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Algerian Sufism and religious transnationalism in the Sahara and Sahel region: A test of resilience in the face of mobile Islamism

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Abstract

Religious movements that transcend national borders pose a significant challenge to Algerian Sufism, which is locally rooted yet regionally interconnected. This study explores the dynamics between Algerian Sufism and mobile Islamism seeking to establish itself in the Sahel region. It examines, firstly, the impact of transnational networks on the spread of Sufism and its adaptation in Algeria and neighbouring countries; and, secondly, how the exchange of practices and teachings among religious scholars contributes to the harmonisation of Sufi traditions, whilst grounding them in local contexts. The study also highlights the central role of major Sufi orders, such as the Tijaniyyah, Qadiriyyah, Rahmaniyyah, Shadhiliyyah, Balqaydiyyah and Muridiyyah, which maintain close ties with their counterparts in neighbouring countries; these transnational networks facilitate the exchange of religious teachings and practices.

Algerian Sufism has developed innovative strategies of resistance in the face of the rise of radical Islamism, focusing on strengthening Sufi identity, developing social and charitable activities, utilising the media and digital technology, as well as cooperating with the authorities and fostering dialogue between different communities and the local population.

This study seeks to examine Algerian Sufism as a Sufi-order-based counter-narrative to radical Islam, through the lens of transnational religiosity in the Sahel-Sahara region. At a time when armed jihadist and rebel groups are working to undermine state institutions in the region, Sufism, with its various branches and orders, offers an alternative narrative to jihadism, whilst remaining part of transnational dynamics.

This research aims to highlight the crucial role played by Algerian Sufism in promoting a moderate and tolerant Islam in the face of the challenges posed by the Islamist movement in the Sahel and the Sahara region; it is a research contribution towards a better understanding of transnational religious dynamics and their security, social and identity-related issues.

Keywords: mobile Islamism, Algerian Sufism, the African Sahel region, cross-border religious dynamics, radical Islamism, Algeria.

Introduction

Recent decades have witnessed profound shifts in patterns of religious action within international relations, coinciding with the decline in the ability of national borders to contain human, symbolic and cultural flows, and the rise of new forms of transregional religious organisation. In this context, religion is no longer merely a local cultural component or an element of communal identity, but has become a networked actor capable of producing transnational extensions and reshaping spaces of belonging, legitimacy and mobilisation beyond the traditional frameworks of the nation-state. This transformation has been particularly evident in the Saharo-Coastal region, which represents one of the most dynamic regional areas in terms of the interplay between population dynamics, informal economic networks, and cross-border religious interactions.

This region is a strategic arena where different forms of religiosity compete to produce religious and social legitimacy, as deeply rooted historical Sufi networks intersect with mobile Islamist movements with transnational regional reach. Whilst Sufi orders draw on symbolic and historical capital accumulated over centuries of social, educational and spiritual presence, and rely on extensive zawiya networks linking Algeria to its African hinterland, various Islamist currents have emerged in recent decades—some proselytising, others armed jihadist—which have succeeded in exploiting the fragility of border environments, state crises and weak territorial control to build new spheres of influence within the African Sahel region.

The Algerian case takes on particular significance in this context, given the historical position occupied by zawiyas and Sufi orders within the national religious and social fabric, and the cross-border reach of major orders such as the Tijaniyyah, Qadiriyyah, Rahmaniyyah and others within the Saharan–Sahel region. These networks are not merely local religious institutions, but constitute transnational religious actors possessing considerable capacity to foster social solidarity, disseminate moderate religious authorities, and reconstruct patterns of religious legitimacy within local communities. Conversely, these networks face a growing challenge in the form of the rise of mobile Islamism, which has reshaped the regional religious landscape through flexible networked mobilisation strategies that capitalise on fragile security contexts and the dynamics of globalisation and connectivity.

On this basis, the study poses a central question: **How have transnational religious dynamics in the Saharo-Sahelian region reshaped patterns of competition for religious legitimacy between Algerian Sufi networks and mobile Islamism, and what are the limits to Algerian Sufism's ability to withstand these pressures and maintain its role as a regional religious actor that fosters stability?**

The study is based on the hypothesis that the resilience of Algerian Sufism is not solely due to its historical depth or traditional religious legitimacy, but is primarily linked to its cross-border networked nature, and its ability to adapt to social, technological and security transformations, which has enabled it to maintain its role as a religious, social and security actor countering the rhetoric of radical Islamism within the Saharo-Coastal region.

To test this hypothesis, the study has been divided into four main sections; the first section addresses the analytical framework of cross-border religious dynamics in the Saharo-Coastal region, whilst the

second section focuses on Algerian Sufi networks as a cross-border religious actor. The third theme examines mobile Islamism in terms of its dynamics of diffusion and indicators of strength, whilst the fourth is devoted to analysing the interaction between Algerian Sufism and mobile Islamism, as well as the mechanisms of resilience and the reconfiguration of the religious sphere in Algeria and the Sahel region.

Theme 1: The analytical framework for cross-border religious dynamics in the Saharan–Sahelian region

The Saharan–Sahelian region is witnessing profound transformations in the structure of religious practice, driven by the interplay of globalisation and the fragility of local contexts, which has led to the emergence of transnational religious patterns that transcend traditional state frameworks. In this context, this theme aims to develop an analytical approach that explains these dynamics by linking the conceptual dimension to the transformation of the religious sphere and the rise of networked actors.

First: The conceptual grounding of transnational religiosity: Transnational religiosity is defined as a pattern of religious interactions that transcend the territorial framework of the nation-state, whereby religious actors—whether institutions, missionary networks, or social movements—engage in building relationships and exerting influence across borders, leading to the reconfiguration of the religious sphere within a multi-level context that combines the local and the global (Haynes, 2001, p. 145) . This transformation is closely linked to the phenomenon of deterritorialisation, whereby religion is no longer tied to a specific geographical sphere or a centralised religious authority, but is situated within transnational spaces where the relationship between religion and the sphere is constantly being redefined (Roy, 2015, p. 85). As a result, the religious sphere is no longer a closed institutional structure, but has transformed into an open space where multiple religious models—traditional, reformist, and others with political leanings—without any of them succeeding in completely monopolising religious legitimacy, particularly in environments characterised by political fragility and intense cross-border interactions. (Levitt, 2004, pp. 1014–1020)

This transformation is deepening in the context of what might be described as a 'Network Society', where religious actors organise themselves within flexible, overlapping networks that transcend traditional institutional constraints and rely on flows of knowledge and information rather than hierarchical structures. (Castells, 2010, pp. 15–20) This networked logic has led to a reconfiguration of the modes of production and circulation of religious knowledge, particularly with the shift from a model of direct reception based on personal relationships to a textual and media-based model of circulation that relies on modern media (Villalón, 2015) , which has contributed to the dismantling of traditional authorities and the redistribution of religious power amongst multiple actors possessing varying capacities for dissemination and influence. This shift has also enabled the emergence of new actors outside traditional frameworks, who reproduce religious discourse in a way that is suited to both local and transnational contexts simultaneously. (Thurston, 2018, pp. 191–192)

In the same vein, increasing global interdependence and the proliferation of communication technologies have led to the emergence of fluid and diverse forms of religiosity, whereby religious affiliation is no longer confined to a specific organisational or doctrinal framework, but is instead shaped within transnational social fields that allow individuals and groups to selectively reconstruct

their religious identity. Consequently, the religious sphere ( ) has been reshaped into a competitive and dynamic space where symbolic authority intersects with social, economic and political

considerations, reflecting the transition of religion from a stable structure to a fluid process. (Soares, 2005, pp. 202–205)

The structural transformations accompanying globalisation in recent decades have led to a renewed and complex repositioning of religion within the public sphere, such that it is no longer confined to the realm of individual practice or the private sphere, but has become a present actor in political, social and cultural spaces. The dynamics of globalisation—including the unprecedented acceleration of information flows, the intensification of communication networks, and the expansion of circles of interaction between societies—have contributed to reshaping the modes of meaning-making within the social sphere. This has led to a decline in the nation-state's monopoly over functions of symbolic regulation and the production of value references (Gauthier, 2020, pp. 1–14). In this context, the boundaries separating social spheres are no longer as rigid as they once were; rather, they have become more fluid and overlapping, allowing religion to intersect with multiple spheres such as education, health, social work and culture, and even to assume increasing roles within public debates concerning justice, identity and the social order.

This shift is understood as a transformation in the very nature of the religious function, whereby religion is no longer merely a framework of meaning or a closed ritual system, but has become an active agent in shaping 'public morality' and reproducing patterns of social organisation. Globalisation has intensified interaction between different cultural and religious systems, turning the religious sphere into a competitive arena where multiple visions of the common good coexist and clash, and within which new reference points are formed, influenced by the interplay of the local and the global. (Stackhouse & Paris, 2000, pp. 1–5) Furthermore, the escalation of social inequalities, the growing role of transnational economic actors, and the increasing presence of market logic in the organisation of social life have reinforced the need to re-employ religion as a symbolic and ethical resource that contributes to addressing issues of violence, justice, the family and identity. (Gauthier, 2020, pp. 15–18)

Thus, the return of religion to the public sphere cannot be understood merely as a restoration of traditional forms of religiosity, but rather as a reconfiguration of its status and functions within a changing global structure, in which it intersects with the logic of the state, the market and transnational networks. In this context, religion does not withdraw from the public sphere, but is reintegrated into it under new conditions that make it more flexible and adaptable, and more closely linked to the issues of shared life in a world characterised by increasing complexity and the continuous redistribution of sources of power and meaning.

Thus, the transition from local religion to networked religion represents a structural shift in the nature of religious function and its sphere of operation, whereby religion is no longer confined to a closed geographical or institutional framework, but has become part of an open communicative space in which meaning and belonging are reproduced through transnational networks. (Castells, 2010, pp. 6–9) In the traditional model, the primary function of religion was to achieve social integration within cohesive local communities, where belonging was based on spatial proximity and a central institutional authority, which gave identity a fixed character and a territorial framework. (Castells,

2010, pp. 9–11) However, the transformations associated with the globalisation of information have led to the dismantling of this model, as the role of geography as the exclusive determinant of

belonging has receded in favour of new forms of religiosity based on networked interaction and symbolic flows, making religious identity more fluid and susceptible to reconfiguration. (Roy, 2004, pp. 7–12)

In this context, the function of religion has been redefined from being a tool for local social control to being a flexible framework for the production of an imagined global identity that transcends the nation-state, without being entirely detached from the local contexts from which it derives its conditions of formation. (Beyer, 2001, pp. 30–35) Religion has not lost its social roots, but is being reconstructed through a dialectical interaction between the local and the global, where religious movements are fuelled by specific internal crises, whilst at the same time engaging in transnational networks that transmit and reshape ideas. (Roy, 2004, pp. 8–9) Within this transformation, communication emerges as a structural element in the religious sphere; it is no longer merely a medium for conveying messages, but has become part of the very process of producing collective action, leading to an overlap between communicative, organisational and mobilising functions. Thus, the religious sphere is transformed from a closed institutional space into an open networked sphere, in which patterns of religiosity are defined by the logic of interconnection and flow rather than centralisation and stability, reflecting a profound restructuring of the function of religion and its sphere in a globalised context

Secondly: The reconfiguration of the religious sphere in the Saharo-coastal context:

The analysis highlights that the specificity of the Saharo-coastal space lies not so much in its geographical location as in its functional nature as a system of relations based on mobility and networked interconnection, where it is constantly reproduced through the flows of people and goods rather than being defined by fixed boundaries. (Retaillé & Walther, 2011, pp. 51–63) The historical accumulation of trans-Saharan routes, and the transformation of oases and cities into hubs at the intersections of these routes, have established a flexible spatial structure in which connectivity—rather than separation—is the organising principle of this region. (Grémont, 2011, p. 27)

In this context, patterns of economic and social activity intertwine within cross-border networks that transcend the formal–informal dichotomy, where illicit exchanges play a complementary role in linking local economies and compensating for market failures, thereby enhancing their integration into the regional economy rather than isolating them from it (Masquelier, 2014)

Furthermore, the persistence of patterns of mobility, whether in their commercial or migratory forms, reflects the fact that mobility is not a circumstantial response but an organisational structure that frames the distribution of resources and the reconfiguration of social relations. (Bossard, 2014, pp. 28–42)

On the other hand, the ability of local actors to adapt by integrating multiple activities and engaging in networks extending beyond the national framework weakens the centrality of the state as the sole regulatory actor, and highlights, in contrast, the rise of network logic as an alternative mechanism for organising the territory. (Bossard, 2014, pp. 28–42)

Consequently, the Saharo-coastal space is shaped as a complex incubator for cross-border interactions, where economic and social dynamics intersect within a flexible structure that redefines the concept of the political and economic sphere beyond traditional territorial frameworks.

In the Saharo-coastal context, the religious sphere is undergoing a structural transformation characterised by the decline of hierarchical organisational models that once granted certain religious frameworks a near-monopolistic position in the production of legitimacy, giving way to a more fluid and pluralistic distribution of religious authority. Historical and social transformations, particularly with the expansion of communication networks and the intensification of cross-border human mobility, have led to the reconfiguration of this sphere within an open space where local and trans-regional levels overlap, and within which diverse actors compete to define and direct religious authority. (Soares, 2005, pp. 204–205) In this context, religious legitimacy is no longer based on affiliation with fixed traditional structures, but has become the product of ongoing social interactions in which symbolic and economic dimensions intersect, reflecting a shift from a logic of monopoly to one of pluralism and negotiation. Furthermore, the expansion of the public religious sphere, driven by education and modern means of communication, has contributed to deepening this transformation, giving rise to diverse forms of religiosity that transcend classical divisions and reconfigure various elements within flexible and changing frameworks. (Loimeier, 2013, pp. 1–7)

Consequently, the disintegration of religious centrality does not signify a decline in religious agency, but rather points to its redistribution within a dynamic, multifaceted field, in which coexisting and intertwined forms of religiosity are taking shape ,Stemming from this very structural transformation, religion is no longer produced within a single unified model or a single epistemic authority, but has become a pluralistic space in which different modes of understanding and practice intersect, constantly being reshaped under the influence of social and economic transformations and the multiplicity of sources of religious meaning. This fragmentation has not led to a decline in religion, but rather to its reconfiguration within multiple structures, (Kane, 2003, pp. 2–7) which can be analytically distinguished into overlapping main patterns: Salafi religiosity, Sufi religiosity, and then hybrid forms of religiosity that combine different elements without strict adherence to any single model.

Salafi religiosity represents an approach based on the re-establishment of religious authority in accordance with the concept of 'returning to the Salaf', that is, to the Qur'an and Sunnah, interpreted as the 'correct' understanding, immune to historical or local interpretations. (Sounaye, 2017, pp. 2–7) This approach is characterised by key concepts such as: **tawhid (monotheism)**, **Sunna (the Sunnah)**, **bidʿa (innovation)**, **and tanqiya (purification)**, whereby religious practice is understood as a process of strict regulation of behaviour and doctrine, and the reorganisation of daily life according to clear and codified religious standards. It is also based on the idea **of commitment (iltizām)** as the criterion of true religiosity, and on the rejection of spiritual intermediaries or practices not based on explicit textual evidence, making it a model that tends to 'unify' religious authority and reproduce it in a relatively closed normative form, even whilst remaining open to the conditions of social reality. (Sounaye, 2017, pp. 8-10)

In contrast, Sufi religiosity is based on a radically different logic, centring on inner experience and an emotional relationship with the sacred, rather than merely on outward compliance with the texts. This approach is founded on central concepts such as: **the path (tariqa)**, **spiritual education (tarbiya)**, **remembrance (dhikr)**, **the wards (Alward)**, **annihilation (fanāʾ)**, **permanence (baqāʾ)**, **and the spiritual journey (Suluk)**, (Seesemann, 2011, pp. 8–22) concepts which together form a

framework of religiosity based on the inner transformation of the self. In this context, worship is understood not merely as a legal duty, but as a gradual educational–spiritual path aimed at purifying the soul (**tazkiya al-nafs**) and reshaping consciousness through a direct relationship with the sheikh as an educational and spiritual mediator who transmits the 'state' (**ḥāl**) prior to theoretical knowledge. (Seesemann, 2011, pp. 67-104) Religious practice here becomes a lived experience based on progression through the maqāmāt and spiritual ascent towards higher states such as **fanāʾ**, where the individual self dissolves into the divine presence, reflecting a transition from formal religiosity to existential religiosity. (Schielke & Debevec, 2012, pp. 17–33)

Hybrid religiosity, however, represents the most complex outcome of this pluralism, in which individuals do not belong exclusively to a Salafi or Sufi model, but rather reconstitute elements of both within flexible daily practices. In this model, concepts such as **commitment (iltizām)** may coexist with **remembrance (dhikr)**, **the permissible (ḥalāl)** with the logic **of utility (manfaʿa)**, **and reward (thawāb)** with a logic resembling **symbolic investment** in religious time. This hybrid religiosity is based on a logic of 'practical adaptation', whereby religious values are not practised as a closed system, but as tools for managing daily life, including poverty, work, marriage, and social ambition. Consequently, it does not produce a fixed religious identity, but rather a flexible one shaped through constant negotiation between the religious ideal and the constraints of reality. (Schielke & Debevec, 2012, pp. 66–82)

Within this context, a broader pattern of "lived religiosity" also emerges, based on the reintegration of religion into the details of daily life, where rituals are practised within social and economic spaces where religious symbols intersect with the logic of the market and consumption. Here, concepts such as **reward (thawāb), reckoning (ḥisāb) and intention (niyya)** become part of a symbolic economy governed by the logic of expectation, where religious action is viewed as a 'future asset', just as economic action is viewed as an investment in return. This overlap renders religious time itself a time open to the future, grounded in anticipation and incompleteness, whether in the promise of otherworldly salvation or in promises of material well-being. (Schielke & Debevec, 2012, pp. 98–131)

Consequently, contemporary religiosity cannot be understood as a simple division between distinct models, but rather as a complex structure in which multiple modes of meaning and practice overlap. Salafism seeks **standardisation**, Sufism produces **experience**, whilst hybrid religiosity reconfigures both within a daily life governed by the logic **of adaptation and negotiation**. From this perspective, religion is not a closed system, but an open field of continuous reproduction, where forms of religiosity are shaped as living social responses to profound shifts in the economy, power, and meaning.

Thirdly: Religious Actors and the Logic of Transnational Networks: The transformations witnessed in the contemporary international system show that religion is no longer reducible to a

cultural element or a matter confined to the private sphere, but has become an active variable in the structure of international interactions, contributing to the reshaping of certain patterns of political behaviour at both the domestic and international levels. (Haynes, 2014, pp. 13–15) Following the dominance of the secularisation thesis in classical thought on international relations—which posited that religion was gradually receding in the face of modernity and rationality—contemporary realities have emerged to confirm that religion has not receded so much as repositioned itself within the public and international spheres, (Haynes, 2014, pp. 16–20) in what might be described as a relative and multifaceted return of religion to global politics. This presence is evident both at the level of states that employ religious authority to varying degrees in their foreign policies, and through the emergence of instances where religious considerations intersect with security and national interest calculations, as is the case in some contemporary political experiences, as well as through the rise of non-state religious actors who have come to form part of the equations of conflict and cooperation within the international system. (Rudolph & Piscatori, 2018, pp. 1–3)

In this context, religious influence is no longer confined within the sovereign borders of the state, but has taken on a transnational character through what are known as transnational religious networks, which include global religious movements, church institutions, Islamic, Christian and evangelical associations, and other formations that transcend traditional geographical and political frameworks. Globalisation and the communications revolution have contributed to strengthening these networks' ability to influence international issues, whether by contributing to the formulation of discourses on human rights, development and peace, or by influencing public opinion and policy-making in more than one country simultaneously. Consequently, these religious actors cannot be reduced to mere marginal entities; rather, they have become part of the interactive structure of the international system, exerting a growing, albeit irregular, influence on areas of conflict and cooperation. (Rudolph & Piscatori, 2018, pp. 4–7)

At the theoretical level, this shift necessitates a rethinking of how these networks are incorporated into approaches to international relations, as they can be interpreted within traditional frameworks in ways that highlight the limitations of each; whilst realism views them as secondary extensions of conflict within a state-centred logic of power, liberalism sees them as part of global civil society and mechanisms of cross-border pressure and influence, whilst constructivism offers the most explanatory framework by focusing on identity, norms and the production of legitimacy outside the state framework. (Haynes, 2014, pp. 51–60)

Thus, religious networks are no longer merely external phenomena to the analysis of international relations, but become a key entry point for understanding the intertwining of the religious and the political and for reshaping concepts of international agency. This opens the way, both theoretically and methodologically, to a shift towards studying international actors as a multi-level structure encompassing both state and non-state, material and symbolic, and both secular and religious.

Religious Transnational Actors (RTAs) refer to the totality of non-state actors whose identity, objectives or activities are based on religious references, and who exert their influence beyond the borders of a single state, without any formal or permanent link to governments. (Haynes, 2014, pp. 61–79) These actors are characterised by their ability to operate across international spaces through

flexible networks that transcend geographical constraints, capitalising on the structural shifts in the international system, particularly following the end of the Cold War and the acceleration of globalisation, which has enabled them to expand their sphere of influence across multiple issues such as security, development, human rights and international cooperation. (Rudolph & Piscatori, 2018, pp. 8–16)

In terms of classification, three main types of these actors can be distinguished: Firstly, Extended RTAs, such as the Catholic Church, which possesses a global institutional structure and well-established cross-border networks, and plays broad political and developmental roles; secondly, negotiated RTAs, such as the Tablighi Jamaat, which lack centralised organisational structures and rely on informal and fluid networks to build their international presence; and thirdly, State-linked RTAs, such as Protestant evangelical networks in the United States, whose objectives intersect with the state's foreign policies and which seek to influence them, particularly in areas such as religious freedoms. (Rudolph & Piscatori, 2018, pp. 16-19)

As for their roles, these actors exert their influence in international relations across several levels: they may contribute directly to shaping international political outcomes, or influence states' domestic policies in ways that are reflected in their foreign orientations, they also rely primarily on what is known as 'religious soft power', that is, the ability to persuade and build normative legitimacy rather than resorting to physical coercion. (Haynes, 2014, pp. 144–169) In this context, their roles vary between "constructive" actors seeking to promote cooperation, development and human rights, and "conflictual" ones that may resort to violence and aim to undermine the existing international order, reflecting the complex and multidimensional nature of these actors within an international context characterised by increasing interplay between the religious and the political.

The concept **of 'network logic'** in the organisation of religious action reflects a profound structural shift in the patterns of production and distribution of religious practice, whereby such action is no longer governed exclusively by traditional hierarchical structures based on the authority of religious scholars, but is instead shaped within interconnected systems of social, institutional and digital relationships. (Campbell, 2012, pp. 10–13)

In traditional contexts, such as the networks of religious schools associated with movements like the Deobandi, this logic manifests itself in a complex interaction between scholars, students, donors and the state, allowing for the circulation of religious knowledge and fatwas and the reproduction of authorities across multiple, overlapping spaces. (Campbell, 2012, pp. 11–18) However, this interconnection is no longer confined to the physical realm; rather, it has been reinforced by the rise of what is known as the Network Society, where religious practice has been redefined within digital spaces based on decentralisation and interactivity.

In this context, digital media contribute to expanding the scope of religious practice by enabling individuals to engage with virtual, cross-border religious communities and participate in religious rituals and practices interactively, thereby redefining the concepts of community, authority and religious identity. This networked logic also leads to a redistribution of religious authority, such that it is no longer the exclusive preserve of traditional actors, but is instead distributed amongst new actors within the network, thereby granting individuals an active role in the production and direction of religious meaning. (Bano, 2012, pp. 116–120)

Consequently, religious action in the context of this transformation is understood as a dynamic process taking place within a hybrid network where real and digital dimensions overlap, reflecting a shift from a closed institutional model to an open networked model, based on flux, interaction and continuous reconfiguration. Building on the above, the cross-border religious dynamics in the Saharan–coastal region as the product of a three-way interaction between the logic of networks, which has reorganised religious practice into a flexible and interconnected form; the logic of competition

for legitimacy, which has transformed the religious sphere into an open field for the redefinition of authorities; and the fragile structural contexts that have provided the conditions for the spread of these networks beyond the institutional frameworks of the state. Within this interweaving, religion is no longer a stable structure or a monopolised authority, but has become a dynamic process shaped by cross-border flows and connections, where the effectiveness of actors is determined by their ability to position themselves within networks and build spatial and symbolic extensions.

Consequently, this framework allows for an analytical shift from the general structural level to the study of specific actors who embody these dynamics, a point that is clearly illustrated by the case of Algerian Sufi networks, which serve as a telling example of how cross-border religious agency takes shape in terms of structure and reach.

Based on the conceptual and analytical framework developed in this section, religious dynamics in the Saharo-Coastal region cannot be treated as separate phenomena or merely as a juxtaposition of different forms of religiosity; rather, they must be recontextualised within an analytical model that explains their internal logic. The preceding data clearly indicate that religious action in this region is not determined by a single factor, but rather takes shape at the intersection of three major dynamics: the logic of networks, the logic of competition for legitimacy, and the influence of the structural context.

In this context, **the logic of networks** constitutes the infrastructure within which religious action takes place. As the analysis has shown, religious actors no longer operate within closed hierarchical structures, but rather within flexible, cross-border networks based on flows rather than territorial anchoring. These networks do not merely transport individuals or resources, but also convey meanings, symbols ( ) and patterns of religiosity, which makes religious action a continuous, dynamic process that is reshaped through interaction. Consequently, the capacity of any religious actor—be they Sufi or Salafi—is measured not only by their local scale, but by their positioning within these networks and their ability to build cross-border extensions.

However, this networked logic does not operate in a vacuum; rather, it intersects with **the logic of competition for** legitimacy, which transforms the religious sphere into an open field of conflict. With the disintegration of the traditional monopoly on religious authority, legitimacy is no longer granted in a fixed manner, but is produced and reproduced through social interaction. Here, different forms of religiosity—Sufi, Salafi, and hybrid—compete over the definition of the 'true religion' and for social recognition. This competition is not merely symbolic in nature; it extends to encompass spheres of social influence (education, charitable work, social mediation), thereby linking religious legitimacy as much to the actors' ability to respond to the needs of society as to textual authority.

The third dimension lies in **the** structural **context**, which constitutes the enabling condition for these dynamics. The Saharo-coastal region, characterised by institutional fragility, a weak state

presence, and the overlap between the formal and informal economies, provides a conducive environment for the proliferation of religious networks and the growth of their roles. Furthermore, the impact of globalisation, particularly in its communicative dimension, enhances these networks' ability to transcend borders and reproduce themselves in different contexts. Consequently, fragility is understood not merely as a factor of weakness, but as a generative factor that allows new forms of

religious agency to emerge outside traditional frameworks. By combining these three dimensions, an analytical model can be proposed based on the idea that:

Religious dynamics in the Sahel = (cross-border networks) × (competition for legitimacy) × (a conducive structural context)

This model not only explains how religious action is shaped, but also allows us to understand the variation in its outcomes from one region to another. Where networks are denser, competition more intense, and the context more fragile, the religious sphere tends towards greater pluralism and fluidity, and may open up to diverse forms of religiosity, some consensual (as in the case of Sufism), and some conflictual (as in certain forms of Salafi-jihadism). Conversely, where the state has a stronger presence or networks are less interconnected, the religious sphere tends towards greater relative stability.

Theme 2: Algerian Sufi Networks as a Transnational Religious Actor: Structure and Reach

This theme aims to analyse the network structure of Algerian Sufi orders as a transnational religious actor, capable of transcending the national geographical framework to reach broader African spaces. It also seeks to highlight the mechanisms of expansion and interaction that have enabled these networks to reproduce their spiritual and social presence through intersecting historical, commercial and cultural pathways.

First: The network structure of Algerian Sufism: The network structure of Sufism in Algeria manifests itself as a dynamic, transnational system based on multi-level interconnections between Sufi actors and institutions, where the order serves as an overarching framework for organising spiritual and social relations. (Hamed, 2023, pp. 31–37) The zawiya (zawiyas) constitute the central core within this network, acting as geographical and functional nodes spread across Algeria and the Maghreb, and performing educational, spiritual and social roles. (Hamed, 2023, pp. 37–40)

This system is also based on the spiritual chain (silsila), which links the disciples to the founding sheikh, thereby lending the network historical depth and religious legitimacy. The Sheikh occupies a central position within this structure as the Qutb (Pole) and spiritual authority, whilst the muqaddimûn (representatives) and al-murīdūn (disciples) are distributed across an extensive network that ensures the transmission of teachings and the organisation of affiliation. The movement of sheikhs and students, alongside practices such as ziyāra (visiting shrines) and rihla in pursuit of knowledge, contributes to reinforcing this networked extension, making Algerian Sufism a flexible communicative space that transcends political boundaries and continually reproduces itself. (Khatir, 2016, pp. 94–107)

In terms of organisational and symbolic characteristics, Algerian Sufism combines a flexible organisational structure with intense symbolic authority. Organisationally, it is based on a clear hierarchy (sheikh/muqaddam/murid) within a decentralised framework that allows for expansion and

adaptation, where zawiyas perform a dual function combining religious education (the Qur'an, fiqh) and spiritual guidance (upbringing, conduct). This structure also relies on relationships of allegiance and spiritual obedience, which ensure a unified authority within the network despite its geographical spread. (Khatir, 2016, pp. 41-45)

Symbolically, Sufism is based on a system of fundamental concepts such as barakah, regarded as a circulating spiritual capital, and wilayah, which grants the sheikh and the awliya' a special status

within the collective imagination, in addition to karāmāt, which perform a symbolic function in establishing the legitimacy of the Sufi practitioner. Collective rituals such as dhikr, the werd and khalwa also play a role in cementing networked belonging and strengthening internal cohesion, as these practices become mechanisms for reproducing spiritual and social identity within the community. (Seghieri, 2024, pp. 367–375)

These characteristics are clearly embodied in the major Sufi orders, foremost among them the Qadiriyya and the Tijaniyya. The Qadiriya represents a traditional model of network organisation, based on gradual expansion through zawiyas and spiritual chains, where the sheikh retains his position as a centre of blessing and guidance, and rituals such as collective dhikr are practised within a framework that reinforces social cohesion, which has given it the ability to consolidate religious and national identity, particularly in contexts of resistance. (Chatra & Ramdani, 2024, pp. 7–12)

In contrast, the Tijaniyyah reflects a more centralised and organised model, characterised by the distinctiveness of the 'wird' and the autonomy of the spiritual lineage, alongside its emphasis on exclusivity of affiliation, which enabled it to build a vast, cross-border network extending into sub-Saharan Africa. (Berriane, 2015, pp. 17–32) The Tijaniyyah zawiya also served as a centre of spiritual and organisational influence, where devotional functions intersect with social and economic dimensions, reflecting its transformation into a space for the production of a cross-domain 'spiritual economy'. (Roux, 1969, pp. 126–127)

Accordingly, the Qadiriya and Tijaniya represent complementary models for understanding Algerian Sufism, where the interaction between organisational structure (the zawiya, the sheikh, the chain) and symbolic significance (baraka, wilaya, karama) manifests in the production of a Sufi network capable of enduring and adapting across time and space.

Second: Mechanisms of cross-border expansion: The cross-border expansion of Sufi orders in Algeria is based on a complex network system in which institutional, spiritual and movement dimensions overlap, making Sufism a dynamic religious structure capable of transcending geographical boundaries and reproducing itself in multiple contexts. (Miller, 2013) Institutionally, the zawiyas play a pivotal role in this expansion, serving as spaces for religious education and the transmission of Sufi knowledge; their role is not limited to instruction but extends to the reproduction of spiritual lineages (ijazas) and the linking of the local to the wider Islamic sphere. These zawiyas also work to consolidate a collective religious memory and form centres of spiritual influence that ensure the continuity of Sufi orders across generations, reflecting a dual function that combines the educational dimension with the networked structure of dissemination. (Cornell, 1998, pp. 309–311)

Conversely, this network is based on a dense web of spiritual and social ties linking the sheikh and his disciples, establishing relationships that transcend the narrow local sphere towards a broader spiritual space grounded in concepts such as barakah, spiritual affiliation and intercession. These

bonds are reinforced through collective practices such as dhikr and spiritual visits to shrines, making Sufi affiliation a continuous relationship that is not severed by geographical boundaries, but rather adapts to them by reproducing forms of religious solidarity both within and beyond the original sphere of the Sufi orders. (Chih, 2002, pp. 491–495)

-The third factor is religious and historical migration, which has been a key mechanism in the transmission and resettlement of Sufi orders across regions. The movements of sheikhs and disciples—whether as part of scholarly journeys, pilgrimages, or forced or economic migrations—have helped link Algerian zawiyas to broader Sufi networks extending to the Islamic Maghreb, sub-Saharan Africa, and the Islamic Levant. This transition was not merely a geographical one, but a process of reconstructing spiritual spaces within new environments whilst maintaining links with the original centres, reflecting Sufism's capacity for adaptation and reconfiguration within different social and historical contexts. (Cohen, 2018, pp. 262–264)

In this sense, the cross-border extension of Sufi orders in Algeria should not be understood as a linear movement of diffusion, but rather as a multi-level networked system in which zawiyas, spiritual connections and religious migration are integrated to produce a Sufi space that transcends regions and political borders.

Third: Local adaptation within the Sahelian space: In the context of the Sahel region, linked to Algeria's African hinterland, the reproduction of Sufi discourse cannot be understood merely as an extension of ready-made Eastern or Maghreb models, but rather as a process of epistemological and sociological reconfiguration that took place within local spaces characterised by distinct tribal, commercial and spiritual specificities. (Seesemann, 2011, pp. 6–8) Sufi zawiyas and orders, particularly in the southern regions of Algeria, performed a dual function: on the one hand, transmitting Sufi teachings; and on the other, reinterpreting them to suit Saharan lifestyles and trans-Saharan exchange networks (Seesemann, 2011, pp. 15–20). In this context, abstract Sufi concepts were simplified and integrated into concrete daily practices, such as collective dhikr sessions, madih (praise), and rituals associated with hospitality and mutual aid, thereby making Sufi discourse more accessible for social circulation outside elite circles. (Kane, 2016, pp. 41–96)

Furthermore, interaction with the local linguistic and cultural environment contributed to the production of hybrid forms of expression, whereby local dialects and Saharan cultural symbols were employed to explain spiritual concepts, without breaking with the Arab-Islamic tradition. This trajectory was reinforced by the mediating role played by the Sufi sheikh, not only as a spiritual guide but also as a social actor who regulates and symbolically frames relationships within the community, thereby giving Sufi discourse a discursive dimension that extends beyond the educational sphere into the realm of social organisation (Bozbaş & Bozbaş, 2022, pp. 9–23). As a result of this interplay between the religious and the social, Sufism in the Algerian coastal region has evolved into a system of local meaning-making, in which the universal references of Sufism are adapted to the conditions of the Saharan environment, reflecting the ability of local actors to reshape religious discourse according to a logic of interaction rather than replication.

Sufi zawiyas have contributed to the integration of tribal structures within an organised religious framework, by transforming the Sufi sheikh into a social mediator who goes beyond his spiritual function to assume a role in mediating disputes and redistributing symbolic and material

resources, thereby strengthening the cohesion of the tribal community and reorganising its internal relations. (Soares, 2005, pp. 306–307)

This interaction is also evident in the ability of Sufi orders to reshape social affiliations through mechanisms of spiritual allegiance and networks of loyalty, which intersect with the tribal structure rather than replacing it, a factor that grants Sufi discourse a high degree of flexibility in penetrating local contexts. (Benkoumar & Merigui, 2023, pp. 84–87)

This pattern reflects what the ethnographic analysis of the 'economy of supplication' in West Africa has pointed out, where the relationship between religious actors and followers is founded on a symbolic exchange that reproduces power within society through both spiritual and social mediators (Benkoumar & Merigui, 2023, pp. 88–90). In the Algerian context, particularly in the coastal-Saharan region, this dynamic is embodied in the integration of zawiyas into the tribal system as spaces for social mediation and the regulation of local balances, making them a structural agent in the reproduction of the social order rather than merely an isolated religious institution (Villalón, 1995, p. 210)

Fourth: Indicators of Spread and Influence:

Indicators of the spread and influence associated with zawiya and Sufi networks in Algeria and beyond show that this presence cannot be reduced to its geographical or historical dimensions, but must be understood within a complex interplay between spatial structure and the intensity of religiosity in society. In terms of spatial distribution, historical and spatial data reveal that zawiyas within Algeria follow a centralised-network pattern, being densely concentrated in religious and historical centres such as Tlemcen, Algiers, Constantine, and (Pew Research Center, 2018, pp. 13–50), as well as their extensions in the south (Touat, Ain M'adi, Adrar). This reflects their ability to combine institutional stability in urban centres with functional expansion into the transient and open-ended desert regions. (Azedi, 2024, pp. 2–18) Beyond its borders, this network has expanded across the African Sahel (Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso) and the Maghreb, through religious migration routes, spiritual ties and Sufi educational networks, thereby forming a transnational structure based on symbolic continuity and social and religious exchange, rather than on rigid political borders. (Nsaibia et al., 2024, pp. 3–23)

In this context, this spread draws its strength from a social environment characterised by high religious density, with comparative data from the Pew Research Centre showing that Algeria belongs to a highly religious region, with rates of religious affiliation approaching 99%, 88% in daily prayer, and 73% in the importance of religion in public life, (Seghieri, 2024, p. 365) figures that reflect a structural presence of religion in shaping identity and social behaviour. This quantitative data intersects with other indicators from the Arab Barometer, which suggest that the average level of religiosity in the Arab world remained within the range of 2.29–3 during the period 2010–2022, with internal shifts, as shown , involving a decline in the middle category of religiosity (from 56.7% to 47.5%) alongside an increase in the categories of high religiosity and non-religiosity, reflecting a restructuring of the religiosity spectrum towards a more polarised pattern rather than a centrist consensus. (Afrit, 2024) Algeria is also among the countries that have experienced a relative rise in religiosity during certain periods, particularly in times of crisis, which reinforces the hypothesis that religious activity is linked to social functions and existential security. (Arab Barometer, 2024, pp. 3–

12) Taken together, these indicators suggest that the intensity of religious activity is a decisive factor in explaining the region's receptiveness to Sufi networks, as the latter draw their strength from a social structure that assigns religion a central role in public life, whether in terms of identity, legislation or behaviour. In this sense, the distribution of zawiyas does not appear to be merely a historical outcome, but rather a reflection of a dense socio-religious structure that provides the conditions for symbolic reproduction and cross-border influence. These findings will be clarified in

greater detail in the following table, which highlights quantitative indicators of prevalence and influence.

Table 01: Indicators of the spread and influence of religious and zawiya networks (quantitative approach)

Country	Religious Affiliation %	Weekly attendance %	Daily prayer %	Importance of religion %
Algeria	99	48	88	73
Mali	100	79	81	94
Niger	99	88	87	86
Burkina Faso	100	93	100	93
Chad	97	77	83	86
Senegal	100	69	88	98

Fifth: The social and security function of Sufism:

A historical and sociological analysis of the development of Sufism in Algeria reveals that Sufi orders did not merely play a religious and devotional role, but gradually evolved into social and security actors that contributed directly to the organisation of the local sphere and the reproduction of social cohesion. Through the spread of zawiyas since the 6th century AH, local networks for religious and social socialisation were formed, based on consolidating moderate religious authority and spreading the values of moderation, tolerance and the rejection of extremism, which gave them a protective role in shielding society from forms of religious extremism (Abu al-Qasim, 2026, pp. 1709–1710). At the same time, the zawiyas undertook social mediation functions by intervening in the resolution of tribal and family disputes and reconciling parties, drawing on the symbolic capital accumulated by their sheikhs within the local structure, which made them an informal mechanism for managing social tensions and maintaining civil peace. (Schubel, 2018, pp. 1–2) Furthermore, their daily presence—through Quranic education, providing accommodation for students of knowledge, and feeding the poor and wayfarers—reinforced their ability to build local legitimacy based on community trust and symbolic acceptance. (Al-Aragi, 2026, pp. 494–496) This role was not confined to the social sphere, but extended to the security and strategic dimensions during the colonial era, as many zawiyas became centres for mobilisation, Organisation and resistance; historical data indicate that the 1871 uprising saw the involvement of more than 250 tribes, with a mobilisation estimated at over 100,000 fighters in some accounts, whilst others suggest around 150,000 fighters within the resistance networks associated with the Rahmaniya order(Ould Al-Amir, 2021, pp. 150–165, reflecting the significant mobilisation and organisational capacity of Sufi structures at the local level. Furthermore, some colonial documents confirm that the number of adherents to the Rahmaniya Order

alone was estimated at around 295,000 in the mid-19th century (Jaballah, n.d., pp. 144–147) , which explains the colonial administration's awareness of the danger posed by this expansion and its attempts to monitor the zawiyas and confiscate their endowments. Thus, Sufism in Algeria was not merely a spiritual presence within society, but rather an integrated socio-security structure that contributed to the spread of religious moderation, the containment of local conflicts, build social legitimacy, and strengthen society's capacity to confront internal and external threats, making it one of the fundamental historical components in the production of religious and social stability and the preservation of Algerian national identity

The Third Axis: Mobile Islamism in the Sahel: Dynamics of Spread and Indicators of Strength

Political Islam is a relatively modern political phenomenon based on **the politicisation of Islam and its transformation into a project to reorganise the state and society** according to a religious framework (Cesari, 2018, pp. 1–3) However, it does not represent a direct extension of Islam as a creed, but rather reflects **a complex historical interaction between religion and modern political transformations** (Fuller, 2004, p. 119). It emerged in the context of what might be described as a 'crisis of civilisational decline', in which the Islamic world moved from a position of leadership during the classical eras to a state of decline from the fifteenth century onwards; a crisis that deepened with European colonial expansion, the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, and the imposition of the modern nation-state model. Against the backdrop of these transformations, Islamism emerged as an intellectual and political response seeking to explain the causes of this decline and to restore the "Islamic Renaissance" by re-employing religion as a tool for legitimacy and political mobilisation. (Fuller, 2004, p. 119)

As the twentieth century unfolded, Islamism evolved from a reformist discourse into **organised movements and political ideologies**, as embodied in examples such as the Muslim Brotherhood and the ideas of Abu al-A'la al-Mawdudi, becoming a central actor in the political sphere, acting as a catalyst for change even without attaining power. It contributes to reshaping political discourse by questioning the legitimacy of authoritarian regimes and calling for reform and democracy, whilst operating within a complex competitive landscape that challenges the state, traditional religious institutions and other political actors, reflecting the emergence of internal pluralism in the interpretation of Islam.

Islamism manifests itself in various forms, ranging from radical armed struggle—which seeks to change the regime by force despite its limited effectiveness—to indirect peaceful strategies such as da'wa, which focuses on reforming society from the grassroots, as seen in movements such as the Tablighi Jamaat or reformist currents. Between these two poles, intermediate forms emerge that engage in party politics and electoral campaigns or in social activism, confirming that Islamism is not a homogeneous project but **a pluralistic field that adapts to different political contexts**. (Cesari, 2018, pp. 4–9)

Consequently, Islamism cannot be understood merely as an extension of Islamic doctrine or a deviation from it, but rather as the product of the reshaping of religion within the framework of the nation-state, where Islam has become an ideological resource employed in the construction of identity and legitimacy, whether in its nationalist form or in its transnational manifestation (Fuller, 2004, pp. 135-140). From this perspective, Islamism provides a necessary analytical framework for understanding its subsequent transformations , particularly its transition from the national framework

to fragile regional spaces. This is clearly evident in the Sahel region, where it manifests in forms of 'mobile Islamism' that reflect the dynamics of diffusion and adaptation to border contexts.

First: Mobile Islamism as a transnational actor: Islamism is understood today not as a phenomenon confined within the borders of the nation-state, but as a political actor moving across regional and international spaces, shaped by a complex intersection of local contexts and structural shifts in the global system. Globalisation and the development of communication networks have not

merely expanded its sphere of influence, but have also reproduced it within networked structures that transcend traditional hierarchical organisation, where armed movements, missionary activities, political formations and diaspora networks intertwine in constantly shifting dynamics(Nair, 2026, pp. 1–2) . This transformation has made Islamism a multi-level project, no longer confined to the goal of seizing state power, but extending to broader spheres that include redefining religious and political allegiance at a level transcending the nation-state, whilst adapting to a local social reality that is fragile in many cases. (Mandaville, 2007, pp. 1–10)

In this context, the phenomenon does not appear to stem from a single factor, but rather from a long historical interaction between the legacy of colonialism, external interventions, and state-building crises, which has produced political environments susceptible to reshaping by transnational actors (Mandaville, 2007, pp. 12–21). Furthermore, the development of flexible networked organisations has allowed the transfer of ideas, personnel and discourses between different regions without the need for a fixed command centre (Nair, 2026, pp. 3–4), which has strengthened these movements' ability to persist and reposition themselves. This parallels the role of global security discourses in redefining the phenomenon within the framework of a global threat, which has contributed to expanding its scope rather than containing it, through interventionist and militarisation policies that often reproduce the conditions for its spread. In this sense, Islamism is not understood as a rigid ideological bloc, but rather as a flexible political structure that takes shape within transnational networks and reproduces itself according to contextual interactions, particularly in fragile regions where security crises intersect with state weakness and the multiplicity of local and international actors. (Nair, 2026, pp. 3–4)

An analytical approach to Islamist movements reveals them to be a dynamic, multidimensional structure characterised by three interrelated central features: adaptability, pluralism/division, and the problem of violence. Firstly, in terms of structural adaptability, Islamism emerges as a pragmatic political actor that reshapes its strategies according to the nature of the political and social environment; in closed contexts, some movements tend towards clandestine activity or confrontation, whilst in semi-open contexts they engage in party politics and electoral participation, as evidenced by the transition of some movements from opposition to parliamentary integration or political alliances. This adaptability is also reflected in the adoption of 'reform from below' strategies through advocacy, charitable work and the building of civil society networks to gain social legitimacy, as opposed to 'reform from above' strategies that rely on controlling the state to guide society. (Fuller, 2004, pp. 13–35) Secondly, Islamism reflects a characteristic of pluralism and structural division, as it does not represent a unified intellectual framework, but rather a competitive space within which pragmatic reformist tendencies that accept gradualism and institutional work coexist alongside radical currents that adopt confrontational approaches towards the state and reinterpret religious concepts

within exclusionary visions; This makes the phenomenon governed by a constant tension between the logic of participation and the logic of rupture. This pluralism is also evident in differing perceptions regarding central issues such as legitimacy, violence, and the limits of reconciling religious authority with the requirements of the modern state. (Mendelsohn, 2016, pp. 40–45) Thirdly, there is the characteristic of violence as a contextual rather than an essential choice, whereby violence does not constitute a general structural feature, but rather a choice adopted by certain currents under specific

conditions, such as political exclusion or institutional deadlock, leading to the selective use of religious texts to justify confrontation. Conversely, large sections of Islamist movements tend to reject violence and adopt peaceful means such as electoral competition or community work, reflecting an internal division over the legitimacy and limits of such means. (Hamming, 2022, pp. 50–83)

Within this framework, religious authority becomes a symbolic resource open to reinterpretation, used to legitimise diverse practices ranging from opposition to participation, and from criticism to reform. This grants Islamism a structural flexibility that explains its ability to persist and reproduce itself in changing contexts without losing its capacity for mobilisation and influence.

Second: Mechanisms of Expansion in a Fragile Structure: A study of the dynamics of Islamist movements in the Sahel and the Maghreb—particularly the case **of Katiba Macina**—reveals that the mechanisms of expansion are not based on ideology in the narrow sense, but rather on a complex interplay between structural fragility and pragmatic strategies for exploiting social and economic dimensions, alongside flexible local recruitment patterns. In a context of state weakness and a decline in its capacity to provide basic services and maintain security, this fragility becomes a strategic opportunity, whereby jihadist groups succeed in infiltrating communities by filling the institutional vacuum with quasi-governmental functions, such as imposing forms of 'local justice', providing protection, and organising certain economic activities, which grants them functional legitimacy that transcends ideological discourse. (Raineri, 2020, pp. 261–262)

Within this framework, the social dimension constitutes a fundamental pillar of the expansion process, as these groups rely on exploiting deep-rooted local grievances—whether linked to political marginalisation, ethnic conflicts or inequalities in the distribution of resources—to reframe them within a mobilising religious narrative. However, this mobilisation aims not only at ideological persuasion, but also at reconstructing networks of loyalty within society, particularly through integration into existing social structures such as tribal and family ties and local religious leadership. This pattern of 'pragmatic integration' allows the group to be transformed into an internal actor, rather than merely an imposed external force. (Hansen, 2019, pp. 206–207)

On the economic front, Islamist movements capitalise on the fragility of local economies, particularly in border regions characterised by informality. They do not merely exploit these activities, but engage in them in various ways: as partners in smuggling networks, as entities demanding protection money, or as actors organising the flow of illicit goods. (Raineri & Strazzari, 2019, pp. 2–5)

This overlap provides groups with sustainable financial resources whilst simultaneously strengthening their ties to communities that depend on these activities for their livelihoods, creating a form of mutual dependence. Furthermore, conflicts over natural resources— —such as land and pastures—are exploited to reshape local power balances, as these groups provide military or

political support to marginalised groups, thereby increasing their appeal as protectors and enablers (International Crisis Group, 2019, p. 3)

In this context, these dimensions are integrated with 'bottom-up recruitment' strategies, which are one of the most prominent mechanisms of expansion. Recruitment does not take place through centralised channels or abstract ideological discourse, but rather through local social networks comprising relatives, intermediaries, and village cells, giving it a horizontal and decentralised

character. Field testimonies show that the motives for joining are often pragmatic, linked to the need for protection, access to resources, or the acquisition of social status amidst the collapse of public order, whilst religious rhetoric comes later as a mechanism for legitimisation and framing. These groups also sometimes resort to forced recruitment or social pressure, particularly in environments lacking economic and security alternatives. (International Crisis Group, 2019, pp. 5–7)

Consequently, it can be argued that the spread of Islamism in fragile environments is the result of a structural interaction between the exploitation of social and economic imbalances and the activation of deep-rooted local recruitment mechanisms, transforming these groups into flexible actors capable of navigating multiple modes of control—from social penetration to indirect security influence. This explains the limitations of security-focused approaches and, conversely, highlights the need to address the structural roots of the crisis, as they are the actual breeding ground for these dynamics.

Thirdly: Indicators of spread (temporal statistical analysis): A quantitative analysis of ACLED indicators, when viewed through the lens of the dynamics of 'mobile Islamist spread', shows that the evolution of violence in the Sahel between 2015 and 2024 cannot be explained merely as a cumulative increase in the number of attacks, but rather as a gradual reconfiguration of the regional security landscape by two central actors: the Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims (JNIM) and the Islamic State in the Sahel (IS Sahel/formerly ISGS) Nsaibia, 2024) . Chronologically, the data indicate that the region has moved from a relatively low threshold of violence (2015–2016) in northern Mali (Kidal–Gao–Timbuktu) to an initial expansion phase (2017–2019) coinciding with the shift of operations towards northern and eastern Burkina Faso (Soum, Yaga, Sina) and south-western Niger (Tillabéri), where the number of violent incidents rose to hundreds per year, before reaching a level of more than 700 incidents in 2019 alone, reflecting the beginning of the formation of an 'interconnected operational space' between the two groups. (Le Roux, 2019, pp. 1–7)

In the subsequent phase (2020–2021), a dynamic of redistribution of influence between JNIM and IS Sahel took shape within the Liptako-Gourma region, with JNIM concentrating in central and eastern Mali and Burkina Faso (particularly the regions of Mopti, Sangha, and north-eastern Burkina Faso), whilst IS Sahel established its presence in the Menaka–Anderamboukane–Abba triangle in north-eastern Mali and south-western Niger(Nsaibia, 2024). This phase was characterised by a qualitative escalation in confrontational violence between the two groups, alongside an expansion of attacks against regular forces and local militias (VDP in Burkina Faso and MSA/Gatia in Mali), reflecting the conflict's transition from an 'insurgency against the state' to an 'internal jihadist struggle for territory'. (Nsaibia, 2024b)

From 2022 onwards, the data reveals a more profound structural shift, namely the opening up of the operational axis towards the south, where JNIM began using the eastern Burkina Faso corridor

(Kombianga–Taboua–Fada Ngourma) as a springboard towards Benin via the W-Arly-Pendjari corridor, with operations recorded in northern Benin (Alibori) and northern Togo, in parallel with IS Sahel's expansion across southern Niger (Dosso–Gaya) towards north-western Nigeria (Sokoto–Kabi). This expansion was not linear, but took the form of "unstable transit corridors" in which rural areas were used as temporary logistical hubs, reflecting a shift from spatial control to "discontinuous network control". (Radil & Walther, 2024, pp. 9–12)

During 2023–2024, the contours of what might be termed the "new coastal front" took shape, with the regions of Dosso in Niger, Alibori in Benin, and the northern border of Nigeria becoming active zones of multi-actor violence. (Radil & Walther, 2024, pp. 22-23) At this stage, JNIM's infiltration strategy intensified through a combination of religious proselytising, establishing a presence in rural markets, and integrating into smuggling networks, particularly around the W-Arly-Pendjari National Park, (International Crisis Group, 2026, pp. 14–20)

whilst IS Sahel adopted a more confrontational approach based on "economic violence", notably by targeting critical infrastructure such as the oil pipeline between Niger and Benin, alongside intensified attacks against civilians in the Dosso and Tillabéri regions (Nsaibia, 2024, pp. 1–5)

In quantitative terms, ACLED data indicates that the three Sahel countries (Mali–Burkina Faso–Niger) recorded more than 7,600 deaths linked to political violence in the first half of 2024 alone, an increase of nearly 9% compared to 2023, reflecting a shift in the violence to a level of "sustainable maximum intensity" rather than merely an upward trend. It is noted that over 55% of these incidents are concentrated in border regions, confirming that the logic of proliferation is no longer based on classical territorial expansion, but rather on "cross-border circulation of violence", with the routes of JNIM and IS Sahel intersecting in particular in southern Niger (Dosso–Gaya) and the WAP belt. (Radil & Walther, 2024, pp. 13–20)

In light of this sequence, it can be concluded that between 2015 and 2024, Islamist armed action shifted from a model of "limited regional concentration" to a "multi-node armed network" model, whereby the organisation no longer relies on contiguous control, but rather on a flexible distribution of operations across dispersed spaces linked by the informal economy, local social ties, and security vacuums resulting from coups and the retreat of Western security partnerships. This means that JNIM and IS Sahel are no longer traditional local or regional actors, but have become cross-border network structures that reproduce themselves through continuous adaptation to the changing geopolitics of the Sahel and West Africa.

The Timeframe	**Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims (JNIM – *Groupe de soutien à l'islam et***	**Islamic State in the Sahel (IS Sahel – *État islamique au Sahel / EIS-S***	**Predominant geographical area**	**Level of Presence**	**Key analytical characteristics**

	aux musulmans				
2015–2016	Formed through a merger (Ansar Dine + Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) + Al-Mourabitoun)	Initial emergence under the name ISGS (*Islamic State in the Greater Sahara*)	Northern Mali (Kidal – Gao – Timbuktu)	Local and limited	Restructuring of the Jihadist landscape following the disintegration of traditional organisations
2017–2018	Expansion towards central Mali and the start of infiltration into Burkina Faso	Intermittent activity in Liptako-Gourma	Central Mali + Northern Burkina Faso	Initial expansion	Beginning of a competitive space between the two organisations
2019–2020	Significant expansion in Burkina Faso (Sina, Soum, Yaga) and Niger (Tillabéri)	Operational escalation in Menaka and western Niger	The tri-border region (Mali–Burkina–Niger)	Rapid regionalisation	Rise in violence and intensification of attacks against civilians
2021	Consolidation of influence in central Burkina Faso + expansion into Niger	Restructuring into IS Sahel following the killing of Abu al-Walid al-Sahrawi	Liptako-Gourma	Conflict-ridden region	Escalation of direct confrontation between the two groups
2022	Initial advance towards the south (Benin – Alibori) and Togo	Consolidation of control in Menaka and Andiramboukane	Northern Benin + Southern Niger	Network expansion	Start of the shift towards the “coastal front”
2023	Operational expansion in Benin and	Intensive attacks in Menaka and Gao + cross-	Benin – Niger – Mali	Cross-border expansion	Escalation of bloody rivalry

	Togo + activity in western Niger	border operations			between the two groups
2024	Establishing a foothold in the southern Sahel (Benin – northern Nigeria)	Consolidation of control in Azawad + expansion towards Dosso and Tillabéri	Coastal West Africa + Niger High-density network		Shift towards a "multi-node cross-border network"

Compiled by researchers based on previous information and sources

The table reveals that the dynamics of expansion during the period 2015–2024 did not follow a linear path, but rather underwent three fundamental structural shifts:

Firstly, a phase **of local concentration in northern Mali,** where the organisational structures of both JNIM and ISGS were formed. Second, the phase **of regional expansion within the Liptako-Gourma region** between 2017 and 2021, characterised by a gradual increase in attacks and simultaneous geographical expansion across Burkina Faso and Niger.

Third, the phase **of cross-border expansion towards coastal states (2022–2024)**, during which the groups shifted from a logic of geographical control to that of 'flexible networks' relying on porous borders and uncontrolled rural areas.

It is also evident that **JNIM** exhibits a greater capacity for social penetration and geographical expansion, whilst **IS Sahel** focuses on establishing a foothold in Menaka–Gao with limited but more militarily intensive expansion. The interaction between them shows that expansion is not merely spatial, but rather the result **of armed competition that is reshaping the maps of influence in the African Sahel**.

The fourth axis: Interaction between Algerian Sufism and mobile Islamism: competition and mechanisms of resilience

First: The nature of the interaction between religious networks: An analysis of the interaction between Algerian Sufism and mobile Islamist currents—particularly Salafism—shows that the relationship between them cannot be reduced to a mere doctrinal dispute, but rather takes the form of a complex structural rivalry centred on the monopoly of religious legitimacy and the redefinition of the religious and social sphere. On the one hand, Sufi networks draw on a form of legitimacy that might be described as 'historical-social legitimacy', grounded in local reach, spiritual lineages (silsila), and the symbolic charisma of the zawiya sheikhs, alongside their traditional social functions in education, arbitration and mutual aid. (Benkoumar & Merigui, n.d., pp. 84–88)This form of legitimacy, which was reinforced during the colonial period through its role in preserving Islamic identity and resisting cultural penetration, enables Sufism to present itself as the 'authentic' bearer of Algerian Islam. (Benaïssa, 2012, pp. 5–20) In contrast, mobile Islamist movements, particularly Salafism, rely on a transnational, normative textual legitimacy based on a literal interpretation of religious texts and a claim to represent 'true Islam', with a clear tendency to delegitimise Sufi practices and brand them as heresy and deviation. (Boukhars, 2021, pp. 5–15)

This divergence in sources of legitimacy is directly reflected in the nature of the interaction between the two sides, which takes on a dual character ranging from competition to circumstantial coexistence. In contexts of relative stability, a form of coexistence emerges based on the sharing of the religious sphere, particularly in the face of state intervention, which tends to support Sufism as a 'moderate' actor contributing to the regulation of the religious field. **(**Sour, 2025, pp. 462–470) However, this coexistence remains fragile, as it quickly turns into tension and conflict in times of crisis, when each network seeks to expand its influence and reshape religious authority in its favour.

This conflict is particularly evident in the redefinition of social values, such as the status of women, the limits of openness to others, and patterns of economic participation, where Sufism tends to adopt a more inclusive and tolerant model, whilst Salafi currents lean towards isolationism and strict identity politics. (Mecheri & Radji, 2020, pp. 397–404)

Furthermore, this rivalry extends beyond the religious sphere to take on political and social dimensions, as both Sufism and Islamism are linked to different networks of interests and patterns of mobilisation; Sufism benefits from its relative ties to the state and its historical presence in local society (Karimov et al., 2024, pp. 3–5), whilst Islamist movements rely on cross-border dynamics, supported by modern media and global missionary networks. Consequently, the interaction between the two sides can be understood within the framework of a dynamic 'religious field', within which various actors vie for symbolic power, where no single side is definitively victorious, but rather the balance of power is constantly being reshaped in accordance with political and social shifts. (Karimov et al., 2024, pp. 5–7)

Consequently, the competition for legitimacy between Algerian Sufism and mobile Islamism essentially reflects a struggle over the representation of Islam itself within society, and over the definition of its values and organisational standards, which makes this interaction one of the key factors for understanding the transformations of the religious field in contemporary Algeria**.**

Furthermore, the interaction between Algerian Sufism and mobile Islamism takes on a heterogeneous character, determined primarily by the nature of the sphere in which it occurs, ranging from relative coexistence to acute tension depending on the degree of stability or fragility. (Patrick, 2011, pp. 27–35) In regions characterised by a degree of security and social stability, where the state maintains its presence and relies on local networks capable of producing legitimacy and regulating the sphere, the relationship between the two sides tends towards forms of implicit coexistence or indirect containment. This is evident, for example, in some south-western regions such as Adrar, where Sufi zawiyas play a pivotal role in shaping religious and social life, thereby limiting the spread of mobile forms of religiosity and confining them to a limited or non-confrontational sphere of influence. (Zartman, 1995, pp. 874–877)

Conversely, the nature of interaction changes markedly in areas suffering from security fragility and weak border control, where the state's capacity recedes and traditional frameworks of social mediation weaken, transforming the relationship into a state of tension or intense rivalry. (OECD, 2020, pp. 61–77) This is most evident in certain southern and border regions such as Tamanrasset and Illizi, where the open nature of the terrain and ease of cross-border movement provide greater opportunities for mobile groups to establish themselves; these groups exploit security vacuums and work to reshape the religious sphere according to a more fluid and conflictual logic. In such contexts,

the ability of Sufi actors to contain these groups diminishes, and the relationship shifts into a confrontation that is at times unequal, fuelled by the fragility of the local environment and the multiplicity of actors. (OECD, 2020, pp. 80–106)

Consequently, the variation in the nature of the interaction stems not so much from a fundamental difference in doctrines as from the differing conditions of the sphere itself; where stability prevails, the relationship tends towards coexistence and the reproduction of local balances, whilst where fragility prevails, the sphere becomes a space of tension and the reshaping of religious

power balances. Thus, the interaction between Algerian Sufism and itinerant Islamism becomes a direct reflection of the spatial configuration rather than a fixed product of abstract ideological differences.

Second: Analysis of mutual influence: Contemporary literature suggests that the relationship between Salafi Islamism and Sufism should not be understood as a relationship of unilateral replacement or decline, but rather as a complex trajectory of structural interaction and the reconfiguration of the religious field through a continuous redistribution of symbolic power and mechanisms of legitimacy production (Seesemann, 2010, pp. 608–612). On the one hand, the rise of Salafi and Islamist discourses since the second half of the twentieth century has brought about a significant shift in the conditions under which Sufism operates, as the latter has faced increasing critical pressure targeting its traditional structure based on spiritual charisma, hierarchical loyalty and zawiyas as vehicles for religiosity. Some of its practices have been described within the discourse of "religious correction", as heretical or lacking textual foundation. This led to a relative decline in its presence within certain public religious spheres and the rise of more text-based forms of religiosity (Fradkin, Haqqani, & Brown, 2017, pp. 86–105). However, this pressure did not lead to the disintegration of the Sufi structure so much as it prompted it to reproduce itself within a new context, shifting from the logic of traditional legitimacy to that of composite legitimacy, which blends jurisprudential authority, social function and symbolic representation within the public sphere. (Bary, 2016)

In this context, Sufism cannot be understood as a rigid traditional actor, as the evidence reveals that it has undergone a clear process of functional modernisation, encompassing not only religious discourse but also the tools of dissemination and influence. Many Sufi orders have worked to reposition themselves within the contemporary media sphere (Ould El Amir, 2021, pp. 127–135), by utilizing traditional religious media, then gradually transitioning to digital media and social media platforms, including the production of audiovisual content, the broadcasting of dhikr sessions and lessons, and the expansion of their networks across the virtual space. This shift has enabled them to rebuild their audience beyond the narrow local confines of the zawiya, and has allowed them to compete with Salafi discourses that had preceded them in early investment in the digital sphere, thereby making Sufism a prominent player within the 'digital religious marketplace' rather than remaining confined to the traditional sphere alone. (Ould El Amir, 2021, pp. 140–148)

On the other hand, the interactive dimension of Sufism emerges as a crucial element in understanding its relationship with Islamism, as its role was not limited to passively receiving pressure, but extended to the formation of soft resistance mechanisms that contributed to slowing the spread of Salafi discourse. In the Sahel-Sahara region extending to northern Nigeria and Niger, for

example, Sufi orders—led by the Qadiriyya and Tijaniyya—confronted the "Elimination of Heresy and Restoration of the Sunnah" movement through a deep-rooted social and symbolic structure that made it difficult for Salafi discourse to achieve rapid penetration. (Hassan, 2020, pp. 2–10)

These orders relied on extensive symbolic capital linked to zawiyas, spiritual mentors and networks of spiritual affiliation, which enabled them to foster religious and social continuity that limited susceptibility to radicalisation, and allowed them to function as a 'social filter' slowing down the process of ideological transformation within society. (Hassan, 2020, pp. 11-16)

In the same context, the role of Sufism is not limited to direct confrontation, but manifests itself in a logic of containment and the restoration of balance within the religious sphere. It offers a model of religiosity based on gradualism, purification, and a step-by-step engagement with religious meaning, in contrast to the Islamist discourse, which is based on rupture and the comprehensive re-founding of social and religious reality. (Boujto, n.d., pp. 12–22) This structural difference in the mode of religious production makes Sufism a mechanism for alleviating religious tensions, as it acts as a mediator between the individual, society and the state, and reorganises the relationship between religion and reality through educational and spiritual tools rather than those of ideological conflict. (Ould Mohamed, 2012, pp. 3–7)

From another perspective, the interaction between the two sides reveals a more complex dimension, namely the reappropriation of the Sufi heritage within Islamist narratives themselves, whereby certain jihadist currents have reinterpreted historical Sufi experiences (such as the jihads of the nineteenth century) within a new ideological framework that strips them of their spiritual and institutional dimensions and re-inserts them into the logic of 'loyalty and disavowal' and political mobilisation. This overlap has made Sufism not only a subject of conflict, but also symbolic material that is reproduced within Islamist discourse itself, reflecting a deep interaction rather than a rupture. (Kante, 2024, pp. 247–260)

Thus, it can be argued that Sufism has not merely confronted Islamism, but has reshaped the conditions of its operation, contributing to the slowing of its expansion through its networked and social structure, whilst simultaneously developing its media and organisational tools to enable its survival within a competitive and changing religious environment. Consequently, the relationship between the two sides is not one of domination or retreat, but a complex dialectical relationship based on mutual adaptation: Islamist pressure reshapes Sufism, and a flexible Sufism recalibrates the trajectories of Islamism, making the religious sphere an open arena for a protracted struggle over legitimacy and representation, rather than a final resolution in favour of one side at the expense of the other.

Third: Spatial Variation in the Influence of Sufi Presence on Islamist Penetration: The spatial dimension constitutes one of the key determinants for understanding the variation in patterns of religious presence and security shifts within southern Algeria, particularly when comparing the provinces of Adrar, Tamanrasset and Illizi, as these are border desert regions where considerations of territorial development, spatial integration, cultural specificity and cross-border security challenges. Official data from the National Statistics Office (ONS), as well as the strategic orientations set out in the National Spatial Planning Scheme (SNAT 2030), show that the Algerian Saharan region, despite covering more than 80% of the national territory, remains the least densely populated and most

vulnerable to issues of territorial isolation and poor connectivity and service provision compared to northern Algeria. This structural disparity is directly reflected in the nature of social and religious actors within these regions. (Boukhars, 2012, pp. 11–17) In the province of Adrar, there is a relatively stable urban and social pattern based on the historical oasis structure, where the zawiyas and Sufi orders—notably the Tijaniyya and Qadiriyya—have played a pivotal role in establishing networks of social control and religious education, and in maintaining social cohesion (Khelladi, 2014, p. 64). Furthermore, Adrar's historical integration into Saharan trade networks and cultural relations with the

African hinterland has granted the traditional religious establishment extended social legitimacy. (Khelladi, 2014, pp. 66–70) This factor makes the religious sphere in Adrar more stable and less susceptible to infiltration by radical Islamist discourses, particularly given the continued presence of local religious authorities within society. (Lacher, 2012, pp. 3–18)

The province of Tamanrasset, however, is characterised by a distinct feature linked to its geostrategic location as a gateway to the countries of the African Sahel, making it a space open to complex human, cultural and commercial flows. This border situation creates a more socially fluid environment compared to Adrar, where informal trade, irregular migration and cross-border networks overlap. (Khelladi, n.d., p. 80) Although there are Sufi influences within Tuareg society, the weak institutional density and the vast geographical expanse make the process of social control more complex, which may explain the region's heightened susceptibility to imported religious discourses or non-local ideological mobilisation networks. (Pargeter, 2015, pp. 145–168)

In contrast, the province of Illizi represents a special case due to its border location and its strong ties to the energy-related rentier economy. Despite its strategic importance, the low population density, the dispersion of urban settlements, and the concentration of economic activity in extractive areas limit the formation of dense traditional social structures such as those found in Adrar (Ben-Antar, 2016, pp. 215–230). Consequently, the Sufi presence in Illizi appears less deeply rooted in institutional and social terms, which means that patterns of religiosity or the penetration of extremist discourses is more closely linked to factors of security geography and cross-border movement networks. Ben-Antar, 2016, p.234)

Consequently, a spatial comparison between the three provinces reveals that the strength of the Sufi presence is not solely linked to doctrinal structure or religious heritage, but is also influenced by the degree of local development, population density, the level of integration into public policies, and the nature of the geopolitical location. Where there is a stable social structure and deep-rooted traditional religious networks, as in Adrar, the chances of the spread of radical Islamist activity diminish, whilst the likelihood of security instability increases in more open and fluid border areas such as Tamanrasset and Illizi. This is what gives the empirical comparison explanatory value in testing the hypothesis of the relationship between Sufism and local stability.

Fourth: Sufi strategies of resilience in the face of Islamism and the reshaping of the religious sphere in Algeria: Sufism's interaction with the state in Algeria, across various historical periods, constitutes a complex framework for the production of multiple mechanisms of social and religious resilience in the face of ideological shifts, foremost among which is the rise of militant and radical Islamist movements. Through an examination of the trajectory of the zawiyas and Sufi orders, it becomes clear that they were not merely traditional religious structures, but rather flexible social and

political actors capable of adapting to different forms of authority, whether in the colonial or post-independence contexts, enabling them to maintain their continued presence within society and reproduce their legitimacy through deep-rooted social and spiritual networks.

This resilience was manifested primarily in their ability to combine three interrelated functions: the production of religious identity, the expansion of social roles, and repositioning within a complex relationship with the state. At the level of religious identity, the zawiyas have played a pivotal role since the Ottoman period in preserving local Islamic authority through Qur'anic education, moral

upbringing, and the dissemination of Maliki jurisprudence and Sufi traditions, in addition to their roles in social mediation and conflict resolution (Sour, 2025, pp. 462–463)This role was reinforced with the onset of the French occupation in 1830, when the colonial administration realized that subjugating Algerian society could not be achieved through military force alone, but also required dismantling its symbolic and religious structures through the confiscation of waqfs, the weakening of Arab-Islamic education, the undermining of the Sharia judiciary, and the imposition of policies of Frenchification and Christianization. (Sour, 2025, p. 464) In response to this, the zawiyas became spaces for the reproduction of Islamic identity and the preservation of the cultural continuity of Algerian society, through the teaching of the Holy Quran, the Prophetic Hadith, Maliki jurisprudence, and spiritual education, thereby preserving the system of beliefs and values within society. Historical data points to the widespread proliferation of zawiyas during the nineteenth century, with their number reaching some 349, comprising thousands of leaders and hundreds of thousands of followers, which gave them a significant capacity to mobilise society and reshape collective consciousness in the face of colonial assimilationist policies. (Meknass & Kriss, 2021, pp. 77–80) In this context, the major Sufi orders, such as the Rahmaniyya, the Qadiriyya and the Tijaniyya, played a fundamental role in combining educational functions with social mobilisation and national resistance; figures such as Emir Abd al-Qadir and Sheikh al-Mukrani embodied this intertwining of spiritual authority and political struggle against colonialism (Chatra & Ramdani, 2024, pp. 4–10)

This role was not limited to the historical dimension, but was also linked to a deeper intellectual framework that explains the continued role of religion as an actor in the public sphere. In this context, both Joseph Ratzinger and Jürgen Habermas point out that modernity, despite its secularist tendencies, has been unable to exclude religion from the public sphere, reflecting the continuing need for spiritual and value-based authorities. This is consistent with Nile Green's argument that Sufism was not separate from the social and political spheres, but rather formed a system capable of reproducing religious values within local communities, thereby granting them the ability to withstand intellectual and cultural transformations. Chatra & Ramdani, 2024, pp. 11-14) In the Algerian context, this is clearly embodied in certain zawiyas, foremost among them the Zaouia Al-Aouia, whose function was not limited to worship and spiritual education, but which became a space for reproducing religious and cultural belonging, connecting individuals to the local Islamic heritage through education, moral upbringing, resolving social conflicts, and consolidating the values of moderation and tolerance. This enabled them to resist attempts at marginalisation and ideological infiltration during various political and security crises. (Meknass & Kriss, n.d., pp. 81–86)

On a social level, the zawiyas have managed to transform their religious function into effective social capital, enabling them to strengthen their presence within the local fabric and counter the

expansion of Islamist movements with their mobilising or protest-oriented rhetoric. Their sources of strength were based not only on spiritual legitimacy, but also on their ability to permeate the daily life of society by providing shelter for the poor and travellers, caring for widows and orphans, providing food for the needy (Benkoumar & Merigui, 2025, pp. 496–498), and building solidarity networks based on endowments, donations and zakat. These functions produced a direct relationship based on trust and mutual social benefit, which granted the zawiyas broad social acceptance and a loyal following that helped shield them from attempts at ideological infiltration by certain Islamist

movements, particularly those that sought to delegitimise Sufism and accuse it of heresy or deviation from the faith. (Benkoumar & Merigui, 2025, pp. 499–501) The zawiyas also consolidated their position through their roles in social mediation and the resolution of local disputes, which granted them moral authority within the local sphere and made them more attuned to the daily needs of the population compared to Islamist actors, who often focused on doctrinal and political discourse. (Benkoumar & Merigui, 2023, pp. 88–89) Furthermore, religious festivals, dhikr gatherings and collective activities contributed to fostering a collective sense of belonging and shared identity, which strengthened the internal cohesion of the murids and followers and created a form of social immunity against radical and exclusionary discourses. (Benkoumar & Merigui, 2023, p. 90)

As regards the relationship with the state, this relationship has been characterised more by a spirit of adaptation and negotiation than by conflict or estrangement, which has enabled the zawiyas to maintain their continuity without losing their spiritual and social functions. The state, whether during the colonial period or after independence, did not treat the zawiyas merely as religious institutions, but rather as social networks capable of influencing patterns of collective religiosity and maintaining balance within society. (Dris, 2023, p. 1136) Conversely, the zawiyas managed to integrate partially into the political system without being completely absorbed by it, giving rise to a model of 'institutional moderate religiosity' based on moderation, mediation and non-ideological spiritual legitimacy. This interaction became more evident after independence in 1962, when the state's relationship with the zawiyas fluctuated between marginalisation and co-optation; however, these institutions maintained their adaptability by redefining themselves as guardians of 'authentic Algerian Islam'. (Dris, 2023, pp.1137-1138) With the rise of Islamist movements during the 1980s, followed by the worsening of the security crisis in the 1990s, the Algerian state restored the status of the zawiyas as bearers of moderate Islam and a component of national identity, and they were utilized as part of a strategy to reassert control over the religious sphere and counter extremism. (Lamari, 2014, pp. 134–136)

However, the importance of the zawiyas at this stage was not linked solely to state support, but also to their own capacity to mobilise their social networks, particularly in rural and marginalised areas, through Quranic education, charitable work, social mediation, and the promotion of values of tolerance and moderation, thereby providing a religious and social alternative to exclusionary Islamist discourses(Boukhars, 2021, pp. 8–10)This interaction between the state and the zawiyas also contributed to the creation of a kind of 'symbolic fortification' for society, with Sufism becoming part of the mechanisms for regulating the religious sphere and defusing ideological tensions, without resorting to direct confrontation with Islamist movements. (Boukhars, 2021, pp. 12–15)

In the contemporary period, this strategy has expanded to take on a geocultural and regional dimension, with certain Sufi orders, particularly the Tijaniyyah order, have become part of Algeria's religious presence in Africa, especially in the Sahel and West Africa (Baqi, 2017, pp. 152–153), reflecting the transition of the zawiyas from local action to the deployment of symbolic capital at the regional level. Despite new challenges linked to criticism from some younger generations regarding the zawiyas' proximity to political power, as well as mounting competition from transnational Salafi and Islamist discourses, the zawiyas have maintained their ability to adapt by reproducing their

spiritual and social legitimacy and reconnecting society with its symbolic and historical roots. (Lamari, 2014, pp. 137–138)

On this basis, it can be argued that Sufism in Algeria has relied not so much on direct confrontation with Islamist movements as on the construction of an alternative religious and social model based on moderation, social piety, mediation, and historical legitimacy. It has contributed to safeguarding the Maliki-Sufi tradition and re-establishing traditional religiosity within society, whilst at the same time providing the state with a symbolic and social resource to support stability and reorganise the religious sphere. Thus, Sufi resilience mechanisms were not merely defensive; they also constituted mechanisms for the reproduction of the religious and social sphere, enabling the zawiyas to preserve their historical continuity, limit the appeal of radical Islamist discourses, and prevent the monopolisation of religious legitimacy by a single actor within Algerian society.

Conclusion

With its cross-border historical, social and spiritual dimensions, Algerian Sufism constitutes one of the most significant informal religious actors influencing the Saharo-Coastal region. This study has sought to analyse the nature of the interactions generated by cross-border religious dynamics in the region, by exploring patterns of competition for religious legitimacy between Algerian Sufi networks and mobile Islamist movements, and by assessing Sufism's capacity to withstand challenges and maintain its role as a regional religious actor that fosters stability.

The study's findings revealed that the transformations experienced by the Saharo-Coastal region in recent decades were not limited to a reshaping of the political and security balance of power, but extended to encompass the religious sphere as a field of symbolic and social competition. In this context, Algerian Sufi networks have emerged as a cross-border actor capable of generating specific forms of religious and social influence based on the historical and symbolic ties linking them to communities in the Sahel and West Africa. Conversely, mobile Islamist movements have sought to exploit the fragility of borders and security and social crises to expand their sphere of influence and redefine sources of religious legitimacy within the region.

The study reveals that the resilience of Algerian Sufism is linked not only to its historical depth and social roots, but also to its flexibility in adapting to contemporary regional transformations, through the revitalisation of its cross-border networks, the development of its social, educational and charitable roles, and by utilising modern media and digital platforms to strengthen its religious and cultural presence. Furthermore, its relationships with official religious institutions and local actors

have helped to consolidate its position as a proponent of a moderate religious discourse, offering a symbolic and social alternative to the radical narratives espoused by extremist groups.

Accordingly, the research findings confirm the validity of the hypothesis that the cross-border nature of Algerian Sufi networks constitutes a strategic asset that has strengthened their ability to counter mobile Islamism and maintain their regional presence. However, this role remains contingent upon these networks' ability to continue renewing their operational mechanisms and adapting their discourse to the rapid social, demographic and digital transformations taking place in the region.

From a broader perspective, the study reveals that understanding issues of security and stability in the Sahara and Sahel region cannot be limited to traditional military or security approaches, but

requires the integration of the religious dimension into the analysis of cross-border dynamics, given that religious actors possess a growing capacity to influence patterns of social cohesion and the reproduction of legitimacy within local communities. Consequently, Algerian Sufism emerges not only as a component of the national religious heritage, but also as a regional actor contributing to the creation of spaces of moderation and stability within one of the most fragile and transformative regions on the African continent.

These findings open the way for future research that examines in greater depth the impact of digital transformation on cross-border Sufi networks, and compares the roles of Sufi actors in the Maghreb and West Africa, as well as examining the growing interactions between religious diplomacy and security policies in managing the challenges of violent extremism within the Saharo-Sahelian region.

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