

Sufi sites in Libya under attack

Al Monitor (28.12.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2CbZLhs> - Attacks on Sufi Islamic sites in Libya have left the religious group feeling targeted, as instability in parts of the fragile nation continues following the 2011 revolution that deposed longtime autocrat Moammar Gadhafi. Sufis often come under criticism from hard-line Salafi Muslims, who oppose their interpretation of Islam for supposedly not comporting with "true" Islam.

"Successive interim authorities since the 2011 uprising and across Libya have [failed to protect](#) Libya's Sufi religious sites from attacks and destruction by extremist militias," Eric Goldstein, deputy Middle East and North Africa director at Human Rights Watch, noted in an HRW press release on Dec. 7. "The unpunished attacks on Sufi mosques are endangering one of Libya's historic minority communities."

Tarek Megerisi, a Libyan political analyst and researcher, told Al-Monitor, "Libya's Sufi community has been under siege ever since the end of the revolution, mainly from Salafi groups who have correspondingly risen in prominence since the revolution." He noted that Salafi preachers took over a number of mosques in Libya in the immediate aftermath of the revolution and later, as Gen. Khalifa Hifter's Libyan National Army made gains in Benghazi.

"Salafi militias have destroyed ancient Sufi mosques, which contain shrines, libraries and which are generally considered landmarks of Libya's Sufi community," Megerisi said. "Given that Salafi militias are continuing to grow in power across the country, and the constituency of Salafists in Libya is also steadily climbing, the persecution of Libya's Salafists seems likely to worsen in the near-term future."

Sufis have become an [easy target](#) for hard-line Muslim militias. Dozens of Sufi religious sites — "including mosques, shrines, tombs, and libraries containing ancient scriptures" — have been destroyed since 2011, according to HRW. Followers of Sufism have also been [kidnapped and killed](#), but their killers have gone unpunished.

Some 20 adherents of Sufism [went missing](#) in eastern Libya in August. The daily Al-Wasat reported in September that the missing were victims of kidnapping.

The latest attack on Sufis, which took place on Nov. 28, occurred the day before a feast to celebrate the Prophet Muhammad's birthday. In that episode, unidentified attackers torched the [Zawiyat Sheikha Radiya Mosque](#) in Tripoli. No casualties were reported.

Sufism is a religious practice, tradition, or approach to Islam that varies by region, as opposed to being a branch or sect with universal practices.

"Over the decades, Sunnis in the Maghreb region never even noticed that Sufism was seen as separate [from mainstream Islam]," Jalel Harchaoui, a doctoral candidate in geopolitics at Paris 8 University and a frequent commentator on Libyan affairs, told Al-Monitor. "The distinction came into view recently, mostly as a result of the spread of Salafi groups."

He added, "The latter being ultra-conservative and eager to judge other Muslims, see the [stylistic tradition of Sufism](#) as a perversion of 'true' Islam. The [Sufis'] celebration of Prophet Muhammad's birth, for instance, has long been a perfectly innocuous holiday across the Maghreb. However, Salafists — whether they are of the rigorist or jihadi kind — designate the tradition as a sinful departure from 'true' monotheism."

Libya's minorities came under increasing threat from Salafists in recent years, as Libya became a hub for jihadists seeking to join the Islamic State (IS) in 2015 after the

extremist group faced numerous military defeats in Syria and Iraq. That year, IS took over the [city of Sirte](#). A bombing campaign by the US-led coalition eventually pushed its fighters out of the city in December 2016. They have since moved to desert valleys and inland hills to the southeast of Tripoli.

IS is not the only group posing a threat to Sufis. In fact, the security apparatus of the United Nations-backed Government of National Accord is a prime suspect in some of the attacks against them. The Special Deterrence Force (SDF) — a radical Islamist military police unit under the Interior Ministry that nonetheless acts independently — is led by Abd al-Rauf Kara, a man described by Daily Beast contributor Jamie Dettmer as an "[Islamic fanatic](#)."

"He quickly took it upon himself after Gaddafi's toppling to hunt down former regime security officials and to police an unruly Tripoli according to ultra-orthodox interpretations of Islamic principles," Dettmer wrote in 2015. "His Nawasi Battalion [later refashioned as the SDF] became notorious for targeting alleged alcohol traders and drinkers and drug dealers as well as gays and also single women unaccompanied by male relatives or husbands, even those frequenting the more up-market coffee houses in affluent districts of Tripoli."

The current government has not denounced any of the attacks on Sufi sites, which some locals believe the SDF to have been behind. In October in Tripoli, a Sufi mosque was attacked in the Ghararat neighborhood during a clash between the SDF and [armed militias](#) that had been accused of drug trafficking.

"A religious scholar with ties to the Sufi community in Tripoli said it was the SDF, which had gained control of the neighborhood, that intentionally damaged the 16th-century Sidi Abu Gharara Sufi mosque," HRW reported. The SDF released a statement denying that they had attacked the mosque, saying they would deal with those responsible.

"It is very possible that Abd al-Rauf Kara's group is responsible," Harchaoui said, "but nobody has any proof backing such an accusation."

See as well: New waves of attacks against Sufi sites (Human Rights Watch, 7 December 2017)

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/12/07/libya-new-wave-attacks-against-sufi-sites>