

Between the Sword and the Soul: Sufism's Living Tradition of *Jihād*

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Abstract: This article explores the multidimensional understanding of *jihād* within the Sufi tradition, focusing on its typology as internal, verbal, and physical struggle (*jihād al-naḥs*, *jihād al-lisān*, *jihād al-Sayf*). Drawing on classical Sufi texts, historical accounts, and modern scholarly analyses, the study re-evaluates the perception of Sufism as an exclusively pacifist movement. It argues that early Sufi thinkers such as Al-Ghazālī, Rūmī, and 'Abdallāh b. al-Mubārak developed an integrated conception of *jihād* that prioritized spiritual purification but also permitted martial engagement under ethical conditions. The paper highlights the roles of Sufi saints and brotherhoods in resisting tyranny through speech, participating in holy wars, and supporting imperial military structures such as the Janissaries and Mughal armies. In modern times, many Sufi groups have reinterpreted *jihād* in nonviolent, ethical, and social terms, offering a counterbalance to Salafi-jihadist ideologies. The study concludes that Sufism's legacy of combining inner discipline with outward responsibility provides a more holistic and historically grounded vision of *jihād*, one that continues to resonate in contemporary Islamic thought and global religious discourse.

Keywords: *Sufism; Jihād; Spiritual struggle; Sufi militancy; Salafi-jihadism.*

INTRODUCTION

The concept of *jihād* has long occupied a central position in Islamic discourse, yet it remains one of the most contested and multilayered terms in the religion's history. While often rendered simply as "struggle," its meanings span an expansive spectrum, ranging from inner ethical striving to organized military conflict. This semantic breadth reflects profound doctrinal divergences within the Islamic tradition itself. Most notably, the contrast between *Sufism* (Islamic mysticism) and jurisprudence or political Islam reveals two fundamentally different interpretations of what constitutes legitimate struggle in the path of God. In particular, Sufism reinterprets *jihād* through a spiritualized lens, emphasizing internal purification and moral transformation, whereas legalistic and political traditions often define

jihād through external, collective obligations such as defense, warfare, or territorial expansion (Amiri & Daneshshahraki, 2024; Saritoprak et al., 2020; Sulaiman, 2022).

This divergence is not merely academic but is rooted in historical, theological, and sociopolitical realities. From its inception, Islamic mysticism developed alongside early Islamic asceticism, which prioritized inner struggle over outward conquest. The Sufi vision of *jihād* as primarily directed against the *nafs*—the lower self or ego—is deeply embedded in classical texts and spiritual manuals. In contrast, Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) developed increasingly detailed rules governing external forms of *jihād*, often expanding its application beyond self-defense to include state-sponsored or ideological campaigns aimed at preserving the political unity and moral fabric of the Muslim community (Lambton, 1970; Sachedina, 1996).

The most enduring typology that captures this diversity is the three-fold classification of *jihād*: *jihād al-nafs* (struggle against the self), *jihād al-lisān* (struggle through words), and *jihād al-Sayf* (physical struggle through warfare). This framework, widely discussed in both mystical and legal traditions, underscores the multifaceted nature of *jihād*. Sufi scholars consistently emphasize the superiority of *jihād al-nafs*—the internal struggle—as the "greater *jihād*" (*al-jihād al-akbar*), relegating other forms to secondary, and often contingent, expressions (Al-Kaisi, 2021; Saritoprak et al., 2020). This prioritization is underpinned by Qur'ānic references to the corruptibility of the soul (Q 12:53) and the moral imperative to tame it through spiritual discipline.

The internal orientation of *jihād* in Sufism is not only conceptual but practical. Sufi literature outlines rigorous ethical frameworks that demand the cultivation of virtues such as patience, humility, compassion, and truthfulness. This inward battle is seen as more difficult and meritorious than any external confrontation. The importance of taming the *nafs* is a recurring theme in the works of foundational Sufi figures such as al-Qushayrī and al-Ghazālī, who assert that one cannot rightly engage in outward forms of struggle without first achieving inner purification (Hasyim et al., 2024; Saeed & Naeem, 2021). These insights were informed by earlier Islamic ascetics, whose teachings emphasized detachment from material desires as the path to divine proximity (Sahri, 2021).

Yet, this spiritual interpretation does not negate the presence of martial themes in Sufi tradition. On the contrary, the historical record shows that many Sufi orders, especially in contexts of political oppression or colonial encroachment, engaged in armed resistance. Notably, the Qādiriyya order under Shehu 'Uthmān Dan Fodio in West Africa (early 19th century) and the Tijānī order under 'Umar Tall in Senegal led organized *jihād* movements against local syncretic elites and French colonialism, respectively (Hiskett, 1994; Willis, 1989). Similarly, the Naqshbandiyya brotherhood in India played a prominent role during the Mughal era, with its *Malfūzāt* texts portraying spiritual leaders who simultaneously provided moral guidance and military support to imperial campaigns (Buehler, 1998; Digby, 2001).

These examples complicate the often simplistic portrayal of Sufism as inherently pacifist. Scholars such as Aljunied (2024), Suratman et al. (2021), and Meirison & Muzakki (2020) have demonstrated that Sufi militancy—what might be termed "spiritualized militancy"—can take various forms: protagonist (leading resistance), protectionist (defending the community), and purist (upholding religious ideals). In each case, the decision to engage in physical struggle was embedded in a broader spiritual worldview that prioritized ethical conduct, divine authorization (often via dreams or visions), and communal well-being.

Nevertheless, Sufi militancy is philosophically distinct from that of Salafi or political Islamist movements. The former draws legitimacy from charismatic authority and

metaphysical experience, rather than scriptural literalism or legal formalism (Akhlāq, 2023; Shikhaliev, 2022). Salafi-jihādī groups, on the other hand, tend to prioritize doctrinal purity and political control, often dismissing Sufi practices as heretical or un-Islamic. This ideological clash has had real-world implications, especially in places like Iraq, Nigeria, and Chechnya, where Salafi militants have targeted Sufi shrines and leaders as part of their broader campaign to “purify” Islam (Geaves, 2013; Knysh, 2019).

In recent decades, Sufi movements have increasingly reasserted their interpretation of *jihād*, particularly as a counter-narrative to extremist ideologies. In northern Nigeria, for instance, Sufi communities have positioned themselves in opposition to Boko Haram’s hyper-militant vision by promoting an ethical framework grounded in compassion, justice, and spiritual education (Yüksek, 2021). Similarly, in post-2003 Iraq, the *Jaysh Rijāl al-Ṭarīqa al-Naqshbandiyya* emerged as a Sufi resistance group, though it has consciously distanced itself from indiscriminate violence such as suicide bombings (Cook, 2005). These developments indicate an ongoing attempt by Sufi actors to reclaim *jihād* as a multidimensional struggle rooted in moral discernment rather than militarism.

Western and even some Muslim historiographies have often mischaracterized or marginalized this militant side of Sufism. Dominant narratives portray Sufi orders as purely spiritual and politically disengaged, leading to a conceptual ambiguity that disconnects Sufi history from broader Islamic socio-political dynamics (Geaves, 2013; Sulaiman, 2022). This underrepresentation has skewed public and scholarly understandings, portraying Sufism as a passive tradition when, in fact, many Sufi orders played pivotal roles in nation-building, resistance, and ethical reform. Correcting this bias is essential for a more accurate and nuanced reading of Islamic history.

Therefore, the present study seeks to examine the historical and theological dimensions of Sufi involvement in *jihād* by tracing its manifestations across spiritual, verbal, and physical forms. This approach offers a typological framework to understand how Sufi traditions have both redefined and operationalized *jihād* in diverse contexts—from personal piety to anti-colonial resistance. The study also aims to distinguish Sufi interpretations from both jurisprudential orthodoxy and contemporary political Islam, thereby contributing to an enriched understanding of the spectrum of Islamic responses to the notion of struggle.

By contextualizing Sufism’s complex relationship with *jihād*, this article challenges binary assumptions that separate spiritual devotion from socio-political activism. Instead, it offers a more integrative view in which ethical interiority and militant exteriority can—and often do—coexist within Sufi paradigms. In doing so, it not only highlights the historical significance of Sufi orders in shaping Islamic thought and practice but also their enduring relevance in contemporary debates on violence, resistance, and religious identity.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative historical approach by examining classical and contemporary texts relevant to the Sufi tradition and the concept of *jihād*. Primary sources include works such as *Iḥyā’ ‘Ulūm al-Dīn* by al-Ghazālī, texts by Ibn ‘Arabī, as well as scholarly articles from academic journals that address the socio-political dimensions of Sufism.

Data were collected through digital literature searches, with source selection focused on the threefold typology of *jihād* in Sufi thought (*nafs*, *lisān*, *Sayf*). Sources that solely explore spiritual experience without social or political engagement were excluded.

The analysis follows a thematic and chronological method, categorizing content based on jihād typology and historical context, ranging from the classical period to the contemporary era. Case studies such as the Bektāshīyya's role in the Ottoman military and Sufi responses to modern extremism are used to illustrate the conceptual transformation of jihād in Sufi praxis.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

Jihād al-Nafs: The Spiritual Struggle as Foundational Discipline

In Sufi doctrine, *jihād al-nafs*—the struggle against the self—constitutes the core of spiritual life and is considered the foundation upon which all higher spiritual experiences are built. Classical Sufi sources consistently frame the *nafs* (self or soul) as the initial battlefield of the seeker's journey, asserting that the purification and mastery over this internal force precede any engagement with external challenges. This notion is not merely symbolic; it is doctrinally elevated as the “greater *jihād*” (*al-jihād al-akbar*)—a concept that represents a clear hierarchy within the typology of *jihād*. (Mulić & Šestan, 2024; Yalçinkaya, 2024).

The journey of spiritual transformation in Sufism is mapped through multiple levels of the *nafs*, beginning with *an-nafs al-ammārah* (the commanding soul inclined toward evil) and culminating in *al-nafs al-sāfiyah* (the purified soul). Each stage—*nafs al-lawwāmah* (the self-reproaching soul), *nafs al-mulhamah* (the inspired soul), *nafs al-muṭma'innah* (the tranquil soul), and *nafs al-raḍīyyah* (the contented soul)—marks progress in ethical mastery, detachment from worldly desires, and increasing nearness to God (Mulić & Šestan, 2024; Shahpesand, 2020). These stages reflect a movement not only away from vice but toward spiritual excellence, echoing Qur'anic references that treat the *nafs* as a moral locus (Q 12:53).

وَمَا أُبْرِئُ نَفْسِي إِنَّ النَّفْسَ لَأَمَّارَةٌ بِالسُّوءِ إِلَّا مَا رَحِمَ رَبِّي إِنَّ رَبِّي غَفُورٌ رَحِيمٌ

And I do not acquit myself. Indeed, the soul is a persistent enjoiner of evil, except those upon which my Lord has mercy. Indeed, my Lord is Forgiving and Merciful.

Sufi practices such as *tazkiyat al-nafs* (purification of the self) provide the practical means for undertaking this internal struggle. Techniques such as *dhikr* (remembrance), *muhāsabah* (self-accounting), ascetic detachment, and emotional discipline are employed to refine the soul and eliminate arrogance, greed, and anger (Aini & Hariyanto, 2020; Anbiya, 2023). This ongoing process of *mujāhadah* is what defines *sulūk*, the Sufi path, emphasizing that spiritual struggle is not a preliminary stage but a perpetual discipline. The end goal is the effacement of the ego and the realization of the divine presence, a condition often referred to in Sufi metaphysics as *fanā'* (annihilation of the self) and *baqā'* (subsistence in God).

Doctrinal sources, including hagiographies and poetic literature, strongly reinforce this elevation of inner struggle. Works like 'Attar's *Tazkirat al-Awliyā'* depict saints who view the *nafs* as a more formidable adversary than Iblīs himself, highlighting the soul's capacity for deception and resistance to reform (Chalisova, 2019). In Rumi's *Mathnawī*, the quest for divine love is portrayed as entirely dependent on subduing the self, with outward militancy viewed as a distraction unless it is animated by sincere spiritual intent (Hisamatsu, 2024; Rūmī, 2021; Yalçinkaya, 2024). The internal *jihād*, in this view, is not passive resistance but an intense battle requiring courage, vigilance, and self-sacrifice.

Similarly, Al-Ghazālī's *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn* presents a detailed model of ethical introspection where the *nafs* must be examined, disciplined, and reoriented through sustained worship, ethical behavior, and the remembrance of death. The process is likened to taming a wild beast or reclaiming a soul from corruption—a metaphor that mirrors martial conflict yet

is focused entirely on inner transformation (Al-Ghazālī, 2011; Tanabayeva et al., 2024). Ibn 'Arabī extends this idea in his conception of the "perfect human" (*al-insān al-kāmil*), asserting that the individual who has conquered the self stands as a mirror of divine attributes, making *jihād al-nafs* not only a moral duty but a cosmological act (al-'Arabī & Ghurāb, 1981; Tanabayeva et al., 2024).

Theological support for the superiority of inner struggle is further found in prophetic reports and Sufi commentary on Qur'anic verses. While the *hadith* designating internal struggle as the "greater *jihād*" is debated in terms of authenticity, it has had a profound normative influence in Sufi ethics and pedagogy (Miller, 2003). Moreover, Sufi scholars argue that the Qur'an repeatedly points toward self-regulation and internal awareness as the preconditions for social justice and communal health.

This prioritization of inward *jihād* has significant implications for how violence and militancy are viewed in the Sufi tradition. Rather than glorifying external battle, Sufi sources often present such engagements as secondary and valid only when aligned with purified intentions. The Sufi emphasis on *nafs*-discipline serves as a safeguard against the misuse of *jihād* as a political or personal tool. By establishing moral integrity as a prerequisite for outward action, Sufi teachings construct a model of resistance and struggle rooted in self-mastery rather than conquest (Irawan et al., 2023; Saeed & Naeem, 2021).

Importantly, the internal focus of Sufi *jihād* extends beyond the individual. Many Sufi orders teach that the spiritual state of individuals affects the moral fabric of the community. Hence, *jihād al-nafs* becomes a communal imperative, fostering environments of justice, patience, and ethical engagement. The notion that peace within leads to peace without is central to this worldview, offering a profound counter-narrative to militant ideologies that emphasize external enemies (Febriani, 2025; Machlis, 2019).

Sufi literature and doctrine converge in presenting *jihād al-nafs* as not only the foundation of spiritual practice but also the axis around which all other struggles must revolve. It is a *jihād* that demands discipline, introspection, and sustained effort and, in its highest realization, brings the seeker into a state of proximity with God. By emphasizing this internal struggle as the "greater *jihād*," Sufism not only distinguishes itself from other Islamic interpretations but also offers a vision of *jihād* rooted in compassion, self-awareness, and transformation.

Jihād al-Lisān: Verbal Resistance and Moral Critique

Within Sufi traditions, *jihād al-lisān*—the struggle through words—emerges as a powerful form of nonviolent resistance rooted in ethical teachings and spiritual integrity. Far from being passive, this verbal *jihād* is a deliberate and strategic engagement with structures of power and injustice. It utilizes language—poetry, sermons, public discourse, and written texts—not only to uplift spiritual consciousness but also to confront political tyranny, religious authoritarianism, and social oppression. This form of *jihād* reflects the Sufi commitment to truth (*haqq*) and justice, where words serve as a vehicle for reform rather than aggression.

Historically, Sufi poets such as Bulle Shah and Shah Abdul Latif wielded verse as both a devotional and political instrument. Their poetry condemned state-sponsored oppression, religious dogmatism, and the marginalization of people with low incomes, speaking directly to the conscience of their communities (Burney Abbas, 2007). These works, though couched in mystical metaphor, critiqued the political order and inspired resistance rooted in compassion and spiritual dignity. Similarly, modern-day performers like Abida Parveen and Nusrat Fateh

Ali Khan have revived such poetic legacies as vehicles of protest against authoritarian regimes and religious extremism in Pakistan, preserving Sufi critique as a living tradition (Burney Abbas, 2007).

The practice of *jihād al-lisān* extends beyond poetry into public preaching and reformist rhetoric. Sufi preachers have historically served as moral voices within Muslim societies, challenging rulers and elites who deviated from justice. Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī's verses often denounced hypocrisy and superficial religiosity, asserting that true governance must stem from inner sincerity and alignment with divine truth (Andon et al., 2022). Likewise, al-Ghazālī used philosophical and theological texts to expose ethical corruption within the religious establishment, advocating for self-purification and humility as prerequisites for legitimate leadership.

Such verbal resistance can also be seen in Ahmad Sirhindi's challenge to Mughal Emperor Akbar's syncretic religious policies. Sirhindi's letters and treatises confronted perceived deviations from orthodox Islam, urging a return to Qur'anic and Prophetic standards. Though couched in spiritual language, his critiques had clear political implications, mobilizing followers toward reform and resistance against religious dilution (Ślęzak & Bielewska, 2021). This illustrates how Sufi speech acts can catalyze collective movements while still grounded in ethical and mystical language.

Contemporary cases further underscore the relevance of *jihād al-lisān*. During the 2011 Syrian revolution, Shaykh Muhammad al-Ya'qūbī invoked Sufi teachings to denounce the Assad regime publicly. Drawing on classical concepts of vicegerency (*khilāfah*) and spiritual duty, his rhetoric framed resistance not only as a political act but as a sacred obligation to uphold divine justice (Faruqi, 2023). His speeches mobilized thousands, demonstrating the enduring power of Sufi discourse as both religious and political intervention.

Verbal resistance also takes subtle, indirect forms. The Naqshbandī tradition, for example, emphasizes *adab* (ethical refinement) and *self-critique* as a spiritual discipline. Although primarily directed inward, this practice fosters values such as justice, patience, and dignity that quietly challenge the legitimacy of unjust rule (Kostadinova, 2024). In Kazakhstan, where religious expression faces strict state control, Sufi networks have revitalized traditional rhetoric to foster cohesion and resist ideological repression under the guise of cultural preservation (Karimov et al., 2024). This strategy reaffirms that even subdued speech, when rooted in spiritual ethics, becomes a form of resistance.

In volatile regions like Kashmir, where Sufism is challenged both by reformist Islamist movements and state interference, public sermons serve as instruments of resilience. Sufi leaders focus on unity, tolerance, and community welfare, countering divisive narratives with inclusive spiritual visions. These public teachings offer a framework for peace rooted not in passivity but in ethical endurance (Houston, 2018).

Moreover, the discourses of figures such as Sheikh Nazim al-Haqqani exemplify the role of Sufi leadership in articulating resistance through spiritual exhortation. His critiques of materialism and moral decay, voiced in public sermons, presented Sufism as a counterbalance to both secular modernity and violent fundamentalism (Reiter, 2016). These teachings do not simply reject injustice; they model a spiritually anchored alternative that calls for introspection, moral renewal, and ethical governance.

Importantly, *jihād al-lisān* empowers marginalized communities by affirming their dignity and worth. Through collective remembrance (*dhikr*), storytelling, and community gatherings, Sufi preachers offer moral clarity and communal solidarity. In doing so, they resist

not only political repression but also despair and fragmentation, reaffirming Islam's spiritual humanism.

Sufi verbal resistance is not oppositional in the sense of incitement; it is corrective. It aims to realign society with the divine order through compassion, ethical speech, and moral example. It is this balance of confrontation and care, grounded in sacred language and spiritual practice, that gives *jihād al-lisān* its enduring relevance. By privileging speech as a medium of transformation, Sufi tradition affirms that the tongue, guided by heart and conscience, can challenge oppression more profoundly than any sword.

Jihād al-Sayf: Armed Militancy in Early and Classical Sufism

Contrary to the popular perception of Sufism as wholly pacifist, early and classical Sufi figures not only articulated a theology of inner purification but also participated actively in military campaigns, especially within the contexts of territorial defense, frontier resistance, and holy war. This participation is well-documented in a range of sources—including hagiographies, historical chronicles, and doctrinal treatises—that portray martial *jihād* not as a contradiction to Sufi spirituality, but rather as an extension of it (Neale, 2017).

The lives of prominent Sufi saints such as Shaykh Arslan Dimashqi, Abu Hasan Shadhili, Najm al-Din Kubra, and Aq Shams al-Din offer compelling evidence of this synthesis. These figures are recorded not only as spiritual guides but also as *mujāhidīn*—leaders who took up arms in defense of Muslim territories. Najm al-Din Kubra, for example, famously died fighting the Mongols during their invasion of Khwarezm, and his followers portrayed his death as both martyrdom and mystical fulfillment (Neale, 2017). Similarly, Aq Shams al-Din played a pivotal role in the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople, acting as both a spiritual mentor and political-military advisor to Sultan Mehmed II. His presence on the battlefield symbolized the legitimacy of the campaign as a form of *jihād fī sabīl Allāh*.

Such examples are not isolated. As noted in the original draft text, proto-Sufi figures like 'Abdallāh b. al-Mubārak (d. 181/797) authored treatises on *jihād* alongside works on asceticism (Cook, 2005; Neale, 2017). He and others such as Fuḍayl b. 'Iyāḍ and Ibrāhīm b. Adham were known to engage in combat along the Byzantine frontiers while maintaining rigorous spiritual discipline (Hiskett, 1994; Knysh, 2019). These early exemplars illustrate that armed struggle (*jihād al-Sayf*) was not divorced from mystical aspiration, but rather carried out under the condition of inner purification (Neale 2017). The notion that "one who has not overcome the soul's temptations cannot participate in other forms of warfare" reflects the Sufi understanding that outer battle must proceed from a victorious inner battle (Buehler, 1998; Neale, 2017).

Sufi literature and doctrinal texts present this martial engagement within an integrated spiritual framework. Military *jihād* is portrayed as an act not of conquest or coercion, but of defense, justice, and divine service. Chapters in Sufi manuals contextualize physical combat as an expression of devotion and communal responsibility. The ethical imperative of warfare—ensuring motives are pure and violence restrained—is aligned with the same moral scrutiny required in *jihād al-naḥs* (Neale, 2017).

Importantly, this dual emphasis is codified in the teachings of Sufi-influenced legal thinkers like Burhān al-Dīn al-Marghīnānī, who reframed the objectives of *jihād* to encompass protection of life, freedom, and faith rather than imperial expansion. His work implies that the Sufi orientation to *jihād* can accommodate peace and strategic non-aggression when these serve the broader spiritual aims of Islam (Soufi 2021, 203–236).

The fusion of spirituality and militancy is further demonstrated in later Sufi orders. The Naqshbandiyya, especially in the Mughal and post-Mughal period, served both spiritual and military functions. As described in the *Malḡūzāt-i Naqshbandiyya*, figures like Bābā Palangpūsh are depicted receiving divine sanction for battle, sometimes through visions involving saintly or prophetic figures. His dream of Ḥamzah (the Prophet Muhammad's martyred uncle) handing him a sword before battle demonstrates the deep interweaving of mystical authority and martial legitimacy (Digby, 2001). These accounts serve not only as inspiration but as theological affirmation that spiritual warfare includes—but transcends—physical resistance.

During the Crusades and Mongol invasions, many Sufi brotherhoods aligned themselves with military causes, particularly where the Islamic community (*ummah*) was under threat. The decisive Battle of Ḥaṭṭin (583/1187), for instance, saw the participation of Sufi volunteers, some of whom were tasked, according to Ibn Kathīr, with executing captured Templar and Hospitaller knights—these actions, though militaristic, were embedded within a larger narrative of divine justice and communal preservation (Ibn Kathīr, 1966).

Moreover, the connection between Sufism and military structures extended into institutional forms during the Ottoman period. The Bektāshiyya order, closely tied to the Janissaries, symbolized this alliance, as did the presence of Mevlevī regiments during World War I, where dervishes not only fought but also performed spiritual rituals to inspire and console troops (Köstüklü, 2002). While some later labeled these groups heretical for their Shī'i or *ghulāt* tendencies, their influence on frontier campaigns and spiritual legitimization of conquest remains undeniable.

Sufi military engagement was never blind aggression. Rather, it was a calculated, ethically anchored response to specific threats, often emerging from border regions like Sistan, the Caucasus, and Central Asia—zones historically marked by both military vulnerability and spiritual vitality. The continuity of this tradition is seen in the resistance of Naqshbandī circles in Central Asia against Chinese repression during the Dungan Revolt (1862–1877), where *jihād* was linked not only to territory but to religious and cultural survival.

The martial strand of Sufi history reveals a tradition in which armed *jihād* was not only permissible but at times obligatory, conditioned, however, by strict spiritual discipline and moral scrutiny. The Sufi warrior-saint embodied both inner purification and outer defense, framing military action as a sacred duty subordinated to the divine will. Far from contradicting mystical ideals, *jihād al-Sayf* functioned as a ritualized extension of Sufi ethics, always bound by the primacy of *jihād al-naḡs*. In doing so, classical Sufism demonstrated that peace and war alike must flow from spiritual insight, not political ambition.

Sufi-State Alliances and Doctrinal Mobilization of *Jihād*

Throughout Islamic history, Sufi orders have not only provided spiritual guidance but have also played pivotal roles in legitimizing and mobilizing military power. This intersection of mysticism and political authority is particularly evident in the historical entanglements between Sufi brotherhoods such as the Naqshbandiyya and Bektāshiyya and imperial state structures. These orders offered rulers religious legitimacy, ethical frameworks, and popular networks in return for protection, institutional status, and influence. The doctrinal discourse on *jihād* was central to this partnership, enabling Sufi shaykhs to sacralize warfare under the mantle of spiritual duty while aligning it with state interests (Nath, 2023).

In the Ottoman Empire, the Bektāshiyya order became intimately linked with the Janissaries, the empire's elite military corps. Sufi lodges (*tekkes*) functioned not only as centers

for spiritual training but also as recruitment and ideological grooming spaces for warriors. Rituals emphasized virtues such as loyalty, discipline, and sacrifice, reinforcing the Janissaries' identity as both military elites and spiritual disciples interests (Nath, 2023). Similarly, during the Mughal period, the Naqshbandiyya order gained political influence by guiding and spiritually preparing soldiers and administrators, promoting *jihād* not only as a military act but as a means of preserving justice and ethical governance (Aljunied, 2024).

Pilgrimage rituals and public veneration at Sufi shrines, such as the shrine of Khwaja Mu'inuddin Chishti in Ajmer during Akbar's reign, further reinforced the link between Sufi charisma and imperial authority. These events not only affirmed the emperor's spiritual legitimacy but also consolidated mass support for military endeavors deemed sacred (Nath, 2023). This alignment between kingship and mysticism allowed *jihād* to be interpreted as both a political instrument and a religious obligation sanctified by Sufi cosmology.

Importantly, the Sufi approach to *jihād* in imperial contexts did not reduce the concept to militant conquest alone. Texts such as the *Malfūzāt-i Naqshbandiyya* present visions and dreams of saints receiving divine instruction to support military campaigns, such as Bābā Palangpūsh's vision of Ḥamza bestowing upon him a sword before joining Mughal forces in the Deccan (Digby, 2001). These narratives not only anchored martial action within a spiritual framework but also ensured that warfare was guided by inner purification, aligning *jihād al-Sayf* with *jihād al-naḥs* as two sides of the same spiritual struggle.

As highlighted in the foundational draft, the influence of Sufi orders on military action extended beyond court alliances. In border regions such as Central Asia, the Caucasus, and Africa, Sufi brotherhoods frequently served as leaders of resistance against foreign occupation and religious oppression. The Dungan Revolt (1862–1877), for instance, was significantly shaped by Naqshbandī teachers who had long traveled among the Hui Muslims in China, offering a model of spiritual militancy that combined community defense with esoteric practice. Similarly, the Fulani *jihād* led by Shehu 'Uthmān Dan Fodio in 1804 drew legitimacy from the Qādiriyyah order, blending reformist theology with active military mobilization to challenge syncretistic regimes and establish an Islamic state based on purified spiritual practice.

In modern times, however, the doctrinal understanding of *jihād* within many Sufi circles has shifted markedly. Confronted with the rise of Salafi-jihadist ideologies that espouse militant confrontation and rigid scripturalism, contemporary Sufi leaders have rearticulated *jihād* as an ethical and communal endeavor focused on self-purification, social harmony, and peaceful resistance (Aljunied, 2024; Muedini, 2015). Rather than promoting violent struggle, modern Sufi groups emphasize education, charity, and interfaith dialogue as meaningful expressions of spiritual *jihād* (Fouad, 2020).

This doctrinal transformation can be seen in Sufi responses to extremism. Unlike Salafi groups that instrumentalize *jihād* as a political weapon, Sufi networks promote inclusive theologies that frame *jihād* as personal moral discipline aimed at cultivating peace, both internally and externally (Burak-Adlı, 2024; Ritonga et al., 2023). Organizations affiliated with Sufi traditions actively denounce terrorism, emphasizing that Islam's true message lies in compassion, service, and ethical accountability.

Moreover, in the digital age, Sufi leaders have effectively adapted their message using social media platforms to counteract radical interpretations. These digital sermons and teachings reclaim *jihād* as a dynamic and spiritually enriching concept—one that mobilizes communities not toward violence but toward social justice, tolerance, and collective well-being

(Piraino, 2016) This shift reflects a broader theological repositioning, in which the classical martial legacy of Sufism is not erased but redirected toward contemporary ethical imperatives.

The relationship between Sufi orders and the mobilization of *jihād* is historically rooted in complex interactions between spirituality, political authority, and communal ethics. While classical Sufi traditions legitimized warfare under strict moral conditions and in alignment with the inner quest for purification, modern Sufi reinterpretations resist the reduction of *jihād* to militant violence. By reviving the ethical and spiritual dimensions of the term, Sufism continues to offer a powerful alternative framework—one that reconciles historical legacy with the moral challenges of the present.

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that the Sufi tradition's engagement with *jihād* encompasses far more than spiritual self-refinement, extending into arenas of verbal resistance and even armed militancy. By analyzing the triadic typology of *jihād*—*al-naḥs*, *al-lisān*, and *al-saif* within the doctrinal, historical, and sociopolitical context of Sufism, the research uncovers the integrated and multifaceted role of Sufi orders in Islamic civilization. The inner struggle (*jihād al-naḥs*) is consistently upheld in classical sources as the foundational discipline upon which all outward actions must be based. Verbal resistance (*jihād al-lisān*) has allowed Sufis to morally challenge power structures and provide spiritual leadership through ethical critique. The historical involvement of Sufi figures and brotherhoods in physical conflict (*jihād al-saif*) illustrates that martial action was not an aberration but a legitimate, ethically governed extension of spiritual duty. Furthermore, Sufi-state alliances in imperial contexts highlight the pragmatic and theological roles that Sufi orders played in mobilizing societies for political and military ends, often embedding *jihād* in state-building narratives. In contrast, modern Sufi reinterpretations challenge the reduction of *jihād* to violent struggle, instead emphasizing peace, education, and moral renewal. This rearticulation positions Sufism as a powerful counter-narrative to extremist ideologies. Overall, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the dynamic, historically embedded, and ethically nuanced Sufi discourse on *jihād*, challenging reductive views and reaffirming the complexity and adaptability of Islamic mysticism in responding to changing historical realities.

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