

GRAVES OF MUSLIM SAINTS DESECRATED IN LIBYA

by Sheikh Musa Furber



Last week, millions of Muslims worldwide celebrated one of Islam's two annual celebrations, Eid al-Fitr, which follows their completion of fasting the month of Ramadan. For Muslims, Eid is a time for visiting family and friends, and a time for feeling joy and solidarity. During these celebrations, Muslims often feel a heightened sense of belonging to a historically-rooted community and an increased affinity for their heritage.

These positive feelings were brought to an abrupt end Sunday morning as news spread that a series of coordinated attacks against a number of Libyan sites that are part of its religious heritage. The reports were consistent: the sites targeted included tombs of Muslim scholars and sages, and the perpetrators were members of radical Salafi groups – with state security forces either complacently standing by or complicit participants in the attacks.

The attacks were not limited to road construction equipment demolishing the structures built immediately around graves (as well as exhuming some of the bodies), but included burning books contained in the sites' libraries – all of this under the Salafi banner of 'removing sources of religious innovation.'

The Arab revolutions that began towards the end of 2010 have included a wide range of participants. For most participants, the goal has been political reform and democratic transformation. There are other actors, however, whose goal is to transform Muslim society to the way they perceive it to have been during the first three centuries of Islamic history; their goal is to reform society according to their puritanical vision of the past. [tld whois](#) . These actors consider Muslims to have lived the past millennium astray – both the laity and the scholars – which leads many to conclude that this reform does not constitute a return to the past, but rather a revision of past history.

Many of those radical Salafi actors were not even engaged in the revolutions, deeming them to be forbidden on account of ‘going against the ruler’ – but their religious doctrine were revised, yet again. Now, the revolution is a method through which they can achieve their own goal – revising religion according to their dogmas, and imposing changes they know they could never achieve through popular referendum. This is part of what we see playing out in this week’s destruction of religious sites in Libya.

To the hardline Salafi religious revisionist, these sites and the tombs they house are either loci for or precursors to heresy. Their worry is that ordinary Muslims who visit the sites supplicate to the dead and ask them to intercede on their behalf. [Burundi](#) . It does not matter whether anyone actually goes there with this intention, since the mere presence of these shrines leaves an ongoing risk to the masses.

If these buildings pose such a risk to the masses, why did the previous generations of Muslims allow these shrines to remain in Libya and elsewhere? The grave of the prophet Ismail is located within the Sacred Mosque in Mecca and the Prophet’s Mosque in Medina grew to envelop the grave of the Prophet Muhammad. Why is it that both of these graves and the mosques

around them were left unmolested? The answer is simple: the sages, muftis, judges, and rulers of previous generations did not consider them as loci for heresy; they did not consider their forcible removal to be the proper legal response. In short, the earliest generations – the Salaf from which the contemporary Salafi derive their name – did not understand the Quran and Sunnah to require forcible exhuming the bodies of Muslims or destroying tombs and other structures built adjacent to their graves.

The general rule in Islamic law concerning the use of force is that it is unlawful. The basis for this goes back to the often quoted verse in the Qur'an that states, "No compulsion is there in religion" (Quran, 2:256). When the Quran and hadith describe force as being legally warranted, they usually warn that God considers pardon and clemency to be the superior course of action.

The Sunni creed that Muslim theologians have taught for the past fourteen centuries to the general masses and at its primary scholarly institutions like the University of al-Qarawiyyin (founded in Fes in 859), and Azhar University (founded in Cairo in 970) – holds that all things in the world are created by God and God alone, in accordance to the Quranic verse "and when thou throwest, it was not thyself that threw, but God threw"(Quran, 8:17). The sound Sunni creed inoculated the majority of the lay community from becoming grave worshipers while visiting graves.

What is important here is that the religious and political authorities responsible for safeguarding religion and society were aware of the situation and left these sites alone. That is, until the 19th century when more militant forms of what became today's Salafi movements began razing tombs in the Arabian Peninsula on the grounds that they lead to polytheism and declaring anyone in their vicinity a polytheist. Needless to say, the fatwa that were propagated to defend such destruction, as well as those that provide 'legitimacy' behind

such crimes in today's Libya, are spurious.

Yesterday, Egypt's House of Edicts (Dar al-Ifta al-Misriyyah) issued an official statement condemning the attacks against the mosques and tombs of Sheikhs Ahmed al-Zarrouq and Abdel Salam al-Asmar, and which was reaffirmed on the Grand Mufti's personal web site. Whereas the Egypt's House of Edicts usually uses sedated language in its fatwas, the text of this fatwa used rare and uncharacteristically strong language, describing the perpetrators of these actions as "criminals," "renegades," and "hellhounds."

These attacks have repercussions that go beyond desecration of physical property: they extend to desecration of Libya's religious and historical identity and heritage, of Islam's historical and legal norms, and the sovereignty of the Libyan state. For all people that are concerned about the future of a post-Gaddafi Libya, it is vitally important to promote transparency and firm positions towards the prevention of such violence. There is no religious, nor civil, justification for such wanton use of violence – this needs to be made clear by all authorities. The perpetrators are not only guilty of religious sin, but of crimes, and they need to be held accountable for.

As the Libyan revolution and others continue, religion is going to remain a topic that draws a great deal of attention, particularly concerning its role in public life and policies. Religion can be used for good, or it can be used for evil – and it will be down to the people of these countries to decide what they want in that regard. It can hardly be argued, however, that the revolutionaries of the Arab world deserve more bloodshed and destruction – surely, they fought for something better than this.

(Sheikh Musa Furber a writer for Egypt Independent where this article was published on August 29, 2012)

Courtesy: [Al-Arabiya News](#)

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