

The destruction of mosques and holy shrines by Salafi extremists in Libya

The political struggle for identity and positions in the aftermath of a civil war

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Introduction

After the armed uprising in Libya 2011 several historical mosques, some of them containing famous graves, have been bulldozed in the center of Tripoli, Benghazi, Misurata and Zlitan. The mosque buildings were wrecked, corpses of buried scholars exhumed and a mosque library was burned.

While as the destruction of mosques, tombs and shrines by Salafi groups is a well-known issue in other Arabic countries, the Libyan destructions are new to Libyan society. The aim of my paper is to look specifically into the events in Libya, and to find out what is the opinion of the intellectuals, the clerics and the public in both countries on this issue, and what are the differences and similarities of their approach to it?

Finally, I want to find out what this power struggle between moderates and a minority of Salafi extremist elements and the subsequent public debate on the destructions does to the balance of finding position and identity in post-war Libya.

Destruction of mosques, shrines and holy places in Libya 2012

In the aftermath of the Libyan civil war a new constitutional Government was formed in Libya. However, this Government failed to disarm the many militias that participated in the fighting during the civil war, opening up for armed groups to struggle for power locally by using force or threats of force.

Timeline and events

No independent statistical statement has been carried out to convey the exact number of mosques, tombs and Muslim shrines that have been destroyed or desecrated since the armed uprising in Libya, but local and international media has reported many incidents all over the country during the last year.

The destructions of mosques and holy shrines seemingly began in October 2011. That month the mosque at the town of Sidi Masri was vandalized and the remains of two Muslim scholars, Abdul-Rahman Al-Masri and Salem Abu Seif, removed. During the same month the cemetery in Gargaresh, a part of Tripoli, was ransacked while, in November, Tripoli's Sidi Nasr mosque was similarly desecrated. In January 2012 Salafi fanatics had wrecked the cemetery of Sidi Ubaid in Benghazi, stealing 31 corpses.

In March 2012, in the city of Zliten, local extremist militias tried to destroy one of the most important shrines in Libya, that of Sidi Abdul-Salam Al-Asmar Al-Fituri. In July 2012 a bomb exploded at the Sahaba Mosque in the city Derna destroying the tomb of Zuhayr Ibn Qais Al-Balawi. At the town of El-Tag near Kufra, in southeast Libya, Salafi activists removed the body of Sidi Muhammad Al-Mahdi Es-Senussi, a supreme sheikh of the Senussi Sufi order, from his mausoleum.

On Sunday August 26th, 2012 in Misrata extremists came at night and dug out the tomb of famous Muslim scholar Ahmad Zarruq, removed his body, took it to an undisclosed location and destroyed the Mosque with bulldozers and explosives. This event started a series of seemingly coordinated similar destructions all over Libya during the end of August.

In the center of the Libyan capital Tripoli the Sha'ab ad-Dahman mosque was demolished on August 25 along with around 50 Sufi graves, including the tombs of Libyan Muslim scholar Abdullah al-Sha'ab and of soldiers who fought Spanish colonialists. According to Foreign Policy Magazine, the Libyan Salafi group Ansar al-

Sharia hired contractors to do the job.¹ The two famous Ottoman mosques Ahmed Pasha Karamanli and Gurgi Cami were also attacked with bulldozers by Salafi extremists who vandalized the buildings and destroyed some of the graves at the cemeteries next to the mosques on August 27.

Later that month Salafi militias wrecked several holy shrines with explosives and bulldozers destroying the tomb of the 15th-century Muslim scholar Abdel Salam al-Asmar and set fire to a historic library in the mosque in the city of Zlitan, ruining and destroying thousands of books. In September 2012 the destructions continued with the wrecking of minor mosques and shrines in the towns of Rajma and Ajilat.

The destructions of the mosques, tombs and shrines in Libya are well documented by local and international media. In addition many Libyans used social media (Twitter, Facebook) to report directly from the destructions. Most of these pictures and video recordings show bulldozers attacking the buildings and bearded men, dressed in traditionally Salafi clothing, wrecking the buildings, digging up corpses and arguing – in some cases even fighting physically – with bystanders and people trying to avert the destructions.²

Interestingly, much of the social media footage shows Libyan security forces present during the destructions without intervening. This gave rise to speculations of whether the Libyan Government was actually endorsing the destructions or perhaps had to give in to armed militia demands to allow the destructions to happen without Governmental interference.

The Libyan Herald news site reported that three journalists from the Al-Assema television station were detained by security forces as they tried to cover the destruction, saying their detention was “a clear violation of press freedom in Libya”.

¹ http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/09/12/the_battle_of_the_shrines

² Some of these pictures and videos are collected at <http://brown-moses.blogspot.dk/2012/08/images-of-shrines-and-mosques-destroyed.html>

The Libyan Herald also reported that Libyan Security forces “sought to cordon off the site throughout the demolition and were hostile to any attempts by journalists to cover the situation,”³

According to Middle East correspondent Hadeel Al-Shalchi from Reuters, a man who appeared to be overseeing the demolition told Reuters the interior ministry had authorized the operation after discovering people had been worshipping the graves and practicing "black magic".⁴ No confirmation of this claim could actually be given, and there was no formal response from the Libyan interior ministry to this claim. However the Libyan interim interior minister Fawzi Abdelaei handed in his resignation on August 27, after members of the newly-elected Libyan parliament accused his ministry of not doing enough to stop attackers who bulldozed a Sufi shrine and mosque.

Libyan Deputy Prime Minister" Mustafa Abushagur commented the resignation by saying *“The destruction of shrines and mosques is a crime. Those who commit these crimes will be held responsible. I asked the Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry of Defence to intervene yesterday but they did not do their duty to protect these sites.”*⁵ On the same day Libyan National Congress Speaker Mohammed Magarief suggested official collusion in the desecrations when he said that those responsible *“are unfortunately aligned with some in the Supreme Security Committee and some ex-revolutionaries”*.⁶

Salafi- justification of the destructions

Who, in practice, are the people destroying Libya’s mosques and tombs, and what is their justification to do so? A popular view that is also shared and endorsed by the

³ <http://www.libyaherald.com/?p=13252>

⁴ <http://worldnews.nbcnews.com/news/2012/08/26/13485762-bulldozer-wrecks-sufi-mosque-and-graves-in-libya-sectarian-attack>

⁵ <http://www.maltatoday.com.mt/en/newsdetails/news/world/Sufi-shrines-attacked-by-Islamist-hardliners-in-Libya-20120826>

⁶ <http://www.libyaherald.com/2012/08/29/why-the-supreme-security-committee-must-be-brought-to-heel-before-its-too-late/>

media is that these destructions are carried out by Libyan “Salafi groups”. Most Libyan experts and media blame the coordinated destructions of mosques and shrines on the Libyan Salafi network *Ansar al-Sharia*. A spokesman for Ansar al-Sharia admitted on BBC in September 2012 that “his people” carried out the mosque destructions.⁷

The term “Salafi” is originally an Arabic expression identifying a Muslim who emphasizes the Salaf (“predecessors” or “ancestors”), the earliest Muslims, as model examples of Islamic practice. In this paper I use the expression “Salafi” to define individuals or groups that subscribe to mainly Saudi/Wahabi ideologies both in theory and in practice. Furthermore, many of the Libyan groups and individuals endorsing the destruction of mosques and tombs in Libya voluntarily label themselves as “Salafi”.

In my methodology I have been looking into Libyan Salafi sources that endorse or call for the destructions of mosques and tombs in Libya, but at present there has been no full research done as to enumerate the different Libyan Salafi organizations or to monitor their public messages in general, thus I have chosen to pick out a few Libyan Salafi sources for exemplification.

Very few sources are available in English; I have focused mainly on first hand Arabic sources for my empirics.

Noman Benotman, a former member of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group and analyst of Libyan Islamism claims that *Ansar al Sharia* is less an organisation than a term applied to an amorphous coalition of Islamist and Salafist groups active in eastern Libya.⁸ The destructions of mosques and shrines were not carried out by locals in their respective towns, but by outsiders and different Salafi groups other than just Ansar al-Sharia.

⁷ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-19638582>

⁸ <http://edition.cnn.com/2012/09/12/world/africa/libya-attack-jihadists/>

According to Irfan al-Aalawi, a researcher from Center for Religion and World Affairs, the Salafi militias in the Zliten destructions claimed they were following the guidance of sheikh Muhammad Al-Luhaidan, a prominent Saudi Wahhabi cleric.⁹

In August 2012 a facebook page titled "Together for the Removal of the Abdel Salam al-Asmar Shrine" congratulated its supporters on the "*successful removal of the Asmar shrine, the largest sign of idolatry in Libya.*" There was no identification as to who established the facebook page.

A larger and more established facebook group called "I am Muslim Salafi" with more than 6000 "likes" and 1352 postings has posted several endorsements of mosque and shrine destructions as well as video clips and documents on their page.¹⁰

The Libyan Herald has numerous cited (second-hand, non-verifiable) testimony from bystanders to mosque destructions claiming these were allegedly done by "Salafis".

Justification as to why the mosques and shrines were destroyed is usually based on typical Salafi and Wahabi arguments used for destruction of mosques and shrines in Saudi Arabia and Egypt. The destructions are necessary in order "*to avoid idolatry*", prevent "*religious corruption*" and prohibiting the spread of other religious deviations such as "*black magic*". There is also mentioned the fear of mainly Sufi shrines and tombs being turned into "*places of idol worshipping*", thus "*undermining fundamental Islamic traditions and values*".¹¹

Libyan Salafi organizations do not play any important role in Libyan mass media. Their propaganda efforts are limited mainly to the use of social media such as Facebook or Twitter, YouTube or the Internet, although some unsuccessful attempts have been made to establish local Salafi TV stations in Benghazi and Derna.

The quite symbolic destructions of mosques and shrines in Libya could very well be an attempt by the Salafi groups to raise awareness for their causes in public without the

⁹ <http://www.lapidomedia.com/libya-more-destruction-sufi-tombs-shows-islamists-are-not-defeated>

¹⁰ <https://www.facebook.com/I.am.Muslim.Libyan.Salafi>

¹¹ Ibid.

economic and structural means of establishing a mass media. By vast exposure of pictures and footage from destructions on Libyan TV and in Libyan mass media – and subsequently on international mass media – could be the only way Salafi groups such as Ansar al-Sharia can reach a wider public audience to publicize the view of Salafi/Wahabi ideology.

Reactions and public discourse

The destructions caused an outrage and intense debate among Libyans, and also internationally.

Although destruction of Libyan mosques and shrines seemingly has stopped for the moment, Salafi groups still pose a threat to such institutions. In November 2012 The Libyan Herald reported how extremist Salafis allegedly threatened the leader of a Muslim Sufi order in Tripoli.¹²

The popular Libyan views to the Salafi rampage destruction are fragmented, and no formal research or survey has been carried out to measure opinions. However, a look at one of the biggest electronic Libyan discussion forums shows a consensus of condemnation across broad political spectrum.¹³

Additionally, interviews with Libyan bystanders done by The Libyan Herald in the last 6 months of 2012 shows people in Libya generally condemning the destructions and calling for Governmental intervention to stop the Salafi rampages.

¹² <http://www.libyaherald.com/2012/11/15/extremists-threaten-sufi-zawia-in-tripoli/>

¹³ The forum is called a-Marbo3a and administered by Hafeed al-Ghwell who holds a position at the World Bank and has administered Libyan free speech discussion boards online since the early 1990ies: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/340588432628008/> - Marbo3 has approximately 1075 members both from inside and outside Libya.

In August 2012 some 21 Libyan organizations, including Lawyers for Justice in Libya (LFJL), have condemned the recent mosque attacks and demanded appropriate action from the Libyan General National Congress (GNC).¹⁴

On August 28, UNESCO condemned the recent Libyan destruction of mosques in a press statement, urging the Libyan authorities and society at large “to exercise their responsibility in protecting cultural heritage and sites of religious significance for future generations.”¹⁵

Reactions of the Libyan Grand Mufti

A statement from the Libyan Grand Mufti, Sheikh Sadeq al-Ghariyani, released by the *Dar al-Ifta* on August 2012, condemned the desecration of graves and holy sites, which it described as “not religiously permissible” and “a violation of the sanctity of the dead”. The statement said that it was forbidden to desecrate graves, whether they belong to Muslims or non-Muslims, and stressed that anyone who does so contravenes the teachings of both the Qu’ran and the Hadith. It also contained a reminder that the use of weapons is forbidden, other than under state authority and also urged the Libyan government to do everything within its power to achieve security and stability.

However mufti al- Gheriyani ’s public statements did not always condemn the destructions. Al-Gheriyani issued several successive and contradictory opinions, the first (on Libyan TV during an interview) of which actually appeared to favor destruction of the mosques and tombs.¹⁶ This interview was done during Ramadan 2011 at a time, when the armed uprising was still under way. His opinion was praised by a Libyan Salafi group (posting photographs of the destruction of a Muslim shrine in Eastern Libya) on the Internet a few days later.¹⁷

¹⁴ <http://www.libyaherald.com/2012/08/28/widespread-condemnation-of-mosque-attacks-and-demands-for-government-action/>

¹⁵ http://www.unesco.org/new/en/media-services/single-view/news/unesco_director_general_calls_for_an_immediate_halt_to_destruction_of_sufi_sites_in_libya/

¹⁶ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-8OZvIDvCkI>

¹⁷ <http://libya-alsalafya.maktoobblog.com/1596227/>

A second statement from al-Gheriyani argued that such activities were inopportune at the time, and the third (cited above) definitively banned aggression against shrines. Yet, browsing the official website of mufti al-Gheriyani at <http://tanasuh.com/>, several fatwas given on questions of the permissibility of building shrines clearly show how al-Gheriyani's argumentation is very close to that of similar Salafi fatwa websites, using Hanbali fiqh to support his proofs.¹⁸

Another branch of Libyan Muslim scholars were less unanimous in their condemnation of the destructions. Umar Mawlud 'Abdalhamid, a member of the League of Libyan Ulama condemned the destruction of tombs and places of worship at the hands of Libyans who claim themselves to be Salafis in a public statement on August 28. The statement heavily criticizes the former statement of mufti al-Gheriyani, deriding him for his Islamic argumentation on three major points:

- 1) Al-Gheriyani had based his opinion (fatwa) on argumentations drawn from the Muslim scholar Ibn Tayimiyah, which is considered the main legal source for Salafi conceptions
- 2) Al-Gheriyani has contravened the position of the dominant school of law in Libya – namely, the Maliki school – even though he formally committed himself to its rulings through the Fatwa Law which he himself drafted,
- 3) Al-Gheriyani intentionally ignored the fact that tombs and shrines in Libya are built separately from mosques and places of worship, and he furthermore ignored the widespread and accepted Muslim tradition of burying scholars next to the places they used to teach in.¹⁹

On September 15, after Salafi groups had attacked the American consulate in Benghazi, killing US ambassador Chris Stephens, al-Gheriyani took a new, much stronger, stand point:

¹⁸ <http://www.tanasuh.com/NEW/readablefatawa.php?id=3712>, and his audio fatwa on question of mosque destructions in Tripoli, October 2011 at <http://www.tanasuh.com/NEW/audioonefatawa.php?id=5011>

¹⁹ <http://shanfaraa.com/2012/08/statement-from-libyan-ulama-on-the-salafi-destruction-of-mosques-and-tombs/>

*"This attack was a clear indication of chaotic security. What had happened was the inevitable result of nothing being done in recent months about several violent incidents carried out by armed militias which used arms without the authority of the state".*²⁰

In this message al-Gheryani made a direct link between the Benghazi attack and earlier attacks on shrines and mosques across the country:

*"They violated tombs and graves during which many lives were lost, such as the incidents of Rajma and Ajilat and before that incidents of Zliten, Misrata and Tripoli as well as many other places."*²¹

Theory and discussion

The ambivalent messages and hidden support for the extremists by the Libyan mufti and the moderate League of Libyan Ulema's open criticism of mufti al-Gheriyani's religious arguments has a broad impact on the transition and ongoing political power struggle between moderates and extremists in Libya. The struggle is a clear sign of finding *position* in the transitory void after a civil war, because positions – or *roles* – have not been clearly defined nor completed by the armed struggle, so the various religious fractions in Libya must find their grounds using rhetorics and define themselves through more symbolic actions.

Libya expert Stephen Schwartz, executive director of the California based Center for Islamic Pluralism, supports this notion, saying that by destroying mainly Sufi shrines across Libya in what appear to be coordinated attacks the Salafi militias are demonstrating "*a highly symbolic way to assert control.*"²²

Both extremists and moderates need to construct their identity in the shadow of the new Libyan political situation, and the only way to do this is by defining their positions

²⁰ <http://www.libyaherald.com/2012/09/15/mufti-condemns-ambassadors-killers-blames-government-for-not-standing-up-to-extremists/>

²¹ ditto

²² <http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/story/2011-10-13/libya-religious-tensions/50750562/1>

(roles) in society. Mufti al-Gheryani obviously has a hard time finding a fixed position, since he changes his own views trying to adapt to the power struggle between Salafi groups wanting to establish a new Saudi/Wahabi-inspired identity, and the moderate Libyans who want to continue a traditional religious identity.

Positioning is defined as “*the discursive process whereby people are located in conversations as observably and subjectively coherent participants in jointly produced storylines*”.²³ The Libyans in the destruction discourse can be positioned by another or by oneself, interactive or reflective positioning. This definition means that the extremists and the moderates position themselves or are positioned in different conversational locations according to changes in storylines. A tri-polar relationship between *position*, *storyline*, and *speech act* is essential for debate, and is the conceptual base of *positioning theory*.

This is exactly what happens with mufti al-Gheryani, as he re-positions himself according to the storyline, he is experiencing. There is a storyline when he is asked strictly religious legal questions and has to give a fatwa. And there is another storyline when he is facing international condemnation and the pressure of the newly elected Libyan government. And finally there is the storyline of how Islamic practice is to be defined in post-war Libya.

This is also how the Salafi groups are positioning themselves in post-war Libya. Normally, positioning takes place in the process of *practicing*, and the *practice* of Ansar al-Sharia is to make war. First they fought the former Jamahiriya Government by using armed force and explosives; now they are waging war against cultural traditions doing the same – this time with bulldozers. By waging war against the mosques and shrines, Salafi groups are trying to create themselves an identity that in a very symbolic way mimics the identity they had as armed liberators. Now they liberate cultural and popular traditions; before they liberated political and anti-political traditions.

²³ Davies, B., & Harré, R. (1999). Positioning and personhood. In R. Harré, & L. van Lagenhove (Eds.), *Positioning theory: Moral contexts of intentional action* (pages 32-52). Malden

The Libyan discourse between Salafis and moderates does not differ much from similar discourse in countries like Egypt, Tunisia or Iran after the 1979-revolution. It is basically a discourse closely connected to the Political Theory of Social Movement, because by carrying out organized destructions of mosques, tombs and shrines throughout Libya, Salafi organizations are trying to draw upon shared cultural understandings of an extremist opinion on Islamic matters.

Libyan Salafi groups had been outlawed under the former Jamahiriya Government and had to make strong positioning outside Libya, mostly on various websites and online for a, but also through illegal activities such as smuggling arms and distributing propaganda material among relative few sympathizers inside and outside of Libya. During the armed uprising in 2011 Salafi groups had gained more or less legitimate access to participate in military operations, some of whom were sponsored by the ultra-conservative regimes in Qatar and Saudi Arabia.²⁴

The popularity of the Salafi groups and individuals before and during the Libyan civil war came from their willingness to engage in military combat against the Jamahiriya Government. The religious and political views of the Libyan Salafi groups played no importance in Libyan population at that point in history at all.

The tension that emerged during the armed uprising in Libya between traditional values and foreign interests exposed a political frame that had to be filled with identities and opinions. Additionally, once the former Jamahiriya Government was toppled and the old symbols destroyed, who was going to define politics and religion in Libyan society? One method for the Libyan Salafi groups to establish power was to find new visible symbols to antagonize; in this case the destruction of Libyan mosques and tombs. Thus Libyan Salafists could show through symbolic actions that they defined themselves according to Saudi/Wahabi ideologies; which was a message both to the Libyan population as well as to their Salafi benefactors from abroad.

²⁴ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/oct/26/qatar-troops-libya-rebels-support>

The problem for the newly elected Libyan government is to find its own identity/position in post war-Libya. This is quite complicated, because Salafi organizations are still armed and very much in control in local places, but also because a large part of the new Government either consist of Salafi members, or of members that are prone to be dominated into submission through Salafi pressure or manipulation.

There is also another interesting social factor that makes Salafi power struggle secondary to the impact it has on Egypt or Tunisia; Libya has abundant possessions of crude oil and very few poor people. In many years Libya has had the highest BNP of all African countries. The social problems that traditionally have fueled popular adherence to Salafi propagandism in countries like Egypt or Tunisia are practically non-existent in Libya. Libyan Salafi organizations like *Ansar al-Sharia* are unable to establish identity as social providers, a thing that Salafi organizations in Egypt, Tunisa and elsewhere in poorer Arabic countries have done in the face of a socially weak Government.

The Libyan Government may be weak as defined by the inability to prevent armed militias exercising political control locally across Libya, but it is not at all weak when providing the population with infrastructure, jobs and social contentment. Libyan Salafi groups had to find a different way to identify their position politically in Libya than to mimic the social responsibilities of a government; and the thing that was available and left to do, was blowing up mosques to prevent “black magic and idolatry” – which according to the Political Theory of Social Motivation doesn’t appear to be enough to gain power in society. Libyan Salafi groups lack the social appeal in population that Salafi groups elsewhere in the Arab world have had, and the mobilization of Salafi ideology into the Libyan population has not been very successful.

Despite much talk of tribal differences, Libya is culturally a very traditional and religiously homogenous society. Salafi ideology has had no easy task filling up the frame of political void that appeared after the armed uprising. Traditional Salafi views and activities in other Arab countries have been centered on social devise of topics

such as music or dress code of women, but in Libya there has been little social grounds to enforce traditional Salafi social values upon an already moderate conservative Libyan population. Dress code and music has simply no grounds for issue in contemporary Libyan society.

The traditional Salafi/Wahabi ideology contains anti-modern and anti-Western segments. This, too, is missing in the case of the Libyan Salafi organizations. The mosques and shrines blown up and destroyed were mainly Sufi places of worship, built by the Ummayyad and Ottoman empires. They were not symbols of the West, and their destruction had nothing to do with any anti-Western or anti-modernizations resentments.

According to theories of positioning, a great deal of positioning is done *by being in opposition* to already established structures and ideas; this is a very easy way to define oneself as something *different* with a clear-cut, *separate identity* as opposed to the identity that one is challenging.

The problem for the Libyan Salafis is that by separating their identity from the traditional Libyan religious and cultural values – by blowing up old Libyan religious structures – the Salafi groups are at the same time alienating themselves from any Libyan cultural context.

The public Libyan opinion on whether Salafi destruction of tombs and shrines are benevolent to the preserving of “true” Libyan heritage or not is further divided because the religious authorities to decide on such matter are in opposition to each other. In between there is the elected Libyan government that couldn’t avert the destructions nor take a clear position as to what to think of the destructions once they had been carried out.

In order to assert popular support and justification the Libyan Government has asked and is expecting religious advice from the Grand Mufti – but obviously the Grand Mufti is unable to devise a clear response to the Salafi destructions. Furthermore the

ambiguous response of the Grand Mufti became the subject of severe public criticism by governmental independent, established Libyan Muslim scholars; their criticism undermining the authority of the Grand Mufti and thus also weakening the authority – and identity – of the elected Libyan government.

Al-Gheryani might be the Grand Mufti appointed by the new Libyan Government, but he does a poor job as religious advisor. On the other hand the League of Libyan Ulema (LLU) has more than 200 traditional religious moderate scholars as members. By criticizing and challenging the religious authority of the Grand Mufti publically and in serious details the LLU is also a “player in the game of post-war Libya” trying to capture popular validity to establish a position or identity as a powerful Muslim clerical body in post-war Libya.

In other countries, such as Saudi Arabia, the clerical powers and the ruling, political powers share a political synergism, where the government is backed by Muslim clerics, but in order to receive this backing, the government has to hand over some confessions the clerics. This is not the case in Libya. Neither the Grand Mufti, nor Salafi groups like Ansar al-Sharia, nor the LLU is strong enough to coerce the government into any political admissions. This is mostly because the elected Libyan government is not strong enough to share any power with clerics or religious groups; in fact the Libyan government is busy trying to attain enough posture to control the numerous armed militias across Libya.

The real political synergism in Libya is taking place between the elected government and the larger of the different armed militias. Salafi groups, like Ansar al-Sharia, must be considered as “just another armed militia” – their strength is not dependent on their symbolic actions, such as destruction of mosques; rather it is measured upon their ability to provide political and social competition against the government. No Salafi group in Libya does at present have the ability to be such a competition, making the destruction of mosques and shrines a mere quest for positioning.

Finally, it might be too early to analyze any conclusion as to whether the destruction of mosques and shrines in Libya has been a successful way to gain position in Libya by Salafi groups. So far, the outcome has been a popular resentment as to the Salafi messages of “preventing idolatry” and “black magic”; and there have been several episodes where Salafi groups trying to wreck another mosque and shrine have been attacked and beaten up by vigilante population waiting for them to arrive at the place.

The lack of mass media propaganda institutions, as seen in Egypt, has so far prevented Salafi groups from any successful spreading of their messages outside the frames of their “fan sphere” on the Internet. It seems the destructions of mosques and shrines have not given the Salafi groups what they wanted; a firm(er) positioning in Libyan society and the necessary political and religious power to gain it.

They have not gained any political position; although there seems to be some support for their actions among members of the elected Libyan government (or perhaps at the very least: indifference as to the destructions). They have not gained any economic position, neither inside Libya nor have they raised their funding income from international Salafi investors. They have not gained any social position that matters inside the Libyan population. But they have established themselves a symbolic position as destroyers of mosques and shrines.

Conclusions

The dichotomy between two of Libya`s most powerful religious institutions is a clear indication of the ongoing power struggle in Libya in the political and religious void after the armed uprising that ousted the Jamahiriya system in 2011. The destruction of mosques and holy shrines is a symbolic battle ground between the two fractions and a place where political and religious positions are being established and new Libyan identity is to be created. The discourse on the mosque destructions also clearly shows how the verbal clash of identities in Libyan society is splitting the population into moderates and extremists.

By blowing up mosques and shrines, however, Libyan Salafis appear to have lost the discourse regarding what kind of road religion in Libya should take. Both the Libyan mass media, the majority of Libyan scholars and the population in general does not subscribe to the views of the Salafis nor their justification to destroy important parts of Libyan heritage. The discourse of the destructions of mosques and shrines in Libya is a powerful example of a failing attempt towards deliberate self-positioning.

Despite this, there is no certainty for future predictions as long as the struggle for identity and positioning is still under way in post-war Libya. But once the dust will have settled, it doesn't look like Ansar al-Sharia nor other Salafi extremists will be able to find much ground in Libya to propagate their ideology. At present they are simply lacking the necessary popular support for their causes.

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