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Sufism and Esotericism: Shadow Organizations Serving the Colonial Agendas of Ottomans

The presence of the Ottoman State was accompanied by an attempt of searching for a kind of overlay of religion, and finding some "legitimate" justifications for its political choices. It also resorted to the ideological common to exploit it in the tools of gathering and mobilization in the service of the political goals and expansion projects. This approach led the Ottomans to rely on the religious factor as a tool to legitimize their rule as well as to direct armies to occupy territory outside the State under the justifications of jihad and the holy war. This necessitated the existence of shadow religious institutions that provided the legitimate cover for their political choices.

Though the Ottoman State was, in principle, espousing the Hanafi school through adopting the Hanafi Doctrines by the State in the principles of jurisprudence and the rules of Fatwa. But it focused on popular religiosity to ensure loyalty within the Country. This made it depend on the Sufi prayer rooms and Tariqahs which were easy to be controlled, given the nature of the behavioral structure of these Tariqahs that tend to ally with the rulers and appease them, and support their choices; regardless of their conformity with the provisions of Qur'an and Sunnah, which are always followed by the organizations and groups belonging to the Ahl-Sunnah and Al-Jamaa, i. e. Sunni Muslims.

The Ottomans resorted to what might be called the "colonial dervish strategy" to extend their influence over the East and the West under the justifications of the Islamic caliphate. This factor contributed to the adoption of Sufi Tariqahs by the Ottoman State, since these Tariqahs are based on the internal governance and on esoteric interpretations to legitimize the external expansionist agendas of the Ottoman family.

Internally, Sufi has greatly influenced the collective behavior of the Turks by establishing a large number of mosques that contain graves and shrines as well as the prevalence of the "Tanoura" dance inspired by the Mawlewi view of the universe. Sufi Tariqahs also affected urbanization through the emergence of a special type of buildings called "Tekyeh", from which their role developed; as headquarters of the sheikhs of Sufism to play an important social role that manifested in welcoming, feeding, sheltering and providing assistance to the poor and needy.

Although Sufi was known as it tends to avoid politics and that it isolates itself for worship, yet the Sufi Tariqahs during the Ottoman era played a major role in crystallizing the Ottoman politics. Instead, the Ottoman sultans relied on them to support their political decisions and colonial agendas. Turkish rulers would not have undertaken any military operation without asking for "supplies" and "blessings" from the Sufi Sheikhs.

Since there is no space to address the different Sufi and esoteric Tariqahs that belonged to the Ottoman system of governance. So we will only deal with the Bektashi Sufi Tariqah which was considered as a mixture of Sufism and esotericism. As it succeeded, through its alliance with the esoteric organizations, in controlling the most important joints of the Ottoman State, including the army.

Esoteric Bektashi:

A Sufi Tariqah Under the Umbrella of the Ottoman Rule

Perhaps what distinguishes the Sufi Tariqahs that were spread in Turkey, inter alia the Bektashi Tariqah, is that they adopted esoteric beliefs and their extremism in loving the family of al-Bayt; and that they permitted killing their opponents. This belief is that the Ottomans were looking for to have a free hand and to use the sword against other Muslims, and to subjugate them to their rule. Dr. Badia Mohamed Abdel-Aal says in her book "The Esoteric Thought in Anatolia", that: the "Esoteric beliefs were spread remarkably in Anatolia and the Sufi sects were distinguished by their esoteric character" ⁽¹⁾.

In this context, the esoteric, Sufi Tariqah emerged that was named after its leader Haji Baktash Wali (738-674 AH), In the 7th Hijri century. It became so popular, that it ended up including the remaining of the Sufi Tariqahs and solely representing the Sufi component within the Ottoman State. Further, it included in its structure many esoteric Tariqahs such as al-Qalandari, al-Haydariyya, al-Hurufiyyah, al-Abdaliyya, and the rest of the esoteric sects that had acquired so many names throughout history ⁽²⁾.

Many of the writings point to the role of the Naqshbandi Tariqah that concluded the first alliance between Sultan Orkhan, the second Sultans of the Ottoman family, and the Bektashi Tariqah. Accordingly, the Bektash became a key component of the Ottoman Janissary Army, which committed the most heinous crimes against the people of the countries that the Ottomans succeeded in subjugating them to their rule. These writings about the Janissary armies were unanimous that the belonging to this military institution was depending on the loyalty to Hajj Bektash, the founder of this Tariqah.

Bektashi Hurufiyyah:

The Allies of Ottomans in Colonization and Terrorism

Hurufiyyah is a Shiite Tariqah that was called "jihardism." that was founded by the Iranian Shiite "Fadlallah Ibn Abd al-Rahman al-Husayni al-Astrabadi" who was one of the students of the Suhrawardi School. It was able to spread in different regions of the Ottoman State, so that the Sultans of the Ottoman family became relying on it in their external wars, starting from the battles of the occupation for "Constantinople".

The "Hurufiyyah" is characterized by the esoteric interpretation of Quranic texts; through depending on mixing the letters and numbers or what is called the sciences of harmony, talismans and astrology. Further, it believed that the number four (4) in the Noble Qur'an explains - in their belief - the elements of existence and the universe, which are "air, earth, fire and water."

During the era of Sultan Murad II, the Hurufi esoteric organization, by its leader, Imad al-Din Nasimi, mobilized to occupy the Constantinople. That obtained the support of the Ottoman Sultan; especially that his successor, Muhammad Al-Fatih, was one of the students of the leader of the Hurufiyyah Tariqah. Then, the latter continued to strengthen their influence within the state and to include them in the "Bektashi" organization as it was the official Sufi Tariqah of the Ottoman State and the religious school of Janissary . This represents - in our estimation - the first declared alliance between Sufism and the esotericism under the banner of the Ottoman State.

Mohamed al-Fateh found in the Bektashi Hurufiyyah, which took the form of a Sufi Tariqah to avoid the criticism by Sunni religious scholars, a corner stone to promote the thesis of the Mahdi who would conquer the Constantinople; especially that the Ottoman armies were not enthusiastic about this military adventure after many setbacks in front of the Byzantine state ⁽³⁾.

All in all, we can say that the Sufi esoteric organizations formed a tool of oppression in the hands of the Sultans of the Ottoman family, those who relied on their aberrant interpretation to mobilize public loyalty as well as to control some of the areas that were occupied by the Ottoman State. Some writings say that the Bektashi Hurufiyyah promoted a myth with which they convinced Salim I to occupy the Levant and Egypt; that myth says that "The S would enter into the L after a first victory over the SH, in order to reveal the tomb of Mohiuddin." The summary of this myth is that the "S", who is Salim I, would defeat the "SH", Who is the Shah Ismail Safawi, before entering the "L", which is the Levant. This myth was such a justification for the Sultan Salim to declare war on his enemies, Mamelukes. Consequently, he subjugated the Levant and Egypt to the Ottoman colonialism, and with him began a new page of the black history of the Ottoman State.

References:

- 1) Badiia Muhammad Abdel Aal, "The Esoteric Thought in Anatolia," Dar Al-Thaqafa for Publishing, 2009, p. 106.
- 2) Ibid, p. 5.
- 3) Amr Abd al-Rahman, an article entitled "The Ottoman Jihardism, the Secret of the Kingdoms of Fire: Truth and Secrets". It was posted by Al-Hiwar website at the link below: <https://www.ahewar.org/debat/show.art.asp?aid=658093>