



The Visitation of Foreign High-Ranking Muslim Statesmen to the Shrine of Imam al-Rida and Their Sufi Inclinations*

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Abstract

Visiting religious sites is one of the customary programs in the journeys of diplomats and officials from Muslim countries when traveling to other Islamic lands. The shrine of the eighth Shi'i Imam in the holy city of Mashhad—which is considered the most important pilgrimage site in Iran—has, in the last century, received dozens of Sunni statesmen. This study, conducted through a descriptive-analytical method, seeks to identify the reasons for the pilgrimage of these figures to the shrine of Imam al-Rida (PBUH). The findings indicate that the Sufi inclinations of certain Muslim statesmen constituted one of the reasons for their visitation to the Imam al-Rida's shrine. Some Muslim politicians, such as Zahir Shah, Abul Kalam Azad, Imran Khan, Abdoulaye Wade, Benazir Bhutto, and others, from countries including Afghanistan, India, Pakistan, Senegal, and beyond, when visiting Iran, traveled to Mashhad with the intention of pilgrimage to Imam al-Rida's shrine. In their homelands, these individuals were known for supporting Sufism or for their affiliation with *tariqas* such as the Suhrawardiyya, Qādiriyya, Naqshbandiyya, Chishtiyya, and Murīdiyya, and there exist numerous reports of their pilgrimages to Sufi shrines. Accordingly, it seems that these political leaders, whether by conviction or out of reverence for the position of Imam al-Rida (PBUH) within Sufi *silsilas* undertook the visitation of his tomb. In this respect, one may expect that the shrine of Imam al-Rida could serve as a point of reliance contributing to the improvement and strengthening of political and cultural relations.

Keywords: pilgrimage, Imam al-Rida, Astan Quds Razavi, Sufism, Muslim statesmen

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1. Introduction

The shrine of Imam al-Rida (PBUH) in Mashhad—apart from its constant centrality for the Shi'a—has also been revered by Sunni Muslims, who have been eager to visit him and pay their respects. Over the centuries, various groups of Sunni scholars and notables have been present in this sacred space, showing reverence to Imam al-Rida (see Jafarian 1999). Recent studies demonstrate that, during the last century, more than seventy prominent Muslim figures—including kings, presidents, prime ministers, and high-ranking military commanders—have traveled to Mashhad to visit the tomb of Imam al-Rida and have also presented gifts and votive offerings to the Astan Quds Razavi¹. The majority of these figures were Sunnis, and altogether they came from twenty-two Islamic countries, ranging from Indonesia in East Asia to Senegal in West Africa (see Taqizadeh Na'ini 2023).

Through case studies of several such figures, this article argues that their Sufi inclinations and affinity for mystical heritage formed a significant motive for choosing Mashhad as a destination in their diplomatic journeys. The examinations undertaken in this paper point to the affiliation of these statesmen with Sufi *silsilas* (initiatic chains of transmission, linking spiritual masters back to the Prophet) or to their devotion to the visitation of the tombs of *awliyā'* (friends of God, i.e., saints) and to *tawassul* (seeking intercession or divine grace through saints). Although political objectives in pilgrimage journeys can never be entirely discounted, the consistent commitment of the statesmen under discussion to visiting Sufi shrines in their own countries may serve as evidence that, abroad as well, their travels were prioritized as pilgrimages.

1.1. Literature Review

So far, no independent research has been conducted specifically on the presence of foreign Muslim statesmen with Sufi inclinations at the shrine of Imam al-Rida and their visitation of his tomb. The topic has generally been treated in a one-dimensional manner; that is, such figures are mentioned merely in terms of their official status as high-ranking dignitaries in some historical sources and documents. Some of these references are as follows:

Atiqi Tabrizi (2013) in his book *Majalis* refers to Ghazan Khan, the Ilkhanid ruler, noting that he had Sufi inclinations and also visited Imam al-Rida. Jafarian (1999) mentions Sultan Mahmud of Ghazna (d. 1030), whose father Sabuktigin, for reasons unknown, had destroyed the tomb of Imam al-Rida; yet his son Mahmud, due to a dream he experienced, restored it anew. In the archives of the National Library and

Archives of Iran, as well as the library of Astan Quds Razavi, documents are indexed concerning the presence of high-ranking Muslim officials at the shrine of Imam al-Rida, but without reference to their Sufi inclinations.

In the press of the Pahlavi era, reports were published on the journeys of leaders of Islamic countries such as India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Jordan, Iraq, and others to Mashhad and their visitation of the shrine of Imam al-Rida. Likewise, with the growth and expansion of digital media, news regarding the presence of prominent foreign politicians at the shrine of Imam al-Rida has become accessible in the archives of news agencies online.

Through a detailed examination of these sources, this study has identified eight major figures of the Islamic world who were either formally Sufis or who displayed evident Sufi inclinations.

2. The Status of Imam al-Rida among the Sufi *Awliyā'*

The perception of Muslim rulers regarding the status of Imam al-Rida was partly shaped by his elevated position among Sufis. The educational system of Sufism requires that every *murid* (disciple) benefit from the guidance of a *murshid* (spiritual master) until he himself attains the rank of *irshād* (spiritual authority). Thereafter, he is permitted to guide his own disciples and to transmit this authority to them. This pedagogical relationship, over the course of Sufi history, generated for each *ṭarīqa* (Sufi order) a chain known as *silsila al-irshād* (initiatic chain of spiritual transmission), resembling a genealogical tree that records successive generations of masters back to the beginning. This chain constitutes the lineage of the order and serves as the basis of legitimacy for its shaykhs (*mashāyikh*)², who see themselves as inheritors of the spiritual rank of earlier figures in the *silsila* and as the immediate successors of their predecessors.

Accordingly, it is worth noting that most Sufi orders emphasize that their *silsila al-irshād* connects, through intermediaries, to Imam al-Rida, then to Imam 'Ali (PBUH), and ultimately to the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). This chain is commonly known as the *Ma'rūfiyya*, which, due to its antiquity and authority, is also referred to as the "Mother of Chains" (*umm al-salāsil*). The name *Ma'rūfiyya* derives from Ma'ruf al-Karkhi, who, according to tradition, at one point served Imam al-Rida as a servant or water-bearer and received from him the authorization to exercise *irshād* (Pazouki 2000, 61).

The *Ma'rūfiyya* chain, in various ways, extended into each of the major and early Sufi orders of the Islamic world. For instance, the *Qādiriyya* connect the *silsila* of their

founder, Shaykh ‘Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani (d. 1166), through successive intermediaries, back to Ma‘ruf al-Karkhi and then to Imam al-Rida (Rahibi Za‘bi 2007, 180). The *Suhrawardiyya* likewise trace the *silsila al-irshād* of Shaykh Shihab al-Din Suhrawardi (d. 1234), through his uncle Shaykh Abu Najib Suhrawardi (d. 1168), to Junayd al-Baghdadi (d. 910), and from him to Ma‘rūf al-Karkhī and Imam al-Rida (‘Ali Jula and Tabataba‘i 2017, 138–39). The same connection is observed in the *Chishtiyya*, who maintain that their founder, Khwaja Mu‘in al-Din Hasan Sajzi (d. 1236), was linked in this way (Arya 1986, 75). An exception to this rule is found in the *Naqshbandiyya*, established by Khwaja Baha’ al-Din Muhammad Naqshband Bukhari (d. 1389). Two different accounts exist regarding his chain: in some sources, his *silsila al-irshād* is traced, without reference to Imam al-Rida, directly to Abu Bakr; while in others he is affiliated with the Ma‘rūfiyya chain and thus linked to Imam al-Rida (Khani 2002, 10; Ruhani 2006, 245).

Beyond this spiritual connection, there also exists a genealogical affinity between Imam al-Rida and certain Sufi shaykhs, which further reinforced their bond with him. For example, it is well known that Shaykh ‘Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani was of Hasanid lineage³ (Ibn Rajab 2004, 2: 189), while the line of descent of Khwaja Baha’ al-Din Naqshband Bukhari is said to reach back to Imam Ja‘far al-Sadiq (PBUH) (Lahuri 1994, 3: 62).

Sufis believe that these two types of bonds—spiritual and genealogical—enabled the transmission of ‘ulūm *ladunniyya* (divinely bestowed esoteric sciences), originally granted by God to the Prophet of Islam, then transmitted orally through the *silsila* of saints down to the present (Pazouki 2000, 62). Manifestations of this knowledge can be found in prayers and aphorisms attributed to earlier Shi‘i Imams, including Imam al-Rida, by eminent Sufis of the *umm al-salāsil al-Ma‘rūfiyya* such as Junayd al-Baghdadi and Dhu al-Nun al-Misri (Nasiri et al. 2015, 109). Clearly, this transmission was not purely of an “Uwaysi” nature (i.e., mystical connection without direct meeting) but, in many cases, reflected historical encounters between the aforementioned Sufi masters and the Shi‘i Imams (cf. Ibrahim 2017, 27–29). On this basis, the Shi‘i Imams have remained so highly esteemed among certain orders (such as the Qādiriyya and the *Rifa‘iyya*) that, to this day, the names of each of them are recited with honor (Montazer al-Qaem et al. 2015, 30–31).

2.1. Sufis, Renowned Rulers, and the Tradition of Visiting the Shi'i Imams' Shrines

Given that Qur'anic verses and hadiths repeatedly and explicitly commend the visitation of the tombs of *awliyā'*, this practice developed from the outset as a Prophetic Sunna. Some opponents, however, regarded visitation of graves as a merely commendable custom without Prophetic basis. Nevertheless, the survival of the practice of visitation throughout Islamic history was always due to the firm conviction and commitment of Sufis to visiting the tombs of their *mashāyikh*. In view of the special rank that the Shi'i Imams occupy within the hierarchy of *awliyā'* and mystics, their shrines were also revered as destinations of pilgrimage in the history of Sufism.

For example, Ibn Maza Bukhari al-Hanafi (d. 1171) authored *Lata'if al-Adhkar li-l-Huddar wa al-Suffar*, the oldest known independent Persian text on the subject of pilgrimage, in which he catalogued the recognized Islamic shrines. In this work he introduced the major shrines of the Shi'i *awliyā'* in Iraq and praised them highly (Ibn Maza 2016, 156–57). Abu Salim 'Abdallah b. Muhammad al-'Ayyashi (d. 1680), a Maghrebian jurist, hadith scholar, and Shadhili⁴ Sufi, authored the travelogue *Ma' al-Mawa'id* (also known as *al-Rihla al-'Ayyashiyya*), recording his pilgrimage journey that began in 1660. In Mecca, he was initiated into the Naqshbandiyya order ('Ayyashi 2006, 1: 335–36), and he refers to Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq as one of the poles (*aqtab*) of the Naqshbandiyya ('Ayyashi 2006, 1: 339). During his visitation of al-Baqi' in Medina, he described the large dome that covered the graves of al-'Abbas, Hasan b. 'Ali, 'Ali b. al-Husayn Zayn al-'Abidin, Muhammad al-Baqir, Ja'far al-Sadiq, and many members of the Prophet's family. He also wrote about the shrines of the Prophet's relatives and the graves of the Companions ('Ayyashi 2006, 1: 376–82).

Abu 'Abdallah Muhammad b. Ahmad, known as al-Sarraj and surnamed Ibn Malih of Morocco, set out on pilgrimage around 1630–1632 under the leadership of a Sufi shaykh from Morocco and recorded it in *Uns al-Sari wa al-Sarib min Aqtar al-Maghrib ila Muntaha al-Amal wa-l-Ma'arib Sayyid al-'Ajim wa-l-A'arib*. Ibn Malih visited the graves of the Ahl al-Bayt in al-Baqi', praising the merits of al-Hasanayn (i.e. Imam al-Hasan and Imam al-Husayn (PBUH)) and identifying Imam Muhammad al-Baqir (PBUH) as one of the saints of God and a transmitter of Sufi truths (Ibn Malih 1968, 110). He also emphasized the scholarly and spiritual standing of Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq (Ibn Malih 1968, 111) and referred to the Qur'anic verse of purification (Qur'an 33:33) as revealed concerning the Ahl al-Bayt (Ibn Malih 1968, 110).

Likewise, Shaykh Abu'l-'Abbas Ahmad al-Rifa'i, the founder of the Rifa'iyya order, visited the shrine of Imam 'Ali in 1279 and composed a *qasida*⁵, several verses of

which remain inscribed on one of the facades of the Imam ‘Ali’s shrine (Fartusi 2014, 327–28). This devotion is also manifest in the words of Sufis who attained the pilgrimage to Imam al-Rida. For example, Mawlana Khalid al-Shahrazuri (d. 1779), a Kurdish master of the Naqshbandiyya, while en route to India, stayed for a time at his shrine and composed an extensive *qasida* in praise of the Imam al-Rida’s shrine and in *tawassul* through the Imams (Modarresi Chahardehi 1968, 78).

The figure of Imam al-Rida was so prominent that his shrine was a focus of rulers’ attention from the very beginning. Historical evidence records that the ‘Abbasid caliph al-Ma’mun (r. 813–833) pitched his tent at the Imam’s tomb and remained there in retreat for several days following the Imam’s martyrdom (Ya‘qubi 2002, 2: 318). It is not surprising that the continuous flow of Shi‘i pilgrims to Khurasan kept the Imam’s shrine under the surveillance of rulers in that region, some of whom personally visited the site. For instance, the Seljuk ruler Alp Arslan (r. 1063–1072), after conquering Khwarazm, visited the shrine (Khwandamir 1974, vol. 2, 489). Similarly, Malik-Shah I (r. 1072–1092) visited the shrine while passing through Tus (Ibn Athir 1982, 10: 211).

Such examples may be interpreted as measures for maintaining political balance rather than expressions of devotion. Yet there are also cases that demonstrate genuine attachment to the *awliyā’* as the motive for pilgrimage. For example, Malik-Shah I and his vizier Nizam al-Mulk not only visited Imam al-Rida but also traveled to Iraq to visit the *‘atabāt* (Shi‘i shrine cities) and ordered the reconstruction of the minaret at the shrine of Imam al-Husayn. They also visited the tomb of the renowned Sufi Ma‘ruf al-Karkhi (d. 815), who by then enjoyed great respect among Shi‘is (Ibn Athir 1982, 10: 159).⁶

Another example is Ghazan Khan (r. 1295–1304), the first Muslim Ilkhanid ruler, who, even prior to his conversion to Islam, due to his deep interest in Sufi teachings, once journeyed to the tomb of Imam al-Rida as well as to the graves of Sufis such as Bayazid al-Bistami, Abu Sa‘id Abu'l-Khayr, Abu'l-Hasan al-Kharaqani, and other *awliyā’* of Khurasan (Atiqi Tabrizi 2013, 46).

The approach of these rulers can be explained by the likelihood that they regarded Imam al-Rida primarily as one of the Sufi *awliyā’* rather than solely as a prominent figure in Shi‘i political history. Shi‘is themselves may not share this perception, but there is evidence that persuades an outside observer. For instance, many of the rituals traditionally performed by pilgrims at his shrine parallel those carried out at the shrines of famous Sufis. Practices such as seeking permission for entry (*idhn al-dukhuł*), circumambulation (*tawāf*), touching for blessing (*tabarruk*), *tawassul*, vow-making (*nadhr*), tying votive knots (*dakhīl bastan*), supplication (*istighātha*),

communal feeding (*it'ām-i jam'i*), and so forth have, for centuries, been prevalent in Sufi shrines across the Islamic world (see Sedaqat 2012; Adli 2013, 103; 'Ayyashi 2006, 1: 193). The perceived results of these practices—such as fulfillment of needs, healing of illnesses, or spiritual joy—mirror those reported at Sufi shrines.

2.2. High-Ranking Muslim Officials and the Pilgrimage to Imam al-Rida's Shrine

With the expansion of archival facilities in the past century, many events related to Astan Quds Razavi have been documented. Among these records are the visits of high-ranking foreign officials from Muslim countries who came to the Imam al-Rida's shrine. Preliminary research by the authors of this article shows that at least 10 percent of these visitors exhibited mystical inclinations and affiliations with Sufi *turuq* (orders). In historical order, these figures include:

2.2.1. Hassan Suhrawardy

Hassan Suhrawardy (d. 1946) was a Bengali politician who served as an advisor in the Ministry of India under the British government (Haddad 1984, 281). His family were descendants of Shaykh Shihab al-Din Suhrawardi and had migrated from Iran to India (see Sana'i et al. 2019, 236–37, 240; Chohdari 2000, 68). His father, 'Ubaydallah Shahabi Siddiqi Midnapuri (d. 1885), was an influential figure in Bengal, and his ancestors were among the shaykhs of the Suhrawardiyya⁷ in that region (Shamim Khan 1994, 170–72). Consequently, Hasan grew up in a Sufi environment.

The Iranian Ministry of the Court informed the governor of Khurasan of his journey (SAKMAQ, archival record no. 94539), and on Monday, October 25, 1943, Suhrawardy arrived in Mashhad (SAKMAQ, archival record no. 94539/2). Shortly thereafter, the Ministry of Interior also sent a letter to the governor's office requesting suitable arrangements for his reception (SAKMAQ, archival record no. 4/94539). Furthermore, a document preserved in Astan Quds Razavi refers to his reception at the Dar al-Tawliya building (SAKMAQ, archival record no. 6/94539). In response, the Ministry of the Court expressed its gratitude to the shrine administration for their services during this visit (SAKMAQ, archival record no. 1/94539).

It is important to note that some of the prominent *mashayikh* of the Suhrawardiyya—such as Sayyid Jalal al-Din Bukhari, known as *Makhdum Jahaniyan* (d. 1384)—explicitly defended the Ahl al-Bayt in their writings. In later periods, some of their *khānqāhs* (Sufi lodges) even formally declared Twelver Shi'ism as their official creed (Razavi 2001, 1: 252). In light of this background, it is not implausible that the

presence of Colonel Hasan Suhrawardy at the shrine of Imam al-Rida reflected the formative influence of Suhrawardiyya teachings.

2.2.2. *Mohammad Zahir Shah*

Mohammad Zahir Shah was related to the Gilani family, who held the leadership of the Qādiriyya ṭarīqa in Afghanistan (Huseyni 2005, 180). With this reputation, he secured the support of various Sufi *turuq* and moderate parties such as the National Salvation Front, and in 1933 he came to power in Afghanistan. His formal enthronement ceremony included the tying of the royal turban by one of the shaykhs of the Naqshbandiyya, known as Fazl 'Umar Mujaddidi and titled Nur al-Mashayikh (Huseyni 2005, 181).

On March 26, 1950, Zahir Shah arrived in Tehran for an official state visit aimed at expanding relations and cooperation between the two countries. During this trip, the Afghan king visited military facilities and arms factories (SAKMA, no. 2683452). From Tehran he traveled to Mashhad and from there returned to Afghanistan (SAKMA, no. 290/2989). Archival documents from Astan Quds Razavi also record his pilgrimage and his donation of 500 US dollars to the shrine (SAKMAQ, no. 115953).

Reports from individuals who had visited his palace indicate that Zahir Shah was committed to Sufism and regularly held *dhikr* (ritual remembrance of God) ceremonies there (Musavi 2017). Hence, it may be surmised that his ṭarīqa affiliations motivated his visit to Astan Quds Razavi, and that despite his formal adherence to the Sunni Hanafi school, he personally chose to undertake the pilgrimage to Imam al-Rida.

2.2.3. *Abul Kalam Azad*

Muhyi al-Din Abul Kalam Azad (1888–1958), the renowned Indian thinker, poet, and writer, was appointed Minister of Culture in 1947. His father was among the *mashāyikh* of Sufism, while on his mother's side he traced his lineage to Mawlana Munawwar al-Din (d. 1857), a disciple of Shah 'Abd al-'Aziz Dihlavi, known as *Chirāgh-i Dihlī* (d. 1823) (Mashayekh Feriyduni 1988, 19). Azad himself, in addition to composing mystical poetry, possessed a spiritual disposition and authored writings in defense of Sufism (Mashayekh Feriyduni 1988, 21; Esfandiyar 2011, 9–10).

In 1951, while serving as India's Minister of Culture, Azad traveled to Iran (SAKMA, no. 240/99890). During this visit he met Iran's Prime Minister, Dr. Muhammad Mosaddeq, as well as Ayatollah Kashani. In recognition of his cultural and scholarly contributions, and his efforts to promote Persian language and culture in India, the University of Tehran awarded him an honorary doctorate in Persian language and literature. On Thursday, July 11, he attended the National Consultative Assembly as an

official guest, after which he traveled to Mashhad (SAKMAQ, no. 33854). Accompanied by a delegation of diplomats, Azad visited the shrine of Imam al-Rida and engaged in supplication and prayer there (SAKMAQ, no. 33854).

Beyond the general Sufi intellectual milieu in which he was raised, some sources also note his direct intellectual influence from Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi (d. 1607), the celebrated Naqshbandi master (Alemzadeh 1990). This could be taken as an indication of his affiliation with the Naqshbandiyya⁸ order and as an explanation for his visit to the shrine of Imam al-Rida.

2.2.4. Benazir Bhutto

Benazir Bhutto (d. 2007) was a prominent political figure in Pakistan who became Prime Minister in 1988. Her father, Zulfiqar 'Ali Bhutto (d. 1979), was a popular leader and, at the time, chairman of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (1974). He openly expressed Sufi inclinations; during that same summit, he took King Faisal of Saudi Arabia to the shrine of the renowned Suhrawardiyya Sufi, Lal Shahbaz Qalandar (d. 1274) (Shah 2019). Benazir, like her father, was inclined toward Sufism. In a 2002 interview with the *Guardian*, she explicitly declared her belief in Sufism, considering it a source of blessing during her period of governance (McCarthy 2002).

On May 15, 1990, Bhutto led a high-ranking political, economic, and military delegation to Iran ("The Trip of Benazir Bhutto, Prime Minister of Pakistan, to Iran" 1990). She performed prayer and pilgrimage at the holy shrine of Imam al-Rida and held a meeting with the custodian of Astan Quds Razavi (SAKMAQ, no. 9846). During this visit, the deputy custodian of Astan Quds Razavi presented her with a blessed package (SAKMAQ, no. 30315).

It is worth noting that Bhutto was a figure whose devotion to *tawassul* through pilgrimage cannot be doubted, as there are numerous reports of her visits to Sufi shrines. For example, she visited the shrine of Khwaja Mu'in al-Din Chishti (d. 1236) several times, praying either for her return to power or for the release of Asif 'Ali Zardari from prison ("President Zardari and Benazir Bhutto's Ajmer Visit in 2005" 2012; "Inshallah, I Shall Return as PM: Benazir" 2001). In December 2007, she also traveled from Karachi to Sehwan, a three-hour journey, to pay homage and pray at the shrine of Lal Shahbaz Qalandar⁹ (Khushik 2007).

2.2.5. Abdoulaye Wade

Abdoulaye Wade served as the president of Senegal from 2000 to 2012. The spread of Islam in this country is largely indebted to the missionary activities of Sufi *tariqas* such as the *Tijāniyya*¹⁰ and the *Qādiriyya* in sub-Saharan Africa. Wade himself

identified as a follower of the Muridiyya, a branch of the Qādiriyya (Thurston 2012), which today comprises about 30 percent of the country's Muslim population ("International Conference on the Discourse of Mysticism and Sufism in Senegal" 2011). Shaykh Ahmadu Bamba (d. 1928), the founder of this branch, was a leading figure in the struggle against French colonialism, and his shrine near the city of Touba remains the central pilgrimage site for the Muridiyya. Wade maintained close ties with the *mashāyikh* of this order, often consulting them even before embarking on foreign visits ('Ibadi 2015).

On the evening of April 9, 2008, Wade traveled to Mashhad with the purpose of visiting the shrine of Imam al-Rida and meeting senior Iranian officials ("The President of Senegal Arrived in Mashhad" 2008). A noteworthy aspect of the Muridiyya is its distinctive affinity with Shi'i beliefs and rituals. For instance, members of the order sometimes recite *adhkār* (invocations) transmitted from the Shi'i Imams (Shahidi 2018, 262). Likewise, in the written works of Muridiyya *mashāyikh* such as the *Diwan* of Ahmadu Bamba, verses expressing love for the Prophet's family (*Ahl al-Bayt*)—including the well-known *Qasida al-Ra'iyya*—are found (Bamba 1977, 110).

Prior to Wade's visit, Djibo Leyti Kâ, a former foreign minister of Senegal, had also traveled to Mashhad in 1991 for the purpose of visiting the shrine of Imam al-Rida and observing the city's historical and cultural monuments ("The Arrival of the Foreign Minister of Senegal in Mashhad" 1991).

2.2.6. Yusuf Raza Gilani

Yousaf Raza Gilani served as Prime Minister of Pakistan from 2008 to 2012. He belongs to the Gilani family, which had migrated from northern Iran to India several centuries earlier. His father, Makhdoom Syed Alamdar Hussain Gilani, was considered one of the leading figures of the Qādiriyya¹¹ in Pakistan, and thus Yusuf Raza was raised in a Sufi-oriented household ("Hazrat Musa Pak Shaheed" 2017). The genealogical and spiritual lineage of Syed Alamdar Hussain, traced back to the founder of the Qādiriyya order, Shaykh 'Abd al-Qadir Gilani, earned him immense respect and almost elevated him to the position of *qutb*¹² of the Qādiriyya in Pakistan; however, due to his political engagements, he declined to assume this role personally ("Hazrat Musa Pak Shaheed" 2017; Gilani 2011).

When Yusuf Raza Gilani rose to the position of Prime Minister, he worked to consolidate the standing of Sufism through policy initiatives. For instance, he established a Chair of Sufi Studies at Bahauddin Zakariya University in Multan, naming it after Musa Pak Shaheed ("Hazrat Musa Pak Shaheed" 2017). Sayyid Abul Hasan Jamal al-Din, known by the epithet Musa Pak Shaheed (d. 1601), was an ancestor of

the Gilani family (Lahuri 1990–94, 1: 212), and his 'urs¹³ is still commemorated annually in Multan from Sha'ban 18 to 20 ("Hazrat Musa Pak Shaheed" 2017).

On September 14, 2011, Yusuf Raza Gilani—accompanied by the foreign minister, the chief minister of Balochistan, a former provincial minister, and several Pakistani officials—traveled to Mashhad ("The Prime Minister of Pakistan Traveled to Mashhad to Visit the Shrine of Imam Reza (AS)" 2011). There, he visited the shrine of Imam al-Rida and prayer at it ("The Prime Minister of Pakistan Returned to Islamabad after Meeting with Our Country's Officials" 2011). This pilgrimage is noteworthy in two respects. First, according to local accounts, before assuming political power Gilani had been a *sajjada-nishin* (hereditary custodian of Sufi shrine) at the shrine of Musa Pak Shaheed and would regularly spend part of his time in devotional service at a shrine (Haqqi 2017). Second, although affiliated with the Hanafi School, he and his family openly declared their devotion to the *Ahl al-Bayt*. For example, during the commemoration of Fatima al-Zahra on the third of Ramadan¹⁴, he, along with his father and brothers, would prepare and distribute food offerings (Gilani 2021).

2.2.7. *Imran Khan*

Imran Khan became Prime Minister of Pakistan in 2018, but on Sunday, April 10, 2022, he was ousted from office by the Pakistani parliament ("Pakistani Parliament Ousts Imran Khan from Premiership" 2022). According to his own statements, his familiarity with Sufi teachings began three decades earlier, during which time he developed inclinations toward Sufism through the study of mystical works. Reports in the Pakistani press indicate that for many years he regularly visited Pakpattan and the shrines of the Chishtiyya¹⁵ order, seeking *tawassul* there (Butt 2018). He also acknowledged that meeting and connecting with the renowned woman mystic Bushra Bibi marked a turning point in his life, making Sufism central to his spiritual orientation. This relationship later culminated in marriage ("I've Made Mistakes in Life, but Marrying Reham Has to Be the Biggest: Imran" 2018), which further cemented Khan's attachment to Sufism. Bushra Imran subsequently inaugurated the Shaykh Abu al-Hasan Shadhili Research Center for the promotion of Sufism, science, and technology. This institution not only provided a platform for interfaith and cross-religious dialogue on both the national and international levels but also advanced studies in Islamic philosophy, Sufism, and mystical traditions ("First Lady Bushra Bibi Opens Sufism Centre, E-Library" 2021).

In 2019, Imran Khan founded Al-Qadir University in Sohawa (Punjab), named after Shaykh 'Abd al-Qadir Gilani, with the aim of making it a hub of knowledge and spirituality. International Islamic scholars, including Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Hamza

Yusuf, were appointed to its board of trustees (Wakeel 2021; "Al-Qadir Varsity to Become Research Hub, Hopes PM Imran Khan" 2021).

On his first visit to Iran, on April 21, 2019, Imran Khan traveled to Mashhad and immediately proceeded to the shrine of Imam al-Rida. Accompanied by the governor of Khorasan Razavi province and other local officials, he performed prayer in a corner of the shrine and later met with the custodian of Astan Quds Razavi ("The Prime Minister of Pakistan Went to the Holy Shrine of Imam Reza (AS)." 2019). Notably, in the same year, at the official invitation of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, he traveled to Turkey and visited the mausoleum and museum of Mawlana Jalal al-Din Rumi in Konya. Following this pilgrimage, he told reporters that he regarded himself as one of the "followers of Sufism" and had studied the works of Rumi ("Imran Khan's Visit to the Mevlana Museum and Tomb in Konya" 2019).

2.2.8. Shah Mahmood Qureshi

Shah Mahmood Qureshi is one of Pakistan's influential politicians, belonging to the prominent Qureshi family. For a period of time, he served as the *sajjada-nishin* of the shrine of Baha' al-Din Zakariya Multani, known as Shah Rukn-e-Alam ("About Shah Mahmood Qureshi" 2019). His father, Muhammad Sajjad Husayn Qureshi, was also a *sajjada-nishin* of this shrine, introducing innovative practices in religious ceremonies that quickly became widespread. His promotion of Suhrawardiyya teachings earned him great respect (Tasbihi 1972, 799).

Shah Mahmood Qureshi himself frequently appeared in public wearing traditional Sufi attire. While he was in charge of the Suhrawardiyya shrine, he personally presided over the annual 'urs of Baha' al-Din, attended by guests from other Muslim countries ("Hazrat Bahauddin Zakariya's Urs Ceremony: Shah Mahmood Qureshi's Bitter Speech against the Baha'is" 2016). However, due to his increasing political commitments, he eventually withdrew from the leadership of the *tariqa* and his role as *sajjada-nishin*. Following in the footsteps of his ancestor, Makhdom Murid Husayn Qureshi, a major spiritual and political leader of the Indian subcontinent (Qadri 2020), he emerged as a prominent political thinker and eventually became Pakistan's Minister of Foreign Affairs.

On January 12, 2020, during a visit to Iran, Qureshi first traveled to Mashhad, where he visited the shrine of Imam al-Rida. In a press interview, he described this pilgrimage as a source of great honor for himself ("The Foreign Minister of Pakistan Arrived in Holy Mashhad" 2019).

2.3. Implications

An important question to pose at the conclusion of this study is: What consequences and outcomes have followed from the presence of foreign Muslim statesmen—particularly those affiliated with Sufism—at the shrine of Imam al-Rida, and what benefits accrue to both sides? In response, it can be said that the presence of Muslim dignitaries in Shi'i centers and institutions is inherently a commendable and beneficial matter that yields positive results. Yet the Sufi inclinations and motivations of these figures potentially entail further implications, which may be summarized as follows:

a. Astan Quds Razavi annually hosts millions of pilgrims, and projections suggest that the city of Mashhad will welcome 40 million pilgrims by 2025 ("Pilgrimage Budget for the Spiritual Capital of Iran / The Entry of 40 Million Pilgrims by the Horizon of 2022" 2010/11). Most come seeking the spiritual blessings of Imam al-Rida. If one asks what drives this growth in pilgrim numbers, one factor is the influence of prior visitors whose experiences inspire others who have not yet made the journey. Given the prominence of foreign dignitaries, their visits to Mashhad can inspire new pilgrims, especially among Sufi adherents, to seek the blessings of the Imam. It is noteworthy that today the global population of Muslim Sufis is estimated at around 800 million (Eftekhari 2020).

b. The Middle East has been wracked in recent decades by wars and turmoil, most visibly through the rise of takfiri groups such as ISIS, making the region one of the most volatile in the Muslim world. Part of this instability stems from the "disunity" of Muslim countries, which has opened the way for extra-regional powers to intervene. Although Astan Quds Razavi formally has no role in Iranian foreign policy, certain foreign dignitaries visit the shrine voluntarily and intentionally. Thus, the shrine functions as a tool of foreign relations and can play a positive role in fostering "unity" among regional states. A notable example is the statement of Shah Mahmood Qureshi, who described his Sufi orientation as a means of establishing peace and halting conflictual policies ("Thick Blood: Shah Mahmood Qureshi Rubbishes Brother's Challenge" 2014).

c. Despite deep-rooted historical differences between Shi'a and Sunnis—and the damage these tensions have caused to both communities—today the need to create mechanisms of "rapprochement" has become a widely shared discourse. Given the significant doctrinal and ritual similarities between Shi'ism and Sufism, the Sufis represent the closest group within the Sunni world to Shi'a Islam, and they have played a crucial role in resisting the spread of Salafi and anti-Shi'i ideas. Sunni Sufi scholars have written treatises refuting Wahhabi doctrines. A prominent figure among

them is Ahmad Zayni Dahlan (d. 1886), a Shafi'i scholar of Mecca, who was affiliated with the 'Alawi Sufi order (Zarkali 1989, 1: 130; Katani 1982, vol. 1, 390). His works *Fitna al-Wahhabiyin* and *al-Durar al-Saniyya fi al-Radd 'ala al-Wahhabiyah* were written specifically in refutation of Wahhabism (Haydari Azar 2018). Clearly, the presence of high-ranking Muslim officials—especially those from Sufi backgrounds—can help them to better understand contemporary Shi'i society, while for Astan Quds Razavi, it provides a means of fostering a more accurate understanding of Sunnis in Shi'i circles. Since both the dignitaries and Astan Quds Razavi have wide audiences within their own spheres, the impact of this mutual understanding can be swift and profound.

d. As observed, some foreign dignitaries have themselves administered shrines in their own countries. Their visits to Astan Quds Razavi may therefore open the way for "inter-shrine cooperation" and the exchange of constructive experiences.

e. In addition to the shrine of Imam al-Rida, Iran is home to many other shrines of renowned Sufi figures such as Bayazid Bistami, Abu al-Hasan Kharaqani, 'Ala' al-Dawla Simnani, 'Abd al-Rahman Jami, and Imam Muhammad Ghazali. Yet these sites have often been neglected. While not on the same level of prominence as Astan Quds Razavi, they nonetheless possess considerable potential. Thus, it is hoped that Astan Quds Razavi can serve as a gateway to guide distinguished foreign dignitaries toward these other pilgrimage sites. A notable example is Yusuf Raza Gilani, who, in addition to visiting the shrine of Imam al-Rida, also traveled to Lahijan to visit the shrine attributed to Shaykh Zahid Gilani (d. 1301) ("The Prime Minister of Pakistan Returned to Islamabad After Meeting with Our Country's Officials" 2011).

f. The presence of foreign dignitaries in Iran also provides a simple means of introducing Iranian culture to outsiders. Sufism and its manifold expressions—in literature, architecture, and the arts—constitute an inseparable part of this culture and can be transmitted abroad through such ambassadors. Imran Khan, for example, in addition to visiting the tomb of Rumi in Turkey, personally recommended to the youth of his country the reading and contemplation of certain literary and visual works of Turkish Sufism (Taschi 2020; "Prime Minister of Pakistan Imran Khan Recommends Reading the Turkish Book 'The Forty Rules of Love'" 2020).

g. Finally, the expansion of cultural activities is another area worth considering. The vast library of Astan Quds Razavi, which houses a priceless collection of Islamic works, along with the Razavi Islamic Sciences University and the Islamic Research Foundation of Astan Quds Razavi, provides a suitable platform for research initiatives, student exchanges, book publication, and distribution.

3. Conclusion

This paper, while presenting a report on the pilgrimage journeys of several Muslim statesmen from India, Pakistan, Senegal, and Afghanistan to Mashhad, has shown—through investigation into their personal backgrounds—that these figures possessed inclinations toward, and affiliations with, Sufi *tariqas* in their respective countries. Some were formally affiliated with one of the established Sufi orders, such as the Suhrawardiyya, Qādiriyya, Naqshbandiyya, Chishtiyya, or Murīdiyya; others maintained a profound attachment to these traditions and observed respect and reverence for the masters of these orders.

Visiting the tombs of great religious figures and Sufi masters (*mashāyikh*) has long been a common practice among those engaged in Sufism and mysticism. The statesmen discussed in this study also had a record of visiting the shrines of Sufi masters. Our examination of the precedent of Sufi pilgrimage to major Shi'i shrines, with special focus on Ibn Maza's *Lata'if al-Adhkar* (6th/12th century), demonstrates that visiting the Imams of the Shi'a was a customary practice among Sufis. Among past monarchs and rulers, the case of Ghazan Khan, the first Muslim Ilkhanid ruler, was highlighted: out of deep devotion to Sufi teachings, he not only visited the shrines of Sufi masters but also made pilgrimage to the sacred shrine of Imam al-Rida.

As argued, the central question of this study is: Why did Sufis undertake pilgrimage to the shrine of Imam al-Rida? The most significant reason lies in the fact that a number of the Shi'i Imams, including 'Ali ibn Musa al-Rida, are incorporated into the initiatic chains of transmission (*silsilas*) of Sufi orders. Nearly all Sufi orders insist that their chain of *ijāza* (authorization) traces back to Imam 'Ali. This connection appears in both direct and indirect forms. The Ma'rufiyya—known as the "Umm al-Salāsil" (the mother of the Sufi orders)—traces its lineage through Shaykh Ma'ruf Karkhi to Imam al-Rida, and from him to Imam 'Ali. Some orders, such as the *Kumailiyya*, claim a direct chain back to Imam 'Ali himself. The incorporation of Shi'i Imams into these Sufi chains of transmission, and ultimately their connection to the Prophet Muhammad, has ensured their lasting reverence within the Sufi tradition, and their sanctified shrines have become loci of pilgrimage, prayer, and the reception of spiritual grace.

The prominent presence of Sufi-oriented statesmen at the shrine of Imam al-Rida, therefore, can be seen as bearing beneficial political and cultural implications for both sides. In this regard, Astan Quds Razavi can function as a powerful instrument in fostering positive and constructive roles in advancing relations and promoting unity among regional states. To summarize the socio-political benefits of such visits, one

may point to the strengthening of Islamic unity, the fostering of convergence, and the countering of extremist fundamentalism.

Another important point is that, given the devotion of these individuals to pilgrimage practices, their visits to Astan Quds Razavi can pave the way for expanding cooperation in the domain of pilgrimage tourism, as well as for facilitating pilgrimage itself and enabling the exchange of constructive experiences.

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Notes

1. Āstān-i Quds-i Raḍawī (literally, "the Sacred Threshold of Imam al-Rida") is the administrative and religious institution that oversees the shrine complex of Imam al-Rida in Mashhad, Iran. It manages the endowments (*awqāf*), charitable activities, and cultural programs associated with the shrine.

2. In Sufi terminology, *mashāyikh* (sing. shaykh) refers to the recognized spiritual masters who guide disciples (*murīds*) along the mystical path. Their authority is based on both personal spiritual attainment and their position within the *silsila*.
3. The term *Hasanids* or *Hasanid sayyids* designates descendants of the Prophet Muhammad through his grandson Hasan b. 'Ali. In Islamic societies, particularly within Sufi and Shi'i contexts, Hasanid descent has often been regarded as conferring special spiritual prestige and legitimacy.
4. The *Shādhiliyya* order is one of the major Sufi orders, founded by Abu al-Hasan al-Shadhili (d. 1258) in North Africa. It spread widely across the Maghreb, Egypt, and later to the Levant and beyond, and is known for emphasizing spiritual purification within everyday social life rather than withdrawal from the world.
5. A classical Arabic/Persian poem with a single rhyme and structured themes, often opening with nostalgia and moving to praise or wisdom.
6. For further study on the relations between the Seljuqs and the Shi'a, see Moradi Nasab and Izanlu 2016, 109.
7. The Suhrawardiyya order is attributed to Shihab al-Din 'Umar b. 'Abd Allah Suhrawardi (d. 1234) and is regarded in Sufism as a moderate *ṭarīqa*. In India, it was propagated by Baha' al-Din Zakariya, known as Baha' al-Haqq Multani (d. 1262), who was himself one of the successors of Shaykh Shihab al-Din Suhrawardi (Zarrinkub 2013, 81).
8. The Naqshbandiyya is one of the most renowned Sufi *ṭarīqas* in the Islamic world. Its founder was Khwaja Baha' al-Din Muhammad Bukhari (d. 1390), known as Naqshband. His path continued the Khwajagan tradition in the Turkistan region (Zarrinkub 2013, 82). This order has branches in China, Turkistan, Kazan, India, Iran, Turkey, Afghanistan, and Java (Mashkur 1996, 318).
9. 'Uthman Marwandi, known as Lal Shahbaz Qalandar, was an Iranian Sufi and one of the founders of the Qalandariyya order in Sindh, which is considered a branch of the *Malāmatiyya* order (see Safi 2008).
10. This order is attributed to an Algerian figure, Abu al-'Abbas Ahmad ibn Muhammad al-Mukhtar al-Tijani (d. 1815), who was himself a *khalīfa* (successor) of the *Khalwatiyya* order. He established the Tijāniyya in 1871, and it gained a large following in Africa, particularly in sub-Saharan regions (Lajevardi 2017, 202).
11. Among the oldest Sufi orders, the Qādiriyya is attributed to 'Abd al-Qadir Gilani (d. 1166), who was a follower of Ahmad ibn Hanbal. The Qadiri Sufis have generally been characterized by tolerance and forbearance (Zarrinkub 2013, 80).
12. A central concept in Sufi thought referring to the supreme spiritual pole or axis of the world. The *qutb* is regarded as the highest-ranking saint of his time, through whom divine grace flows to creation. He is believed to sustain the cosmic order and to stand at the head of the hierarchy of saints (*awliyā*).
13. One of the most important rituals of the Sufis in the Indian subcontinent is the celebration of the *'urs* ceremony, usually held at the shrines of Sufi masters (*aqtāb*) and often coinciding with the anniversary of their death. It is typically accompanied by *samā'* and *qawwali* performances (Arya 1986, 94). Notably, this ceremony is also observed annually on December 17, the date of Rumi's passing, attracting

statesmen, artists, scholars, and admirers of Rumi from various countries ("The Urs Ceremony of Mawlana, Held Between December 7-17" 2022).

14. According to one opinion, the martyrdom of Lady Fatima al-Zahra' (the daughter of the Prophet Muhammad) occurred on this day (Majlisi 1983, 22: 167; 43: 189-214).

15. The oldest Sufi order in India is attributed to Mu'in al-Din Hasan Sijzi (d. 1236). The two renowned Indian poets, Amir Khusrow Dehlavi and Khwaja Hasan Dehlavi, were affiliated with this order (Arya 1986, 42).

