

# An 'African' *Tarika* in Anatolia: Notes on the Tijaniyya in Early Republican Turkey

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## Introduction

With hardly any exceptions, the general introductions to the history of Sufism and Sufi orders present the Tijaniyya as a typically 'African' *tarika*. The narrative of the spread of the order that is usually given, emphasizes its north African birth with the Algerian Shaykh Ahmad al-Tijani (d. 1814) and his early followers, its passage to Mauritania with the affiliation of Muhammad al-Hafiz al-Shinqiti (d. 1830) and his Idaw Ali tribe, its subsequent sub-Saharan expansion with the jihad of al-Hajj 'Umar Tal (d. 1864) and finally, the growth of the Senegalese 'maraboutic' families of the Sy in Tivaouane and the Niasse in Kaolack. The role of the Tijaniyya in the religious and political life of the Middle East, Anatolia and the Balkans, on the contrary, is often left unmentioned. The most important collection of essays entirely devoted to the history of the order provides rich insights into the history of the order<sup>1</sup> in Africa; moreover, its very title and scope reinforce the image of an inherent 'Africanness' of the Tijaniyya.<sup>2</sup> In spite of this existing stereotype, one can note a Tijani affiliation in religious networks that played a public and active role in the society of the Middle East, Anatolia and the Balkans, especially in early post-Ottoman times: the Syrian leader of the first Palestinian revolt 'Izz al-Din al-Qassam (d. 1935);<sup>3</sup> leading Albanian *ulama*

and muftis before, during and after the Communist regime;<sup>4</sup> and, the leader of the early Islamist revolt against Kemalist policies in Turkey, Kemal Pilavoğlu. This paper will provide a brief introduction to the Tijani presence in Turkey, focusing on its influence on the politico-religious sphere of the country during and after the revolt led by Pilavoğlu.

## Secularism, Islam and Sufism in the Turkish Republic

Following the legal ban on Sufism in the Turkish republic in 1925 and the official dissolution of Sufi dervish lodges and brotherhoods, or *tarikats* (*sing. tarikat*), there is often little or no information on their clandestine activities. What is certain is that Sufism has played a clear role in the development of Turkish politics in the twentieth century. The relationship between Sufism and politics in Turkey has been notably influenced by several *tarikat* orders, many of which (like the Naqshbandiyya and the Jerrahiyya-Helvetiyya), are still well known today in Turkey. The Naqshbandiyya, or the *Nakşibendi*, was

the most extensive and influential of Sufi orders in the late Ottoman period. The order was also largely involved in the counter-revolution of April 13<sup>th</sup>, 1909 that reinstalled the constitutional rule of the Sultanate under Mehmed V (r. 1909-1918), and is still, with all probability, the most widespread

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Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, credited as the founder of the secular republic of modern Turkey, saw religion as an impediment against the realization of a Turkish republic. Therefore, after taking power 1923, he attacked the foundation of 'official' Islam, or the Islamic institutions that figured prominently in the politics of the Ottoman Empire. The official religious institutions were responsible for establishing a great deal of the upper class politico-ideological basis, while the popular mystical traditions only appealed to some intellectuals, notables, and officials. Thus, the function of the Sufi orders for the middle and lower classes of the Empire was often a more fundamental aspect of daily religious and social life than it was for the upper class. Focusing his efforts on attacking the foundations of 'official' Ottoman power, Atatürk largely neglected to launch a similar attack against the religion of the masses and to impose his ideology in their daily lives, which remained deeply impregnated with religion. While secularism was one of the key principles of the new Turkish republic and religious expression was put under strict government control, most religious Turks continued to practice Islam in the way they had before the revolution.

Contrary to the popular image of Atatürk's hardline stance opposing Islam, the founder of the republic was well aware of the function of religion for providing emotional meaning in life. It is widely agreed that Atatürk was not necessarily opposed to Islam in the private sphere, but strongly disapproved of its presence in the public sphere. His reforms in the field of religion were largely meant to restrict Islam to the private sphere as much as possible. His view was that individuals were capable of worshipping alone, without the guidance of imams. In place of a public form of Islam, citizens of the new republic were expected to develop a strong Turkish national belonging as their main public, communal identity, and to enhance their feelings of attachment to a political rather than

a religious community.<sup>5</sup>In an attempt to ensure this process, political Islam, as well as tarikat orders and other local or unofficial Islamic practices, such as the recitation of the call to prayer in Arabic, were officially outlawed in Turkey in 1925.

Atatürk did not necessarily wish to expunge Islam from the Turkish consciousness. Instead, he wished to promote a brand of Islam compatible with his concept of the national state. The main method of doing this was to ban Islamic practices that he believed 'tainted' the religion because of their entanglement with political affairs. In Atatürk's view, this would lead indirectly to a revival of what he believed to be a 'pure' form of Islam which was unaffected by the Arabic language and Arab cultural traditions. He perceived this as a threat to the supremacy of the Turkish language and identity that he wanted to promote. He believed that the rational essence of Islam would be naturally unveiled through the 'Turkification' of worship: the dominance of Arabic in ritual and worship was impeding, he felt, the full development of a national consciousness of Turks. Thus, Atatürk initiated the project of translating the *ezan*, or call to prayer, from Arabic into Turkish, along with other elements of daily Islamic ritual worship.<sup>6</sup>

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religious traditions of the republic's peasant majority, and promoted religious interest as a central political concern in order to exploit it for political ends. In conjunction with this new political focus on religious interest, Turkish society saw a steady rise in the popularity of dervish orders which had not dissolved, but had simply gone underground, as a result of the 1925 ban.

The tarikats were mostly not satisfied with a situation in which Islam was merely a strictly-regulated 'appendage' of the new Turkish republic; as a result, protests took place in reaction to the religious policies of the state. These were suppressed by the secular regime, and Sufism in the new Turkish republic quickly became associated with extremism

and reactionary separatism. This dissatisfaction was evident especially in the activities of members of the Tijaniyya order in Turkey, who came to be viewed as reactionaries.

### The Tijaniyya in Turkey

While it is not entirely certain, many sources agree that the order arrived in Turkey just before, during, or following World War I, because of the efforts of a lawyer named Kemal Pilavoğlu.<sup>7</sup> Estimates of Turkish membership of the Tijaniyya following its introduction vary widely. Marmorstein estimates membership anywhere from 8,000 to as many as 100,000; while Lewis estimates approximately 40,000.<sup>8</sup> In his essay on the revival of Islam in secular Turkey, Howard Reed argues that Pilavoğlu tried to use the zeal of his adherents to advance his own questionable material and political ends.<sup>9</sup> Sources closer to Pilavoğlu, on the contrary, emphasize his sincere commitment to a struggle that he saw mainly as a religious duty. As is commonplace in many movements of political activism rooted in Sufi authority, dreams and visions also played an important motivating role.<sup>10</sup>

Musa Cagil, better known by his nickname Saatçi Musa, was a close friend and follower of Pilavoğlu. He mentions in an interview with Asım Öz that Pilavoğlu had a dream in which Ahmad Al-Tijani<sup>11</sup> appeared to him and granted him the authority to establish a new Tijaniyya branch in Turkey.<sup>12</sup> In the same interview, Musa asserts that Tijanis were often moved to action as a result of dreams. Musa goes on to imply that the defacement of several statues of Atatürk in central Anatolia in 1951, which would largely contribute (both positively and negatively) to the fame of the Tijanis in the country, was the result of a dream in which Pilavoğlu saw several statues of Atatürk.

The reputation of the Tijaniyya in Turkey as a reactionary group is a striking departure from its reputation as supporters of the authorities upholding law and order; the latter image was largely promoted in Algeria by the French colonial authorities after the acceptance of colonial rule by the Tijani leadership of Ayn Madhi, the Saharan town of birth of the founder of the order.<sup>13</sup> In Turkey, on the contrary, the secular political elite always viewed the Tijaniyya as an order with a large number

of religious extremists and reactionaries. Emile Marmorstein credits this change in disposition as a manifestation of "... the contrast between loyal submission to a tolerant pagan or avowedly infidel government and open revolt against the rule of co-religionists, who fall short of very exacting standards of faith and conduct."<sup>14</sup>

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Apart from Pilavoğlu's charismatic influence, there are no conclusive reasons why the Tijaniyya took root in Turkey, and it is hard to find out why this group was among the more outspoken in their reactions against nationalist secular reforms. It is possible that the case of the Turkish Tijaniyya

was similar to its Albanian counterpart in its development. In her essay on Tijaniyya in Interwar Albania, Nathalie Clayer believes that the spread of the Tijaniyya in Albania was probably stimulated by the interference by the state in the religious sphere, which led to a transfer of religious vitality to a sector that escaped from the state's tutelage. She also points out that the case of the Tijaniyya in Albania is not unique in that the spread of the Tijaniyya in nearby regions was stimulated by similar circumstances.<sup>15</sup>

As mentioned, the recitation of the call to prayer in Arabic was among the religious practices outlawed in 1925 in the name of the 'Turkification' of Islam. Throughout the 1940s, several Tijanis toured Turkey solely with the purpose of publicly reciting the call to prayer in Arabic, as part of what they believed to be a holy struggle against the secular state. In 1948, the state modified the ban on the Arabic call to prayer, to allow for its recitation only on religious holidays. In 1949, Tijaniyya members Muhiddin Ertuğrul and Osman Yaz recited the call to prayer in Arabic in front of the Grand National Assembly in Ankara during a legislative session, to protest against the remaining ban.<sup>16</sup> Pilavoğlu had incited claims to his followers that the Turkish *ezan* was an exercise of infidelity, and laicism a godless practice.<sup>17</sup> This series of protests came under public debate, and in 1950 the Democratic Party lifted the ban as one of several reforms easing restrictions on religious practices. The lifting of this ban was widely viewed by Kemalists as the beginning of a period of regression, and the decay of the secularist state.<sup>18</sup>

In 1951, reports of the defacement and decapitation of statues of Atatürk began to appear in Turkish news sources. These acts of destruction were followed by speeches from politicians expressing the devotion of the nation to the ideals and achievements of Atatürk. Many attributed the acts of vandalism to a kind of 'posthumous revenge' against Atatürk fueled by the frustration over his total dismemberment of Islam in exchange for secular ideals. Later that same year, Pilavoğlu, along with several hundred members of the Tijaniyya, was arrested and put on trial in Ankara, accused of being responsible for the decapitations. Widespread protests accompanied his trial; thousands of Pilavoğlu's followers occupied the streets outside the courthouse, or came into the courtroom and interrupted the trial in a fit of protest.<sup>19</sup> Asım Öz's interview with Saatçi Musa suggests that Pilavoğlu's popularity allowed him to enjoy exceptional privileges while he was serving a 15-year prison sentence for his crimes, because Pilavoğlu's 'pure' and 'unworldly' qualities allowed him to negotiate successfully with prison guards.<sup>20</sup>

As a result of the acts of vandalism and other protest activities, a new law was enacted that would protect the memory of Atatürk and his achievements. A variant of this law is still in place in contemporary Turkey, and it consists of a general restriction against insulting 'Turkishness.' Secularist nationalist Turks also promoted widely the belief that the revival of tarikats in the 1950s was inspired by Communist agitators. By 1970, many practicing Muslims viewed support for tarikats as a way of keeping politicization in check, and of undermining the growing influence of social democracy.

## Conclusion

Sufism has had an important influence on the development of Turkish politics in the twentieth century. One example of this influence was the high-profile efforts of the Tijaniyya. The example of the Tijaniyya in Turkey is of particular interest due to its North African origins, its global span, and its outspoken rejection of the 'Turkification' of Islam in the republic. Other Sufi movements in Turkey mainly adapted to the nationalist rhetoric of the new republic and promoted an anti-Kemalism based on

a nostalgic, neo-Ottoman vision of Turkish history which can be seen as an 'Islamic' version of Turkish nationalism. In contrast, the Tijaniyya maintained a more genuinely global, anti-nationalist vision of Islamic identity. This unwillingness to negotiate the supra-national nature of Islam was probably the main factor behind its initial popularity, as well as behind its successive decline. Little has been

written on non-African branches of the Tijaniyya. Ultimately, a great deal more scholarship is required regarding several aspects of the Tijani presence in Turkey, especially in consideration of the significant role that the order has played in the development of the politico-religious sphere of modern Turkey.

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## Notes

- 1 Triaud 2000.
- 2 The book even begins with a map highlighting all the countries of West Africa and the Sahelian belt, plus Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco, which are identified as the places with a 'presence of the Tijani order.'
- 3 Schleifer 1993.
- 4 Clayer 2009.
- 5 Turan 1995.

- 6 Azak 2008.
- 7 Marmorstein 1952:348.
- 8 Lewis 1952:34.
- 9 Reed 1954: 274.
- 10 For an interesting essay on a well-known West African case, see Murray Last's 1967 paper titled "A note on the attitude to the supernatural in the Sokoto Jihad," *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, 4(1) pp. 3-13. For a recent attempt to look at the inner and outer trajectories of another famous North African mystic and military leader, see Ahmed Bouyerdene, *Emir Abdel-Kader: Hero and Saint of Islam* (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2012). For the most famous case of political jihad inspired and led in Africa by a Tijani, see: John R. Willis, *In the Path of Allah: The Passion of al-Hajj 'Umar: An Essay into the Nature of Charisma in Islam*. (London: Frank Cass, 1989).
- 11 Ahmad Al-Tijani founded the Tijaniyya Sufi order in North Africa in the late eighteenth century.
- 12 Öz 2010.
- 13 The adaptation of the Algerian leadership of the Tijaniyya to French colonial rule was probably due to a pragmatic consideration of the military forces of the new rulers. Another factor was probably the Tijanis' tense relationships with the former Ottoman rulers. The marriage between the head of the Tijani *zawiya* of Ayn Madhi and Aurélie Picard, the daughter of a French colonial officer who had converted to Islam, would be later seen by the Algerian anti-colonial leadership as a symbol of the purported Tijani 'collaboration' with the colonial authorities and of their 'treason' towards the nationalist cause (José Lenzini, *La Princesse des Sables*, Belfond, 2007). For two attempts to study the relations between Muslim religious leaders and European colonial rulers in North and West Africa beyond the simplistic dichotomy between 'resistant' and 'collaborationist' Muslims imposed by the colonial historiography and reinforced by its successive post-colonial counterpart, see David Robinson and Jean-Louis Triaud (eds.), *Le Temps des Marabouts: Itinéraires et Stratégies Islamiques en Afrique Occidentale Française, 1860-1960* (Paris: Karthala, 1997) and David Robinson, *Paths of Accommodation: Muslim Societies and French Colonial Authorities in Senegal and Mauritania, 1880-1920* (Ohio University Press, 2000).
- 14 Marmorstein 1952: 348.
- 15 Clayer 2009:483.
- 16 Azak 2008: 32, 43.
- 17 Öz 2010.
- 18 Azak 2008: 33.
- 19 Lewis 1952:43; Marmorstein, 1952: 43.
- 20 Öz 2010.