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Salafi Sufism?
Islamic border-keeping in contemporary Sweden

The aim of this article is to analyse a local expression of the transnational Ahbash Sufi movement in light of recent scholarship on the relationship between Salafism and Sufism as well as Islamic neo-traditionalism. Some researchers have reacted against a dichotomous relationship between fundamentalism and Sufism, instead suggesting a continuum and a mutual interdependence. We aim to contribute to a developed understanding of the process whereby some Sufi actors go on the attack against their Islamic foes by publicly and loudly claiming to represent 'true Islam' as found in the 'fundamentals' of Islam – but with a different understanding of what those fundamentals are. We analyse a series of interviews with a local representative of the transnational Ahbash Sufi movement in Malmö, Sweden; the Ahbash movement has its central leadership in Lebanon. Through discussing the representative's understanding of 'good' and 'bad' *bidʿa*, in particular concerning the celebration of the prophet Muhammad's birthday (*mawlid al-nabi*), we note a combined emphasis on authoritative textual sources – including the Qurʾan and hadith literature – and the allegedly unbroken traditional knowledge transmission which secures a correct understanding of Islam. This shows an ambiguous space of Islamic thought and practice, an arguably Salafi-affected neo-traditionalist defense of Sufism, which transgresses commonly employed dichotomies between Salafism and Sufism.

Introduction

Islam has famously been described as a discursive tradition (Asad 1986). Within that tradition, a variety of actors make use of the numerous building blocks available (texts, rites, interpretations) in an endeavour to construe and express what they consider to be authentic Islam. All such constructions are relational, in the sense that they are made in relation to other, often competing, actors who are likewise engaged in the construction of an authentic Islam. These interpretative endeavours cut through time and space, as they are influenced or deterred by historical as well as current trends and developments. Furthermore, the struggle over what is to be considered authentic Islam transpires on a global as well as a local scale. Over the centuries, some ideal-typical currents have developed, so that within the academic study of Islam, we are familiar with categories such as fundamentalist or revivalist Islam, reformist, traditionalist, and liberal Muslims.

While Salafism and Wahhabism commonly come to represent fundamentalist Islam, Sufism is usually placed on the opposite end of the scale, ranging from reformists such as Shah Waliullah (d. 1762) to universalists such as Inayat Khan (d. 1926). Inayat Khan was instrumental in a development that William Rory Dickson and Merin Shobhana Xavier (2019) have called the 'disordering' of Sufism, characterised

by a shift, noticeable in twentieth-century Sufism, away from classical *tariqa* models. Khan also represented a Sufism that increasingly came to separate itself from normative Islamic teachings and traditions. A more recent trend noted by Dickson and Xavier, however, is a 'reordering' of Sufism in America distinguished by a return to traditional modes. Such a shift, they suggest, may be partly explained by global as well as local intra-Islamic struggle and competition:

> Revivalist Islam has tended to marginalize if not directly oppose Sufism as a 'watering down' of Islam, a corruption of it, or at least a distraction from the pressing matter of reviving Muslim civilization. In response, many Sufis have reaffirmed their claim to Islamic credentials and authenticity, and in some cases even situated themselves as the true representatives of Islamic orthodoxy. … This global environment has clearly influenced a number of Sufis to reemphasize their Islamic credentials, fortify their relationship to a classical order, and in general reorder Sufism along more traditional lines. Such a reordering allows Sufis to counter the charges against them made earlier by some Orientalist observers and today by Muslim Revivalists, namely that Sufis are not 'real' Muslims, but rather flaky, spiritualistic imposters that dilute Islam according to their own misbegotten whims. In emphasising their adherence to Islamic law, and connection with medieval orders … Sufis fortify their Islamic ground as against anti-Sufi competitors. (Dickson and Xavier 2019: 150–1)

Such shifts are not exclusive to Sufism in America; similar developments might be seen in Europe as well as in Muslim majority countries (see e.g. Westerlund 2004; Malik and Hinnells 2006; Ridgeon 2008; Raudvere and Stenberg 2009; Bruinessen and Howell 2013; Piraino and Sedgwick 2019; Bazzano and Hermansen 2020). However, the characteristics of such processes differ depending on historical, social and local contexts. This article contributes to the study of such a process in which Sufis counter the charges made against them by reordering themselves in line with ideals influenced by traditional Islamic modes of thinking, associating and acting.

While the modern relationship between Salafism and Sufism, as briefly mentioned above, can easily be understood as one of consistent antagonism and hostility (Sirriyeh 1999: De Jong and Radtke 1999; Ridgeon 2015; Hamid 2016), we use our particular case study of a Swedish Sufi organisation to investigate a more ambiguous, in-between space of Islamic thought and practice. Salafism, although not a homogeneous entity, is generally associated with a puritan and scripturalist approach to religious thought and practice that rejects the historically developed interpretative endeavours within the established schools of law (*madhhabs*) (see e.g. Meijer 2009; Rabil 2014; Thurston 2016; Olsson 2019; Hamdeh 2021).[1] Sufism, in contrast, relates both to a traditionalist approach, where the teachings' connection to the prophet Muhammed through a chain of spiritual teachers (*silsila*) are emphasised, and to the accepted legitimacy

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1   Throughout this article, we have used a simplified transliteration of Arabic terms. We refrain from using diacritical signs but indicate the use of ʿ*ayn*.

of subjective experiences and a variety of ritual practices (see e.g. Sedgwick 2016; Hill 2018; Xavier 2018). In some contexts, Sufism has also been mobilised in political struggles against Salafism, 'extremism', or 'Wahhabism' (see e.g. Stjernholm 2010; Philippon 2012; Sedgwick 2015; Muedini 2015; Joassin 2019).

While many Sufi Muslims criticise Salafi Muslims for breaking with traditions that they consider to be vessels for authentic Islam, Salafi criticism of Sufi Islam generally boils down to the argument that Sufis have abandoned 'true Islam' by introducing several innovations (plural *bidaʿ*, singular *bidʿa*). Among the most criticised practices common to Sufi traditions are the veneration of Sufi shaykhs as almost semi-divine beings, seen by the critics as akin to worship, and the similar veneration of the prophet Muhammed, for example in *mawlid* ceremonies – celebrations of the prophet's birthday (see e.g. Schielke 2003; Katz 2007; Svensson 2013). Such intra-Muslim tensions and competition are global phenomena that take on local characteristics. The Salafi–Sufi divide and conflict is also visible in Sweden, as this article will exemplify (Sorgenfrei 2016; Stjernholm 2022).

Alongside the narrative of a great divide between Salafi and Sufi Islam, some scholars have presented a more nuanced picture than such a dichotomous depiction of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Islam. For example, Itzchak Weismann holds that there exists a full spectrum in between these opposites. Within this spectrum, he places what he calls 'revivalist Sufi shaykhs', characterised by a struggle to adapt Sufi teachings to the challenges in post-modern society, in relation to fundamentalist and reformist discourses (Weismann 2007; see also Weismann 2011). A distinguishing feature of such 'reform Sufism' is the doing away with terminology and organisational structure associated with Sufism, and the notion that such reform is understood as an effort to preserve what is then considered 'the spiritual core' of Sufism (Weismann 2007: 117; see also Westerlund's (2004) concept of 'post-tariqah Sufism' or Oliver Roy's (2004) 'neo-brotherhoods'). Weismann has, for example, studied the Syrian ideologue Saʿid Hawwa (1935–89), associated with the Muslim Brotherhood as well as with the Naqshbandi-Khalidi order. Hawwa wanted to see a compound of the political activism of the Muslim Brotherhood and the spiritual depth and sincerity of the Sufis in an expression of Islam Weissmann called 'Salafi Sufism', combining 'a Sufi type of spirituality with a fundamentalist ideology' (Weismann 2007: 118–20, 128; for Hawwa's biography, see Weismann 1993).

The aim of the current article is to analyse how a local Sufi Muslim group in southern Sweden, with significant trans-national connections, navigates in a more ambivalent discursive field than a purely dichotomous relationship between Salafism and Sufism would suggest, a Sufi discursive field where one can sense an influence of Salafi-oriented modes of expression and argumentation. Even though Weismann's category of 'Salafi Sufism' might not be the most fitting description of this group, we find it worth considering how the Salafi religious 'other' – globally as well as locally – is explicitly and implicitly present in their Islamic reasoning. We are thus interested in how the global struggle between Salafis and Sufis plays out in a local, multi-ethnic and multi-religious setting, namely Sweden's third-largest city, Malmö. In Malmö, most if not all the greater movements found within global Islam are established, as is the intense competition over authenticity and representativity that have briefly been discussed above (Lagervall and Stenberg 2016). Malmö can therefore be studied

as what historian Nile Green calls a 'terrain of exchange' (Green 2015), as a geographically defined space where competing Muslim actors simultaneously define themselves through their differences and are influenced by each other in a struggle over a common goal. The shared goal is to define what authentic Islam is and to persuade local Muslims (and non-Muslims) of the correctness of their specific representation of Islam.

In this article, we will focus on one of the actors engaged in that struggle: the organisation 'The Islamic Fatwa Bureau in Sweden' (Islamiska Fatwabyrån i Sverige). Special attention will be given to differences regarding what might be understood as fundamental within Islam in the discourse of the organisation's main representative, as well as what room their theological reasoning leaves for interpretation and creativity, not least concerning ritual practices. We will particularly consider the reasoning of the imam of the organisation on *bidaʿ* and his legitimisation of celebrations of the birthday of the Prophet Muhammed (*mawlid al-nabi*). In doing so, we are particularly interested in how the Fatwa Bureau is engaged in a sort of productive exchange with, primarily, the Salafi competition they are up against.

The Ahbash of Lebanon and The Islamic Fatwa Bureau in Sweden

The organisation we focus our analysis on calls itself the Islamic Fatwa Bureau (Islamiska Fatwabyrån). It is based in Malmö, and gathers together Muslims of Ahbashi as well as Rufaʿi Sufi background. The organisation was founded in the 1990s by immigrants from Lebanon and Palestine, but it was not officially established as 'the Islamic Fatwa Bureau' until 2011 (Sorgenfrei 2016: 56). The organisation has its roots in the Lebanese Ahbash movement, which was established in 1983 by the Ethiopian Abdallah al-Hariri (1910–2008),[2] also known as 'al-Habashi'. *Habash* means Ethiopian and *Ahbash* is its plural form, thus referring to the ethnic or national identity of the founder rather than to the group's participants or members.

Shaykh Abdallah's ideological orientation was towards mutual tolerance for religious diversity, including Christians and Shia Muslims. However, his tolerance did not extend to Sunni political Islamists and modern proponents of the ideas of Taqi al-Din Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328), whose criticism of classical Sufi practices Shaykh Abdallah vehemently disagreed with. He and his followers in Lebanon have engaged in and defended practices such as celebration of the prophet Muhammad's birthday (*mawlid al-nabi*) and visiting saints' shrines (*ziyarat*). Shaykh Abdallah considered the Rifaʿiyya, the Qadiriyya and the Naqshbandiyya Sufi orders *turuq ahl al-Allah*, or the 'Sufi orders of the people of God' (Hamzeh and Dekmejian 1996).

In fact, his conflict with the broadly conceived 'Wahhabis', which revolved around both issues of theology and politics, also had a personal dimension. Shaykh Abdallah's main ideological rival was another shaykh of Harari background, Yusuf ʿAbd al-Rahman al-Harari (1906–2008?). The two men's lives became entangled in a long struggle to define and shape not just Muslim practice and discourse in Ethiopia, but in larger debates concerning the fundamentals of Islam, in part differently understood, in a global context. After Shaykh Yusuf

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2 According to both Mustafa Kabha and Haggai Erlich (2006: 522) and Thomas Pierret (2010), Shaykh Abdallah was born in 1910, while according to A. Nizar Hamzeh and R. Hrair Dekmejian (1996: 219) his official biography states that he was born in 1920.

The inner-city industrial area of Malmö where the Islamic Fatwa Bureau's mosque is located.

Wikimedia Commons

had been educated in Mecca and Medina, where he developed a Wahhabi perspective on Islam, the two shaykhs were both active in key struggles in Ethiopia during the 1940s. Shaykh Abdallah left Ethiopia in 1948, and after spending time in Mecca, Jerusalem and Damascus came to live in Beirut until his death (Kabha and Erlich 2006: 522–3). During this time, the Ahbash engaged in political struggles in Lebanon, including both street fighting and democratic elections. Since Shaykh Abdallah's death, the leader of the Ahbash has been Shaykh Hussam al-Din Qaraqira (Yarosh 2019: 27).

In Thomas Pierret's (2010) encyclopaedia entry on al-Ahbash, he stresses that despite the group's history of political engagement in its native Lebanon, it 'is not Islamist … Neither is it fundamentalist, as it does not advocate a purification of religion'. Pierret instead suggests categorising al-Ahbash as 'neo-traditionalist', thus placing it together with a set of individuals, groups, networks and institutions internationally that emphasise the importance of an allegedly unbroken chain of transmission of religious knowledge from the development of Islam to this day (on which see e.g. Hamid 2016; al-Azami 2019; Sinani 2019; Bano 2020). Interestingly, however, Pierret also notes that the Ahbash 'resemble the Salafis in some respects'. He especially mentions the custom of pronouncing *takfīr* against other Muslim groups, as well as the movement's strong rejection of political expressions of Islam (Pierret 2010). In the following, we will further identify and explore such resemblances.

Salafi Sufism?

Amer el-Jechi is a tall man in his early thirties who grew up in Malmö, where he is currently an imam at the Islamic Fatwa Council. One of el-Jechi's parents is Swedish, while the other has Palestinian background. Like the majority of Ahbash adherents globally he has no personal background in the 'Habashi', or Ethiopian, community. El-Jechi has received us on two separate occasions in the community's mosque in an inner-city industrial area of Malmö.[3]

3   The interviews took place on 24 September 2021 and 12 November 2021. El-Jechi has given us permission to use his real name. One of the authors has also attended the organisation's annual *mawlid al-nabi* celebration. Translations from the original Swedish were made by the authors.

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One of the most fundamental problems when it comes to 'the world of Sufism', el-Jechi told us, is the lack of correct knowledge when it comes to the foundations of Islam. True knowledge about Islam, he continued, is to be found in the Qurʿan and in the Sunnah, as well as in the interpretations of 'sound *fuqaha*', that is within the frames of Sunni jurisprudence (interview, 24.9.2021). He further considered it to be a problem that contemporary Sufism has been taunted by 'negative innovations' (*bidaʿ sayyiah)*, such as worshipping of shaykhs or attributing divine abilities to shaykhs (interview, 24.9.2021). In agreement with his Salafi opponents, he held that such innovations need to be omitted from sound Sufi practices. But, he emphasised, he and the members of the Fatwa Bureau do not unconditionally reject *bidaʿ*. Rather, they follow a teaching claiming that there are good (*hasanat*) as well as bad (*sayyiah*) *bidaʿ*.

In an earlier study, Amer el-Jechi has expressed how 'there is a kind of dark cloud that has covered Sufism and those who practise it; some people think that it is not a part of the Islamic heritage and should not be practised' (quoted from Sorgenfrei 2016: 58). This is precisely why the Rufaʿi members call themselves the Islamic Fatwa Bureau, he continued. The term *fatwa* refers to an advisory answer to some question, based on Islamic jurisprudence; and according to el-Jechi, they have chosen their name to signal that they will emphasise 'as much as possible the significance of knowledge [about Islam]' (quoted from Sorgenfrei 2016: 58).

Like other Ahbash communities, the followers in Sweden are characterised by a strongly polemical attitude towards Salafism and Islamism and might therefore be studied as a local expression of a global movement (Berglund 2008: 251). While strongly rejecting Salafi Islam, adherents of the Fatwa Bureau themselves also claim that they follow the religious tradition of 'the pious predecessors' (*al-salaf al-salih*) and define themselves as Salafi as well as Sufi (interview, 24.9.2021). Unlike many Salafis, however, they are not inspired by figures like Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Abd al-Wahhab. Nevertheless, they use a terminology and methodology that today is generally associated with Salafism. For example, they have accused Salafist and Islamist ideologues of introducing *bidaʿ*, 'innovations', in the doctrines and rituals of Islam, as well as performing *takfir* on Salafi groups (Sorgenfrei 2016; interview 24.9.2021).

In the context of the Fatwa Bureau accusing other groups of *bidaʿ*, it is noteworthy how they simultaneously defend Sufi practices, including pilgrimage to the graves of Sufi saints (*ziyarat*) and celebrations of the prophet Muhammad's birthday (*mawlid al-nabi*) – practices that are considered to be *bidaʿ* by contemporary Salafi Muslims (and their historical antecedents). We will therefore discuss, in somewhat more detail, one of the practices most often regarded by Salafi Muslims as being a 'bad innovation': celebrations of the birthday of the Prophet Muhammed. This practice is at the very centre of the Fatwa Bureau's public appearance and activities in Sweden, as well as a strong argument against their Salafi competitors in the struggle over how authenticity is to be understood in Malmö, and who is to represent it. But before we consider the *mawlid* specifically, we will deal with el-Jechi's reasoning on *bidaʿ* more generally, as well as his views on how to reach sound Islamic knowledge.

Bidaʿ and sound Islamic knowledge

According to el-Jechi, the most important aspect of Islamic learning is not the possession of a formal degree, but rather to have

an *isnad*, an unbroken chain of knowledge transmission. 'To us, this chain of knowledge is very sacred because it ensures that you have a correct understanding of the religion, it is Alpha and Omega' (interview, 13.11.2021). When asked to explain his reasoning regarding good and bad innovation, and how to tell the difference between them, el-Jechi nevertheless referred to the 'sources':

> Innovation is, per religious definition, every newly introduced thing that does not have a previous example, whether in the Qurʾan or in the Prophet's Sunna or in the scholars' consensus (*ijmaʿ*). … Is it something that contradicts these sources? If that is the case, then we categorise this as a bad *bidʿa*, an innovation that Muslims should not have anything to do with. If this is *not* the case, then of course it is not forbidden. … So it is not limited, as certain voices are trying to make it look, to 'did the *salaf al-salih* do this or not'. Because it is so much broader than that … One talks about 'time and place', *al-makan wa zaman*. These two are decisive concerning whether something is allowed or not. … But some are narrow-minded, unfortunately. (Interview, 13.11.2021)

Here, there is a clear critical edge directed against Salafis. Without mentioning them explicitly, el-Jechi criticises the view that right and wrong can only be determined through looking at the first generations of Muslims and ignoring later developments. He continued to speak of the differences between 'ahl al-sunna* in its Ashʾari-Maturidi sense' and the 'Wahhabiyya':

Ever since the third century [A.H.] until our time, this knowledge [of the *ahl al-sunna*] is completely bound to *al-kitab waʾl-sunna* [the Qurʾan and Sunna]. … They, I would say, fool people into, you know 'we don't follow *madhhab*', you know *la madhhabiyya*, as it is said, 'we go directly to *al-kitab waʾl-sunna*'. But that's – I can read a text, you can read – regardless if it is something written today within pedagogics or some *tafsir al-Qurʾan*, or a verse from *al-Qurʾan*, we will immediately, I will understand something from the text and you will understand something, so there is always an understanding that you choose to follow. And we as Muslims are enjoined to follow the understanding of the majority. And then it's not about the majority from a certain period of time, but from that time until our time today, that majority. (Interview, 13.11.2021)

Again, this hermeneutics, or way of defining the path to reaching a correct understanding of Islam, goes against the Salafi emphasis on the normative superiority of the very earliest period of Islam. When compared to the views and practices of the majority of Islamically learned scholars throughout the centuries, Muhammad's companions and the subsequent two generations represent only a limited portion of that totality, rather than an absolute pillar of correctness. El-Jechi here emphasises the importance of context and human processes of interpretation.

So how should one go about seeking correct Islamic knowledge, according to el-Jechi? One should definitely not go to study in Saudi Arabia, he states. When asked directly whether it is better not to study Islam than to study at the Islamic

University of Medina, he answered affirmatively, saying that the interpretation taught there is incorrect. El-Jechi continued by criticising the intellectual foundations of Salafism. He stated: 'Wahhabiyya have no unbroken chain that goes back further than the six-hundreds or seven-hundreds *hijri*', and that even though Ibn Taymiyya was acknowledged as being learned in hadith, 'many scholars who lived in his time said about him that *ʿilmuhu akbar min ʿaqlihi*, his knowledge is greater than his brain' (interview, 13.11.2021).[4] Despite being aware of the ongoing rivalry with 'Wahhabiyya', however, al-Jechi also noted that locally, in Malmö and Sweden, people were increasingly turning their back on those types of groups. When asked why, he contended that:

> It is very connected to politics … Decisions made by the royals in Saudi Arabia over the last decade have contributed to people, their so-called scholars have not protested against decisions that – I mean, just the fact that Nicki Minaj performed a concert on the outskirts of al-Medina,[5] for example … OK, you want to show that you are not a hundred per cent conservative, that you want to give people a certain amount of liberty to choose. But we must still respect our holy cities, there is a price you are will-

ing to pay, but not higher. … Then you have, of course, [that] al-Qaida came with their massacres, Daesh came, and they all quote Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab and Ahmad Ibn Taymiyya, so that makes people react. (Interview, 13.11.2021)

Here, el-Jechi alleged that Muslims in his local environment have become more sceptical toward 'Wahhabiyya' in recent years largely because of political factors, rather than the content of their ideas as such. On the one hand, the appropriation of popular culture by the Saudi ruling elite in efforts to signal a relative openness has been taken to extremes, according to al-Jechi. This is seen by him, and possibly others, as violating Islamic norms of showing respect to holy places. The other factor he mentions is the extreme violence of certain militant Muslim groups who take some ideological inspiration from scholars central to the 'Wahhabiyya'.

El-Jechi also noted that Muslims who are in doubt about what is Islamically correct come to ask his advice, which he willingly provides. If he is in doubt about the correct answer, however, he said that:

> I ask my teachers … It is said that *al-ʿilm yuʿkhadhu min al-sudur wa laysat min al-sutur*, 'knowledge should be taken from the hearts not from the lines [of text]', and *al-kutubun wasilatun la ghaya*, 'books are a means, not an end'. And I think that this has to some extent been lost today. (Interview, 13.11.2021)

El-Jechi continued by describing how he had engaged in discussions with people who claimed to have read Sahih al-Bukhari after having ordered it from the Internet, without having studied either it or the

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4 This expression appears to be a direct quotation from a book by Shaykh Abdallah in which he refuted Ibn Taymiyya (Kabha and Erlich 2006: 528).
5 This probably refers to the plan for Nicki Minaj to perform at a festival in Jeddah in 2019. However, Minaj withdrew her participation in the event 'because she says she wants to show support for women's rights, gay rights and freedom of expression' (Associated Press 2019).

fundamentals of the science of hadith with a learned shaykh. This, according to el-Jechi, is completely wrong: one has to start with the basics and be authorised by a shaykh before continuing with the more advanced books of hadith, such as Sahih al-Bukhari. This shows that there is a constant dual focus when determining Islamic correctness. To start with, the Qurʿan and Sunna are absolutely fundamental and normatively superior. At the same time, a correct understanding of these sources must be channelled through an unbroken chain of knowledge transmission, and it is only individuals who have a significant degree of learning within this tradition that are allowed to make normative interpretations of how the texts of the Qurʿan and Sunna should be understood and followed.

Mawlid

El-Jechi appears to be as critical of Salafism as Salafis tend to be of Sufism. In the midst of this friction lies the *mawlid* celebrations of the birthday of Muhammed. The *mawlid* is a ceremony which dates back to medieval traditions that have since become a festivity with broad popular support; in several Muslim-majority countries, *mawlid* is a national holiday. But since the end of the nineteenth century and into the modern era, the celebration has been questioned by various reformist groups and has increasingly come to be associated with Sufi traditions (for an in-depth study of *mawlid*, see Katz 2007). As analysed by Simon Stjernholm (2011) in a study focusing on England, *mawlid* celebrations have also been used as a tool, simultaneously symbolic and highly concrete, in Salafi–Sufi competition and conflicts. The Naqshbandi group studied by Stjernholm strategically used their *mawlid* celebration as an argument against their Salafi competition in London (see also Howe 2019). In a similar way, the Fatwa Bureau in Malmö organises *mawlid* celebrations, for which they rent large, central venues to which strategically chosen guests are invited. El-Jechi has previously said about their public *mawlid* celebration: 'We try to reach out as much as we can to the public, hand out brochures on the town, talk about Mohammed' (Sorgenfrei 2016).

The *mawlid* celebration of the Fatwa Bureau is an annually recurring activity in Malmö. Other Sufi Muslims, primarily from the Naqshbandiyya and Qadiriyya orders, as well as schoolteachers, journalists and others who may be interested are invited to take part (Sorgenfrei 2016). The celebrations therefore might be understood as not only taking an intra-Islamic stance against Muslim competitors regarding authentic Islam, but at the same time as performing and displaying a form of Islam that the organisers deem to be more attractive to non-Muslim stakeholders than their opponents' version of Islam. In this example of intra-Islamic competition, what stands out is not least the rhetorical use of a terminology more commonly associated with Salafism. There seems to be an appropriation of the language of their main discursive opponents.

When asked about how he legitimises the practice of *mawlid* despite the criticisms it has attracted, el-Jechi first emphasised that it was important for him and his organisation that their celebration should be large and public, so that Muslims – especially the young – get used to *mawlid* being a legitimate practice that is part of Muslim tradition. It should not be done in secret or under the radar, but function as a proud statement. Regarding its religious legitimacy, el-Jechi referred to several specific texts from Islamic intellectual history. Firstly, he mentioned the writings of the scholar Jalal al-Din Suyuti (d. 1505) on

the *mawlid*, which ascribe a positive value to the practice in view of its proper purpose (for details concerning Suyuti's treatment of the *mawlid*, see Kaptein 1993). Secondly, al-Jechi mentioned a hadith in which the prophet Muhammad says that 'every novelty is an innovation, and every innovation is an error, and every error leads to the Fire'.[6] In his comments on this hadith, which he cited from memory in Arabic and translated into Swedish, el-Jechi said:

> This is perhaps their foremost argument for *mawlid* being forbidden, that every error leads to the fire, meaning it is a sin. And this, there is a hadith in Sahih Muslim[7] where the Prophet expressly separates innovations into good and bad. And then we also have the Arabic language use, how you use the word *kull* [every]. The Prophet says *kull bidʿa dalala*, 'every innovation is an error'. Let's say I have called you twenty times … And then someone says, like, 'Where is X?' – 'Well, I have called him.' – 'Call him again!' – 'No, I have called him, every time I call, he doesn't answer.' But one of these twenty times you answered. And still, you say *every*. And in the Arabic language it's the same. For example, there is a hadith in which the Prophet says, *kull ʿayn min zaniya*, every eye is *zaniya*, has watched the forbidden.[8] … In our faith, we make the proph-

ets exempt from such shameful deeds. They do not look at women with lustful eyes out on the town, at the market, in people's homes. … And still the Prophet says *kull ʿayn min zaniya*, and in Arabic this means the majority, most. And this is the case when it comes to innovations, that most innovations that have come about are unfortunately bad ones. … There are so many things, religious and worldly, that are innovations that the Muslims use. (Interview, 13.11.2021)

Hence, in el-Jechi's reasoning here we can notice how he makes use of the same sources, that is the Qurʿan and especially the hadith literature, and a type of scripturalist method of interpretation similar to Salafi Muslims. The Islamic evidence or proof is seen to be inherent in the authoritative texts – but the *way* they should be properly understood and *who* is able to legitimately reach such an understanding differs between el-Jechi and his Salafi counterparts. The interpretation of the textual sources is used by el-Jechi to legitimise Islamic practices cherished and engaged in by the Fatwa Bureau, as well as to counter accusations of them having deviated from true Islam. His comments on how to understand specific utterances in the hadith literature – focusing on what he considers a proper understanding of the term *kull* – show how, firstly, the specific wording of the prophet Muhammad's reported statements is highly important; secondly, a proper understanding of these statements requires a knowledge of classical Arabic as well as insights into Islamic theology; and thirdly, the 'narrow-minded' reading of texts, where knowledge is taken from the 'lines' rather than from 'hearts', and texts are seen as ends rather than means, leads to error, deviation and falsehood.

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6   El-Jechi ascribed the hadith to Sunan Abi Dawud, in which there is a hadith (no. 4607) that includes the first two parts of the sentence. The third part, about the fire, can be found in Sunan al-Nasa'i, no. 1578.
7   Here, he might be referring to *Sahih Muslim*, no. 1017.
8   *Zaniya* literally means 'female adulteress' or 'prostitute'.

In addition to considering the Qurʿan and Sunna to be the foundations of Islamic knowledge, then, el-Jechi includes the historical tradition of 'sound *fuqaha*', such as Suyuti, from whose 'hearts' one can connect to an unbroken chain of legitimate and consensus-oriented Islamic knowledge transmission. This chain of transmission, which is recorded in an extensive written corpus, is also fundamental to el-Jechi and his fellows.

Conclusion

Amer el-Jechi's reasoning about the concept of *bidʿa*, sound Islamic knowledge, and *mawlid* are, we argue, good examples of how the struggle over Islam can play out in a local environment, in a 'terrain of exchange' such as Malmö. They are also examples of how situated and specific circumstances, such as the debate over *mawlid* celebrations among Muslims in Malmö, connect to a historical and global discursive field. We might also notice how the ideological or theological currents of this field become entangled and entwined in the local setting. As a result of the sustained Salafi criticism of *mawlid* celebrations, the Fatwa Bureau has decided to make their *mawlid* celebrations public and open. Both Muslims and non-Muslims, such as politicians, journalists or schoolteachers, have been invited to these large and ambitious events. This demonstrates how a Salafi critique of certain practices might influence how, where and to some extent why these practices are performed. If the criticism had not been felt so strongly on the local level, there would be less reason to make the event public and invite a broad range of attendees. We could also notice how Amer el-Jechi, in refuting the Salafi critique of the Fatwa Bureau's *mawlid* celebrations, appropriated both terminology and methods commonly associated with their Salafi competition, even to the extent of defining themselves both as Sufis and as Salafis.

By analysing this specific case of el-Jechi and the Fatwa Bureau in Malmö in some detail, we were able both to point to similarities with previous studies and to identify characteristics that distinguish them from earlier investigations. Hence, el-Jechi and the organisation he represents both resemble and distinguish themselves from the Ahbashis described by Pierret, or the Salafi Sufism studied by Weismann. Pierret detected some resemblance between the Ahbash and Salafism in their custom of pronouncing *takfīr* against other Muslim groups, and in their strong opposition to political Islam (Pierret 2010). In this article, we have identified and explored some additional resemblances, especially in their chosen vocabulary and reasoning. Rather than omitting a terminology associated with Sufism – as in the examples studied by Weismann – el-Jechi and the Fatwa Bureau *appropriate* terminology generally associated with Salafism in the defence and performance of typical Sufi practices.

In his analysis of the hostility – and interdependence – of Islamic fundamentalists and modern Sufis, Weismann (2011: 170) in a similar way notes that Sufism 'has been affected by the fundamentalist discourse of return to the scriptures, its critique of popular practices, and its quest to modernise'. This seems to be the case also with el-Jechi and the Fatwa Bureau; whether they are to be categorised as a kind of Salafi Sufism is, however, open for discussion. If the exclusive authority of the Qurʿan and the Sunna of Muhammed and the three first generations of Muslims are to be taken as a distinguishing feature of Salafism, there is no obvious analytical benefit in categorising a group such as the Fatwa Bureau as an expression of Salafism, even though they themselves appropriate

the term Salafi as a self-designation.

Bearing the resemblances with global and local Salafi discourse in mind, there are also important and distinctive differences. El-Jechi does not, for example, accept the Salafi ascription of an exclusive normative status to the first generations of Muslims. By ascribing a normative status to the consensus of the majority of Islamic scholars throughout the full history of Islam, as in the quote by el-Jechi above, one of the most central epistemological claims of Salafis is being challenged head on. In this regard, el-Jechi and the Fatwa Bureau are in line with a range of protagonists in the larger Islamic neo-traditionalist movement.

El-Jechi takes a position where he defends his own and his organisation's ideas and practices not simply by referring to tradition in the sense of 'what we have always done'. Nor does he share the Salafi view that only the practices and statements of the first generations of Muslims count as exemplary. Instead, textual evidence from the Qurʾan and hadith, and the allegedly unbroken chain of traditional Islamic learning, are central to his interpretations and mode of discourse. The resulting response to the scripture-oriented Salafi mode of religious argumentation can, for example, refer to and interpret hadith narratives in a way that defends 'good' innovations, as exemplified above. Through such a strategy of legitimisation, el-Jechi is able to promote the historical jurisprudential and theological tradition as a foundation of authentic contemporary Islam. In doing so he positions the Fatwa Bureau within Islamic neo-traditionalism (e.g. Bano 2019).

In this article, we have aimed to contribute to a developed understanding of the process whereby some Sufi proponents go on the attack against their Islamic foes. They do this by publicly claiming to represent 'true Islam' as found in what they hold to be the 'fundamentals' of Islam, as well as through a 'reordering' rather than a 'disordering' of Sufism in relation to Islamic tradition. The local Swedish representative of the Ahbash movement interviewed here, Amer el-Jechi, can hence be said to express a Salafi-affected neo-traditionalist approach to Islam. His understanding of what constitutes necessary Islamic 'foundations' includes transmission of traditional knowledge and practices, albeit with limitations regarding the type of practices that are accepted. The public celebration of the *mawlid al-nabi* has become a key tactical factor in this struggle to define Islam and win supporters and sympathisers among both Muslims and non-Muslims in Malmö. By engaging in interpretative argumentation regarding the meaning of authoritative scriptures and the very status of tradition itself, el-Jechi and the group he represents join other actors who, in the transnational neo-traditionalist Islamic current, have articulated Islam in ways that challenge simplistic dichotomies between, on the one hand, scripturally oriented Salafis and, on the other hand, experience-oriented Sufis. ∎

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