannah Snyder, "Literature Review as a Research Methodology: An Overview and Guidelines," *Journal of Business Research* 104 (2019): 333–39, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2019.07.039.

[32] Kuntowijoyo, *Metodologi Sejarah* (Yogyakarta: Tiara Wacana, 2003), 89–105; Louis Gottschalk, *Understanding History: A Primer of Historical Method* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1950), 87.

the position and interests of its author, for example, whether a text was written by a Sufi organization describing itself, by an academic researcher, or by a policy institution with strategic objectives. This critical step is essential because the representation of Sufism as "moderate Islam" originates largely in policy documents whose purposes differ from those of Sufi communities and academic observers.

The study relies exclusively on secondary and documentary sources and involves no interviews, field observations, or respondents. These sources fall into three categories: (1) scholarly literature, namely academic books, book chapters, and peer-reviewed journal articles on Sufism in the United States and the West; (2) documents produced by Sufi orders and organizations, such as publications, official websites, and records of their activities; and (3) policy documents, including think-tank reports, conference reports, and published statements related to Sufism, moderate Islam, and American foreign policy.[33]

Scholarly sources were searched in Scopus, Google Scholar, JSTOR, and the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ) for international publications, and in SINTA and the Garuda portal for Indonesian national journals. Policy and institutional documents were retrieved from the official websites of the institutions concerned, such as the Nixon Center and the RAND Corporation, and from the websites of Sufi organizations active in the United States. The search used the following keywords, individually and in Boolean combinations: "Sufism in America," "American Sufism," "Sufi orders" AND "United States," "Western Sufism," "Sufism" AND "Europe," "Sufism" AND "foreign policy," "Sufism" AND "public diplomacy," "moderate Islam" AND "Sufism," "Sufism" AND "counter-extremism," and "Sufism" AND "interfaith." Indonesian-language searches used the keywords "tasawuf di Amerika," "sufisme Barat," and "tarekat di Amerika Serikat."

Sources were selected in three stages. First, titles and abstracts were screened for relevance to at least one of four analytical themes: (1) the historical development and transformation of Sufism in the United States; (2) the spiritual and social needs associated with Sufism; (3) Sufism, religious pluralism, and interfaith relations; and (4) the representation and role of Sufism in American political, diplomatic, and foreign-policy discourse, particularly after September 11, 2001. Second, the full texts of the remaining sources were assessed against

[33] Glenn A. Bowen, "Document Analysis as a Qualitative Research Method," *Qualitative Research Journal* 9, no. 2 (2009): 27–40, https://doi.org/10.3316/QRJ0902027.

the following inclusion criteria: the source substantively discusses Sufism in the United States or the West, or the relationship between Sufism and Western politics; it is published by an academic publisher, a peer-reviewed journal, or an identifiable institution; and its full text is accessible in English, Indonesian, or Arabic. Duplicates, opinion pieces without identifiable authorship, and sources that mention Sufism only in passing were excluded. Third, the reference lists of key works, such as those of Hermansen, Dickson, Muedini, and Corbett, were traced to identify further relevant sources (backward snowballing).[34]

The selected materials were analyzed using qualitative thematic analysis.[35] Relevant passages were coded according to the four themes above, and the codes were then compared across source types to identify similarities, differences, and recurring patterns. Historical sources were used to reconstruct the emergence and transformation of Sufism in the United States, whereas academic studies and policy documents were used to analyze its social role, interfaith engagement, and political representation. Throughout the analysis, the historical-critical principle was applied by contrasting how Sufi organizations represent themselves, how academic researchers describe them, and how policymakers frame them. The findings are therefore presented as an interpretive synthesis that integrates the perspectives of spiritual seekers, religious communities, Sufi organizations, academics, and policymakers.

This study does not assume that Sufism is a monolithic movement. The analysis explicitly acknowledges the differences among Sufi orders (*ṭarīqa*), associations, and individual orientations. It also distinguishes Sufism as a religious and spiritual phenomenon from its interpretation as a political instrument, whether as a means of countering extremism, fostering religious moderation, or advancing foreign-policy objectives. Through this framework, the study analyzes how Sufism has developed and adapted within American society, why it acquires different meanings for different actors, and how its spiritual and social functions intersect with, but do not fully determine, its political and diplomatic significance.

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[34] Snyder, "Literature Review as a Research Methodology."

[35] Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology," *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, no. 2 (2006): 77–101, https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa.

Results and Discussion

The Development and Transformation of Sufism in the United States

The history of Sufism in the United States can be divided into several overlapping phases. Traces of Sufi piety are sometimes associated with enslaved West African Muslims, some of whom came from regions where Sufi orders were influential, although documentary evidence of organized Sufi life in this period is very limited. The documented history of organized Sufism generally begins with the arrival of the Indian musician and teacher Hazrat Inayat Khan in 1910. His Sufi Order in the West presented Sufism as a universal message of love, harmony, and the unity of religious ideals, an approach that attracted American and European audiences who were not necessarily interested in converting to Islam.[36] In the 1960s and 1970s, the counterculture and the search for alternative spirituality widened this audience: Inayat Khan's American disciple Samuel Lewis developed the Dances of Universal Peace, and translations of Rumi and other Sufi poets became widely popular. This phase produced what Hermansen calls "perennial" forms of Sufism, which emphasize universal spirituality over Islamic practice.[37]

A second phase followed the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, which enabled larger migration from Muslim-majority countries and brought teachers from established Sufi lineages. Even earlier, immigrant communities had established transplanted institutions, such as the Albanian Bektashi *tekke* in Michigan led by Baba Rexheb.[38] The Sri Lankan teacher Bawa Muhaiyaddeen arrived in Philadelphia in 1971, and his fellowship later built a mosque and a shrine (*mazār*) in Pennsylvania.[39] The Halveti-Jerrahi order was established in New York from the late 1970s through the visits of the Turkish shaykh Muzaffer Ozak, and the Naqshbandi-Haqqani order expanded after Shaykh Muhammad Hisham Kabbani settled in the United States in 1991 and developed centers in several states.[40] Other networks followed: the Golden Sufi Center represents the

[36] Hermansen, "Hybrid Identity Formations"; Dickson, *Living Sufism in North America*.

[37] Akova, "Journeys to Sufi Islam in America."

[38] Seyedamirhossein Asghari, "The Bektashi Order, Sufism, and Shi'ism in the Work of Baba Rexheb, a Bektashi Sufi of 20th Century," *Turkish Journal of Shiite Studies* 3, no. 1 (2021): 51–74, https://doi.org/10.48203/siader.799560.

[39] Gisela Webb, "Third-Wave Sufism in America and the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship," in *Sufism in the West*, ed. Jamal Malik and John Hinnells (London: Routledge, 2006), 101–102; Xavier, *Sacred Spaces and Transnational Networks*.

[40] Naila Putri Imani, Iqbal Ramdhani, and Yuniar, "From Ego to Essence: The Intersection of Sufi Mysticism and Psychotherapy in Islamic Thought," in *Seminar Nasional*

Naqshbandi-Mujaddidi tradition; Shadhili groups organize lectures, seminars, *dhikr*, and supplication; the Rifa'i-Qadiri network combines spiritual activities with charitable programs; and the Mevlevi tradition developed branches through the Threshold Society.[41] These groups correspond more closely to Hermansen's "hybrid" and "transplant" categories because they maintain Islamic ritual and law while adapting to American society.

The transformation of Sufism in the United States is visible in several adaptations. Teaching is conducted mainly in English; gatherings often include men and women together; retreat centers, publishing houses, music, and digital media have become important channels of transmission; and leadership has gradually passed to American-born teachers. These adaptations show that the growth of Sufism is not merely the transplanting of a foreign tradition but a process of institutionalization and adaptation within a plural and modern society. This transformation does not, however, produce a single "American Sufism." Orders differ substantially in theology, organizational structure, and their relationship to Islamic law: some remain closely tied to Islamic sources and traditional practice, while others emphasize universal spirituality or civic engagement.[42] The movement character of Sufism is therefore reflected in three related processes: the creation of permanent institutions, the formation of communities and networks, and the adaptation of Sufi teachings to the social and cultural environment of the United States.[43]

Sufi-inspired civic movements represent a further form of transformation. Fethullah Gülen, who lived in Pennsylvania from 1999 until his death in 2024, drew heavily on Sufi ethics and literature but did not present himself as a shaykh or lead a formal *ṭarīqa*.[44] His movement combined a spiritual orientation with education, media, and civil-society organizations, showing how Sufi-inspired values can be institutionalized outside the traditional structure of a Sufi order.[45]

Teknologi Dan Multidisiplin Ilmu (SEMNASTEKMU) (stekom.ac.id, 2025), 812–21, https://doi.org/10.51903/037dq182.

41 Patricia Idoko, "Transcending Boundaries: A Comparative Analysis of Islamic and Christian Mysticism," kalima.respectgs.us, 2025, https://kalima.respectgs.us/transcending-boundaries-a-comparative-analysis-of-islamic-and-christian-mysticism/.

42 Saeed Zarrabi-Zadeh, ed., *Sufism in the Modern World* (MDPI, 2024), https://doi.org/10.3390/books978-3-7258-1360-5.

43 Zarrabi-Zadeh.

44 Sokhi Huda, "Fethullah Gülen's Perspective on Sufism (Translated from Indonesian Slide)," Hizmet Talks, 2021, https://doi.org/10.5281/ZENODO.4557872.

45 Huda.

Similar developments in North America indicate that Sufi spirituality can take on new organizational forms while retaining its ethical core.[46]

Sufism as a Response to Spiritual and Social Needs

The expansion of Sufism in the United States cannot be explained by institutional growth alone; it is also connected to concrete spiritual needs that emerge in American society. The literature identifies at least four such needs.[47] The first is the search for meaning amid existential crisis. In a highly secularized and consumer-oriented society, many individuals experience a gap between material success and inner fulfilment.[48] Sufism offers a framework in which life is understood as a journey (*sulūk*) toward God and self-knowledge, giving coherence to personal experience.[49] The second is the need for inner peace and spiritual discipline. Practices such as *dhikr* (remembrance of God), *murāqaba* (contemplative meditation), *samā'* (spiritual listening and music), and retreat (*khalwa*) provide structured techniques for calming the mind and cultivating self-control, which many practitioners describe as a response to stress and restlessness.[50]

The third is the need for belonging in response to social alienation. Converts may feel distant both from their former religious communities and from immigrant mosques, while second-generation Muslims may search for a form of Islam that is spiritually rich and at home in American culture. Sufi circles offer both groups a community of companionship (*ṣuḥba*) and a personal relationship with a spiritual guide.[51] The fourth is the need for a religious identity that can

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[46] Dickson, *Living Sufism in North America*.

[47] Muhammad Saiful Islami Mohd Taher et al., "The Role of Sufism in Shaping Ethical Practices and Business Integrity: Examining Spiritual Consciousness as a Mediator in Islamic Business," in *3rd International Conference on Business, Finance, Management and Economic (BizFAME 2024)* (Bangkok, 2024), 38–58, https://doi.org/10.2991/978-94-6463-827-1_5.

[48] Kasmuri et al., "Abd Al-Qādir Al-Jīlānī's Sufism: A Spiritual Response to Modern Crises of Meaning," *Al-A'raf: Jurnal Pemikiran Islam Dan Filsafat* 22, no. 1 (2025): 26–64, https://doi.org/10.22515/ajpif.v22i1.11025.

[49] Hishyar Hasan and Youniss Ahmed, "الرمز، الرؤية) في التجربة الصوفية وأبعادها دلالاتها الرحلة، المرجعية (- قراءة تأسيسية –," *The Journal of The University of Duhok* 23, no. 1 (2020): 249–66, https://doi.org/10.26682/hjuod.2020.23.1.17.

[50] Mukhlas Habibi, Lailatul Hidayati, and Alfiani Rif'atus Sholihah, "Sufism Education as a Strategy for Developing Social and Religious Character: A Literature Review of the Book 'Mati Sebelum Mati, Buka Kesadaran Hakiki,'" *MA'ALIM: Jurnal Pendidikan Islam* 6, no. 1 (2025): 30–45, https://doi.org/10.21154/maalim.v6i1.10783.

[51] Akova, "Journeys to Sufi Islam in America."

coexist with modern, plural life. Yusak's notion of "do-it-yourself" religiosity captures how many Americans combine Sufi practices with other commitments, while hybrid orders show that Islamic observance can be adapted to American contexts without being abandoned.[52] These needs differ according to the type of movement: perennial groups mainly attract seekers of universal spirituality, whereas hybrid and transplant orders more often serve Muslims who seek spiritual depth and continuity with tradition.[53]

These needs are met not only in individual experience but through community life. Sufi centers provide physical spaces in which religious practice becomes collective: weekly *dhikr* gatherings, shared meals, lectures, study circles, celebrations of the Prophet's birthday (*mawlid*), annual commemorations of saints (*'urs*), and visits to shrines such as Bawa Muhaiyaddeen's *mazār* in Coatesville sustain continuous interaction and form durable networks.[54] Werbner's observation that *dhikr* sacralizes local space among British Muslims has its parallel in American Sufi centers, where ritual turns ordinary buildings into places of shared memory and identity.[55]

Many Sufi communities also translate spiritual principles into social service. The Rifa'i-Qadiri center supports charitable programs, while Halveti-Jerrahi circles combine *dhikr* with collecting donations for people in need.[56] Corbett shows that Sufi-identified leaders in New York framed their public role in terms of "service" to both Muslims and the wider society.[57] Through these activities, Sufi organizations perform at least three community functions: they provide spaces for religious practice, build networks of belonging that cross ethnic and racial boundaries, and facilitate education and social assistance.[58] In this sense, the spiritual needs of individuals are met through, rather than apart from, community life; the community becomes the setting in which spiritual discipline is learned, practiced, and sustained.

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52 Yusak, "A Wayfarer in a Land of the Free.""

53 Christopher Melchert, "Origins and Early Sufism," in *The Cambridge Companion to Sufism*, ed. Lloyd Ridgeon (Cambridge University Press, 2014), 3–23, https://doi.org/10.1017/CCO9781139087599.003.

54 Westerlund, *Sufism in Europe and North America*.

55 Xavier, *Sacred Spaces and Transnational Networks*; Werbner, "Stamping the Earth with the Name of Allah."

56 Edi Basuki and Naqiyah Naqiyah, "Ṣadaqa and 'Spirituality Gene' Expression: The Qurʾan and Advances in Epigenetics," *Teosofia: Indonesian Journal of Islamic Mysticism* 10, no. 1 (2021): 75–88, https://doi.org/10.21580/tos.v10i1.8656.

57 Corbett, *Making Moderate Islam*.

58 Dickson, *Living Sufism in North America*.

Sufism, Religious Pluralism, and Interfaith Relations

One of the most distinctive contributions of Sufism in the United States lies in the field of religious pluralism and interfaith relations. Sufi metaphysics, particularly the idea of the unity of being associated with Ibn ʿArabi and the poetry of Rumi, provides an intellectual resource for recognizing the presence of the divine across different religious traditions.[59] Inayat Khan's message of the unity of religious ideals, the Dances of Universal Peace that incorporate sacred phrases from several traditions, and the openness of the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship to people of different faiths illustrate how this resource has been translated into practice.[60] Comparative studies of Islamic and Christian mysticism, which highlight shared themes of love, self-transcendence, and closeness to God, have further strengthened Sufism's role as a bridge in interreligious conversation.[61]

After September 11, 2001, this interfaith dimension gained public importance. Sufi groups in New York and other cities took part in interfaith prayers, dialogues, and educational programs, and Dressler shows that they used these occasions to present Islam as a tradition of peace while negotiating their own authenticity within the wider Muslim community.[62] The Cordoba Initiative, led by the Sufi-influenced Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf, promoted interfaith understanding and later stood at the center of the 2010 "Ground Zero mosque" controversy.[63] Such engagement contributed to tolerance and to the visibility of Muslims as partners in American civic life.

The image of Sufism as an inclusive spiritual tradition has also shaped how many Americans perceive Islam. For some audiences, Sufism became the most familiar and acceptable face of Islam, associated with Rumi's poetry, music, and meditation. This perception has ambivalent effects. On the one hand, it softens stereotypes and opens channels for dialogue. On the other hand, it may reinforce

[59] Idoko, "Transcending Boundaries."

[60] Makhrus Ali et al., "Islamic Mysticism And Spirituality: Analyzing The Role Of Sufism In Modern Muslim Society," *Journal of Noesantara Islamic Studies* 3, no. 2 (2026): 92–104, https://doi.org/10.70177/jnis.v3i2.3371.

[61] Meis Al-Kaisi, "Rethinking Conceptual Sufism: A Synthesis of Islamic Spirituality, Asceticism, and Mysticism," *Teosofi: Jurnal Tasawuf Dan Pemikiran Islam* 11, no. 2 (2021): 169–93, https://doi.org/10.15642/teosofi.2021.11.2.169-193.

[62] Markus Dressler, "Pluralism and Authenticity: Sufi Paths in Post-9/11 New York," in *Sufis in Western Society: Global Networking and Locality*, ed. Ron Geaves, Markus Dressler, and Gritt Klinkhammer (London: Routledge, 2009), 15.

[63] Corbett, *Making Moderate Islam*.

a binary between "good" spiritual and apolitical Muslims and "bad" political or orthodox Muslims, a distinction that Mamdani criticizes as a product of post-9/11 political culture, and the expectation of being "moderate" can narrow the space in which Sufi-identified leaders speak on political issues.[64] It is therefore important to distinguish spiritual tolerance from political moderation: the former concerns religious and social relations, whereas the latter concerns political alignment, and the two should not be treated as identical.[65]

The Political Significance of Sufism in American Foreign Policy

The preceding sections show that the public visibility of Sufism rests on its spiritual appeal, its community institutions, and its interfaith engagement. It is this socially established presence, rather than any political program of Sufi orders themselves, that made Sufism visible to American policymakers.[66] The political significance of Sufism can therefore be examined at three levels: its representation in diplomatic and religious-policy discourse, the forms of involvement of Sufi organizations and figures, and the limits of that involvement.

1) Sufism, Tolerance, and Moderate Islam in US Diplomatic Discourse

In American diplomatic and religious-policy discourse, Sufism has frequently been associated with tolerance, moderation, dialogue, and resistance to violent extremism. This representation became especially prominent after September 11, 2001, when policymakers searched for Muslim partners who could be presented as alternatives to radical interpretations of Islam.[67] On October 24, 2003, the Nixon Center held a conference in Washington on Sufism and its potential role in US policy. Its report, edited by Zeyno Baran, presented Sufism as a neglected yet influential tradition within Islam, emphasized its tolerance toward other religions, and discussed ways in which Sufi institutions, publications, and educational programs might be supported.[68] RAND Corporation studies similarly identified Sufis, alongside other "moderate" actors, as potential partners in building networks against radical Islamism.[69] In this

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64 Mahmood Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War, and the Roots of Terror* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2004), 39; Corbett, *Making Moderate Islam*, 71.

65 Yusak, "A Wayfarer in a Land of the Free"; Ali et al., "Islamic Mysticism And Spirituality."

66 Sefa Secen and Turan Kayaoglu, *The Muslim World in International Relations* (Cambridge University Press, 2026), https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009720021.

67 Seitakhmetova and Zhandossova, "Between Security and Belonging."

68 Baran, *Understanding Sufism and Its Potential Role*.

69 Benard, *Civil Democratic Islam*; Rabasa et al., *Building Moderate Muslim Networks*.

discourse, the spiritual characteristics of Sufism were translated into political categories such as moderate Islam, religious tolerance, social stability, and counter-extremism.

This translation reveals a gap between self-representation and external representation. Sufi practitioners generally understand Sufism as a matter of spiritual discipline, ritual, ethics, and communal identity, whereas policymakers interpret the same tradition in terms of moderation and security. The political representation of Sufism should therefore be distinguished from the lived reality of Sufi communities: describing Sufism as "moderate Islam" in policy documents neither defines the political role of Sufi organizations nor proves that Sufi communities share the goals attributed to them.[70]

2) Forms of Sufi Involvement in Diplomacy and Religious Policy

The political relevance of Sufism is also reflected in reported contacts between American officials and Sufi actors. Domestically, Shaykh Muhammad Hisham Kabbani and the Islamic Supreme Council of America became prominent interlocutors on questions of extremism. His statement at a State Department forum in January 1999, which claimed that extremist ideology had spread among a large majority of American Muslims, drew strong criticism from other Muslim organizations,[71] and after September 11 he is described as having met officials of the Bush administration and becoming a point of contact in discussions about Islamic movements.[72] Abroad, the literature reports visits by American diplomats to Sufi communities in countries such as Sudan and Egypt, participation in Sufi religious events, and exchanges with Sufi leaders.[73] Policy-oriented institutions also recommended including Sufi traditions in education, translating Sufi texts, preserving Sufi cultural heritage, and creating greater space for Sufi organizations in public life. Muedini analyzes such promotion in the United States and Britain as part of a broader pattern in which governments seek religious partners perceived as non-threatening.[74]

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[70] Westerlund, *Sufism in Europe and North America*.

[71] David W. Damrel, "Aspects of the Naqshbandi-Haqqani Order in North America," in *Sufism in the West*, ed. Jamal Malik and John Hinnells (London: Routledge, 2006), 120–21.

[72] محمد السع," alwatan, 2024, شعر الحداثة والتصوف بين الشرق والغرب, https://www.alwatan.com.sa/a/1140761.

[73] Taher et al., "The Role of Sufism in Shaping Ethical Practices and Business Integrity: Examining Spiritual Consciousness as a Mediator in Islamic Business."

[74] Muedini, *Sponsoring Sufism*.

These forms of engagement should not be taken as proof that Sufi organizations are extensions of American foreign policy. Religious diplomacy is an interaction between actors with different interests and sources of authority: Sufi leaders maintain religious and communal identities, while diplomats pursue state interests. Their interests may overlap in particular circumstances without being identical.[75]

3) The Limits of Sufism in Diplomacy and Foreign-Policy Decision-Making

The role of Sufism in diplomacy and foreign-policy decision-making is limited in at least four respects. First, the internal diversity of Sufism means that no single organization can speak for all Sufis in the United States, let alone for Muslims as a whole.[76] Second, Sufi communities retain their own religious agency. Historically, Sufi orders adopted a range of positions toward political power, from accommodation to armed resistance against colonial rule, as illustrated by the Sanusiyya in Libya, Emir Abdelkader in Algeria, and Sufi-rooted movements in Sudan and West Africa.[77][78] Contemporary studies likewise show Sufi orders cooperating with states in some contexts and acting independently in others.[79]

Third, there is a clear difference between religious engagement and actual decision-making. Sufi organizations may provide access to communities, offer religious perspectives, participate in dialogue, or serve as symbolic representatives of moderate Islam, but the literature offers no evidence that they determine US foreign policy; their role is better understood as communicative, symbolic, or relational.[80] Fourth, political instrumentalization carries risks for Sufis themselves. When Sufism is promoted as a state-favored alternative to political Islam, Sufi groups may be perceived by other Muslims as instruments of foreign interests, which can undermine their religious credibility and deepen

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75 Secen and Kayaoglu, *The Muslim World in International Relations*.

76 Geoffroy and Gaetani, *Introduction to Sufism: The Inner Path of Islam*; Ichwan et al., "Sufism And Quranic Interpretation."

77 Bentlage et al., *Religious Dynamics under the Impact*.

78 Hamdy A. Hassan, "Sufi Exceptionalism in Senegal: The Role of Brotherhood in Preventing Religious Extremism," *Cogent Social Sciences* 12, no. 1 (2026), https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2026.2712656.

79 Darmaiza Darmaiza et al., "The Dynamics and Role of Sufism in Turkish Politics and Society," *Teosofia: Indonesian Journal of Islamic Mysticism* 11, no. 2 (2022): 123–42, https://doi.org/10.21580/tos.v11i2.12443.

80 Westerlund, *Sufism in Europe and North America*.

intra-Muslim divisions.[81] The critique that Western interest in Sufism may serve geopolitical purposes therefore needs to be taken seriously, even though it should not be generalized to all forms of engagement.[82]

Interconnection and Boundaries of the Spiritual, Social, and Political Dimensions

The findings show that the spiritual, social, and political dimensions of Sufism in the United States are interconnected.[83] The spiritual dimension is the foundation: practices of inner purification, remembrance, meditation, and spiritual guidance respond to individual needs for meaning, peace, and discipline. The social dimension emerges when these practices are institutionalized in centers, study circles, shrines, charitable programs, and interfaith networks, turning individual devotion into collective life. The political dimension appears when this socially visible presence, together with its reputation for tolerance, enters public discourse on diplomacy, security, and foreign policy.[84]

These dimensions can thus be read as a sequence: spiritual needs give rise to Sufi practice, practice gives rise to community, community gives rise to institutions and public visibility, and public visibility makes political representation possible. This explains why Sufism can become politically significant without originating as a political movement. The relationship also works in the opposite direction, since political recognition can shape how external actors perceive, fund, and engage Sufi institutions, and how Sufi groups present themselves in public.[85]

Clear boundaries nevertheless exist between these dimensions. Spirituality does not automatically produce political moderation; community activity does not automatically imply diplomatic alignment; interfaith openness does not mean endorsement of state policy; and diplomatic engagement does not imply political control over Sufi organizations. Likewise, the representation of Sufism as "moderate Islam" in policy discourse is not a complete description of the diverse realities of Sufi communities.[86] These boundaries matter because they prevent

[81] Muedini, *Sponsoring Sufism*.
[82] Darmaiza et al., "The Dynamics and Role of Sufism in Turkish Politics and Society."
[83] Secen and Kayaoglu, *The Muslim World in International Relations*.
[84] Seitakhmetova and Zhandossova, "Between Security and Belonging."
[85] Seitakhmetova and Zhandossova.
[86] Secen and Kayaoglu, *The Muslim World in International Relations*.

the analysis from reducing Sufism either to a purely private spiritual practice or to an instrument of American foreign policy.[87]

Conclusion

This study shows that the development of Sufism in the United States cannot be understood solely as the transplantation of a spiritual tradition. From the arrival of Inayat Khan in 1910, through the countercultural interest of the 1960s, to the arrival of teachers from established lineages after 1965, Sufism developed into a diverse field of perennial, hybrid, and transplanted movements. Its transformation is marked by institutionalization and adaptation: the establishment of centers, shrines, publishing and educational activities, and networks of followers, together with the use of English, new organizational forms, and Sufi-inspired civic movements. This transformation, however, has not produced a single, homogeneous American Sufism.

Sufism grows because it responds to identifiable spiritual and social needs in American society: the search for meaning amid existential crisis, the need for inner peace and spiritual discipline, the need for belonging in the face of social alienation, and the need for a religious identity compatible with modern plural life. These needs are met not only in individual experience but through community life, including regular *dhikr* gatherings, study circles, shrine visits, and charitable service. Sufism also contributes to religious pluralism and interfaith relations, and its image as an inclusive tradition has shaped how many Americans perceive Islam, although this image can also reinforce a problematic division between "good" and "bad" Muslims.

Politically, Sufism has been represented in American diplomatic and policy discourse, especially after September 11, 2001, as a form of moderate Islam associated with tolerance and counter-extremism, as illustrated by the 2003 Nixon Center conference and subsequent policy studies. This representation was accompanied by contacts between American officials and Sufi leaders and organizations at home and abroad. Yet the role of Sufism in diplomacy remains limited by the diversity of Sufi orders, the religious agency of Sufi communities, the gap between engagement and actual decision-making, and the risks of political instrumentalization. Sufism is therefore better understood as a potential interlocutor in US public diplomacy than as an instrument or a determinant of American foreign policy.

[87] Secen and Kayaoglu.

The spiritual, social, and political dimensions of Sufism are interrelated but not interchangeable. Spiritual practice forms communities, communities create institutions and public visibility, and visibility opens the possibility of political representation; yet each dimension retains its own boundaries. Future research could build on these findings through fieldwork with Sufi communities in the United States and through comparative studies of Sufism and public diplomacy in Europe, in order to test how far the patterns identified in this literature-based study hold in practice.

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