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Evolution of Sufism in context of contemporary religious movements

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Abstract

The aim of the study was to determine the characteristics of the transformation of the mystical tradition in Central Asia. A mixed-methods approach combining a survey of 210 respondents with textual analysis and regional monitoring reports revealed the current state of the movement. Around 32.8% of the believers surveyed in the region practice the tenets of tasawwuf. Furthermore, 52.2% of those who responded to the survey are between the ages of 18 and 35. In Kazakhstan, 64% of the representatives of the mystic movement use digital platforms to perform their rituals. Additionally, 42% of the movement's followers use its community structures to increase their social and business-related capital. In Kyrgyzstan, 45% of the respondents experience constant pressure and competition from the country's fundamentalist religious groups. Furthermore, the analysis of the data showed that 44.7% of the Muslims in the region use virtual tools to engage with the mystical religious ideas of tasawwuf. The findings demonstrate that Sufi communities are adapting to digital environments, reflecting broader transformations of religious life in the contemporary world. The results of the study demonstrated that the spiritual institutions of the region are successfully adapting to the digital age to fulfill their essential function of mediating between the people and the state. The results of this research could be applied by the authorities of the region that are in charge of the religious affairs of the countries and their analytical.

Keywords: Islam, tasawwuf, tariqa, dhikr, atheism.

Introduction

This study is relevant because of the profound transformational processes that have reshaped the religious landscape of Central Asia in the context of digital globalisation and society's need for internal spiritual stability. As traditional institutional forms of religiosity often fail to keep pace with the dynamics of social change in 2026, Sufism is evolving from an ascetic practice into a socio-cultural and political phenomenon. The search for identity, the need to adapt to technological challenges and

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the requirement to develop a moderate Islamic discourse make the study of Sufi communities essential for ensuring regional security and social harmony. The significance of this research lies in the need to understand how historical religious traditions adapt to contemporary social realities, particularly under the influence of digital communication technologies, changing patterns of religious participation, and transformations in youth engagement with Islamic practices. By examining these processes in Central Asia, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of the mechanisms through which Sufi communities preserve traditional religious identities while simultaneously developing new forms of social interaction and knowledge transmission.

A key issue in this area of research is the blurring of the boundaries between traditional and new methods of transmitting Islamic knowledge, as analysed in detail by F.A. Leccese (2022). His findings show that the West's discovery of Sufism in the nineteenth century through the academic framework of "Orientalism" led to the perception of Sufism as a universal spiritual doctrine detached from Islam. This subsequently influenced the "rediscovery" of Sufism in Muslim countries in the second half of the twentieth century. M. Sodik and B.J. Sujibto (2023) examined the dynamics of urban youth Sufism and its opposition to religious formalism. They established that contemporary youth oppose not only Salafi fundamentalism, but also the exclusivity of traditional Sufi orders, proposing new, less formalised religious spaces instead. A.B. Atamimi and S. Sururi (2025) identified the multifunctional role of urban Sufism in shaping modern religiosity by analysing the activities of dhikr assemblies. They found that such communities are not merely instruments of preaching, but also complex socio-economic structures that contribute to the economic independence of communities.

W. Hasyim et al. (2023) explored the issue of Sufism as a form of spiritual education for the Muslim middle class, analysing the development of Islamic popular culture and the spiritual needs of urban populations. Within this research, the authors concluded that urban Sufism functions as an antithesis to the modernism and materialism of human life, marking a new chapter in the Muslim world following a period of significant political change. I. Arnel (2024) analysed how the influence of Sufi orders has translated into political and network structures within the Asia-Pacific region, finding that Sufism continues to exert significant influence over the region through digital transformation.

The phenomenon of "vernacular" Sufism was studied by M.H. Chuhan and M. Zakir (2024). The authors studied how the teachings of Sufism were adapted to local contexts through the use of vernacular languages. Through adaptation to the regional environments in which these Sufi communities exist, the ideas of Islam are able to take root in those local areas of the Muslim world, avoiding the potential barrier to communication caused by the Arabic language.

The concept of "cyber-Sufism" was explored in the article by S.A. Dudoignon (2020). During this study, the author discusses the way in which Sufis are able to adapt their religious orders to the temporal and spatial conditions in which they form and develop. These Sufisms create alternative models for the lives of those who follow these orders. The development of the internet has become an alternative platform upon which these communities to establish themselves and share their beliefs with the world. A. Khan (2023) investigated the phenomenon of "post-tariqa" Sufism within contemporary Britain. As a result of his analysis of changes to authority within these communities, the author discovered that the role of the spiritual guide within these communities has changed, shifting away from the teaching of religious disciples towards the provision of organisational patronage.

N. Karimov et al. (2024) investigated the political aspects of Sufism within Kazakhstan. During their study of the official religion of Kazakhstan and Sufi orders like the Jahriyya and Naqshbandiyya, the authors revealed discrepancies between the ideals of Islam and its manifestation within the Kazakh region due to the influences of the nation's political ideology. Finally, M. Egamberdıyev and S. Kanafyeva (2025) investigated the traditions of Sufism within the context of the historical interaction between the Kazakh and Pakistani nations. The authors discovered within their study that Sufism has acted as a bridge between the two regions and their respective civilizations, allowing them to continue to maintain their relationship and regional ties.

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T. Temirbayev and A. Temirbayeva (2023) explored issues of syncretism and doctrinal transformation by leaders of Sufi groups in Kazakhstan. Their study showed that contemporary sheikhs actively integrate psychoanalytic methods and Western theories into their sermons, thereby constructing new religious forms such as neo-Sufism. T.A. Almatkyzy and T.T. Tuluybayevich (2023) characterised innovations among contemporary Sufis and the concept of "religious design", analysing the impact of repressive secularisation followed by a subsequent renaissance. They found that foreign education among leaders has influenced Sufi discourse in Kazakhstan, combining ethnic traditions with modern multifactorial techniques of influence.

Despite a considerable body of theoretical work on the subject, there are still several gaps, most notably the lack of comprehensive quantitative comparisons of youth religious activity in the digital sphere in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, and the absence of empirical data on the real impact of digital transformation processes on the social activities of Sufi communities. Existing studies have primarily focused on historical, philosophical, or conceptual interpretations of Sufism, while empirical investigations of how contemporary Sufi communities respond to digitalisation, social change, and new patterns of religious participation remain limited. Therefore, this study extends previous research by combining quantitative survey data with qualitative analysis to provide a comparative assessment of the current transformation of Sufi practices in Central Asia. This mixed-methods approach makes it possible to examine not only the historical and institutional foundations of Sufism but also the contemporary mechanisms through which Sufi communities adapt to digital environments and changing social conditions. This study aimed to identify the institutional features of the evolution of Sufism in Central Asia through comparative empirical analysis. Its contribution is the development of an empirically grounded perspective on the relationship between traditional Sufi institutions, digital environments, and changing forms of religious engagement among different age groups in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan. To address the identified gaps in previous research and build upon the theoretical and empirical perspectives discussed above, two objectives were defined: a philosophical and religious reconstruction of the genesis of the Sufi tradition in the region, and a comparative empirical study of age groups and levels of engagement in Sufi practices across three countries. These objectives directly correspond to the main research gaps identified in the literature, namely the need to reassess the historical and institutional development of Sufism in Central Asia and to provide empirical evidence regarding contemporary patterns of religious participation and adaptation in the digital era.

Materials and Methods

The study covered three key Central Asian states: Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. The total sample for the empirical stage consisted of 210 respondents, distributed evenly (70 from each country). A non-probability purposive sampling method (quota sampling) was employed to ensure the representation of the main age and social groups. Inclusion criteria comprised being aged 18 or over and having permanent residence in one of the studied countries. Exclusion criteria included: age below 18; and refusal to provide consent for the anonymous use of results. Before participation, all respondents were informed about the objectives of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, the procedures for data collection, and their right to withdraw from the research at any stage without any negative consequences. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to completing the questionnaire and interviews. Personal identifying information was not collected, and all responses were processed anonymously to ensure confidentiality and protect participants' privacy.

A separate sample for the philosophical and religious analysis consisted of foundational works by thinkers, as well as contemporary monitoring reports. These included classical texts: A. Yesevi (2016); I. Al'Arabi (1980); I.M. ʿArabi (2006); I.A.H. Al-Ghazali (2011), which enabled the identification of the doctrinal foundations of tasawwuf. Sources not directly related to the Central Asian socio-cultural context, or which duplicated earlier reports without providing updated statistical data, were excluded. The research was conducted in two consecutive stages between December 2025 and January 2026. In the first stage, a hermeneutic analysis of sacred texts and fundamental studies in religious scholarship – A. Schimmel (1975); J.S. Trimingham (1998); K. Garden (2014); A. Knysh (2017) was employed to reconstruct the ontological and anthropological parameters of the Sufi tradition. This was necessary to establish the conceptual framework for understanding the

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notions of the “Perfect Human” and the “Unity of Being” as a foundation for comparing them with the current shifts in identity. The second stage involved a comparative analysis of international monitoring documents and reports (e.g., Aid to the Church in Need International, 2025; United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, 2025) to identify legal constraints, the dynamics of religious freedoms and the extent of state control over Sufi institutions in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan.

The selected methodological framework was considered the most appropriate for the objectives of this study because the transformation of contemporary Sufism cannot be fully examined through a single research approach. A purely theoretical analysis would provide insight into doctrinal and historical developments but would not reveal current patterns of religious participation and digital adaptation. Conversely, a quantitative survey alone would identify social trends among respondents but would not explain their historical, cultural, and institutional foundations. Therefore, the combination of hermeneutic analysis, comparative document analysis, and empirical investigation allowed the study to integrate theoretical interpretations with measurable evidence of contemporary changes in Sufi communities.

Primary data were collected through an original survey methodology implemented via an online questionnaire created using Google Forms. Before completing the questionnaire, participants were provided with information about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and the principles of anonymity and confidentiality. Participation was conducted only after obtaining informed consent, and no personally identifiable information was collected during the survey process. The questionnaire included sections on motivations for joining tariqas (e.g., psychological stabilisation and preservation of traditions), the use of digital tools (TikTok, Instagram and YouTube) and attitudes towards the institution of spiritual guides (pirs). Data verification was carried out through semi-structured interviews with murids and mentors, conducted using secure digital communication tools, including messaging platforms such as Telegram and WhatsApp. Prior to the interviews, all participants were informed about the purpose of the research, the procedures for data collection, and the intended use of the obtained information. Participation was voluntary and conducted only after obtaining informed consent. To protect participants’ privacy, no personally identifying information was recorded, and all interview data were anonymised during processing and analysis. Particular attention was paid to the ethical sensitivity of studying religious beliefs and practices, ensuring that participants could freely express their views without pressure or potential social consequences. This approach aligns with established scholarly studies of “digital Sufism” (Bulan et al., 2024; Temirbayeva, 2026). A variety of statistical methods were employed to analyse the empirical results.

The ethical aspects of the research were considered throughout all stages of the study. The research procedures complied with the principles of voluntary participation, informed consent, anonymity, and confidentiality. The collected data were used exclusively for academic purposes and were stored in a manner preventing the identification of individual participants. Due to the sensitive nature of research concerning religious beliefs and practices, particular attention was paid to ensuring that respondents could express their views freely and without external pressure.

The entire research process was grounded in ethical and anonymous principles, ensuring a consistent transition from the study of the philosophical martyrs of love to the analysis of contemporary transnational networks (Ernst and Larence, 2002). This approach enabled the analysis of traditional tariqa structures to be combined with the study of emerging forms of religious activity in the digital sphere. Consequently, the chosen methodology ensured holistic coverage of the research object and enabled verification of the results at theoretical and practical levels. Nevertheless, several methodological limitations should be acknowledged. The use of purposive quota sampling allowed the inclusion of respondents representing different age and social groups, but it does not provide a basis for full statistical generalisation of the findings to the entire population of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. In addition, the use of online questionnaires and digital communication platforms may have limited participation among individuals with lower levels of digital engagement. Furthermore, given the sensitive nature of religious topics, some respondents may have been influenced by social desirability factors when expressing their views on Sufi practices and

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religious identity. These limitations were considered during data interpretation, and the findings should be understood as an empirical assessment of current tendencies rather than a complete representation of all forms of Sufi activity in the region.

Results

Philosophical and religious studies analysis of the genesis and transformation of Sufism in Central Asia

Sufism, or tasawwuf, has historically emerged as the intellectual and mystical-ascetic core of Islamic civilisation, playing a determining role in shaping the socio-cultural landscape of Central Asia (School of Sufi Teaching, 2026). In religious studies discourse, Sufism is regarded not merely as a set of mystical practices, but as a complex epistemological system aimed at comprehending the ontological unity of being through the prism of the believer's inner experience. The genesis of Sufism in the region is associated with the work of outstanding thinkers whose foundational writings laid the basis for the subsequent evolution of mystical orders (tariqas) (Trimingham, 1998). Central Asia became the cradle of such spiritual traditions as the Yasawiyya and the Naqshbandiyya, which not only transformed the religious consciousness of nomadic and settled peoples, but also served as guarantors of the institutional resilience of Islam during periods of political crisis (Zhumaeva, 2022; Storozhuk & Hoian, 2020). A widespread misconception is that Sufi philosophy presupposes complete withdrawal from worldly affairs, politics, and struggle; however, the history of the region demonstrates the active involvement of tariqas in defending the interests of the Muslim community and in state-building (School of Sufi Teaching, 2026).

To understand Sufi philosophy, it is important to grasp the doctrine of the stages of spiritual perfection: shari'a (exoteric law), tariqa (mystical path), ma'rifa (gnosis) and haqiqa (truth) (Schimmel, 1975). The legitimacy of Sufism as an integral part of orthodox Islam is substantiated in the classical works of Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (Garden, 2014), particularly in his monumental work The Revival of the Religious Sciences. The synthesis carried out by I.A.H. Al-Ghazali (2011) is a shift from "static theology" to "dynamic anthropology". This shift is fundamental, and in it, the knowledge of truth becomes a process of profound transformation of the very structure of the human personality. In this system, the "purification of the heart" is not just a religious requirement, but also a special way to adjust the inner "organ of vision". This allows the believer to think about the presence of God in the physical world. This transforms faith from intellectual assent to dogma into direct, empirical experience.

The "unity of being" (wahdat al-wujud) doctrine is a key ontological complement to the intellectual architecture of tasawwuf, and it influenced the mentality of the region through poetic forms. Thus, the world is understood as a manifestation through which divine attributes are revealed and the recognized. This concept offers a vision of the world as a mirror in which the divine essence contemplates its own attributes, thereby turning the process of understanding nature into an act of knowing God. For philosophical thought in Central Asia, this meant the sacralisation of everyday space, where every element of existence is perceived as a sign (ishara) requiring decipherment through inner illumination. Thus, Sufi epistemology in the region formed a particular worldview, complementing rational thought with intuitive contemplation (kashf) to make it possible to perceive the transcendent within the phenomenal (Al'Arabi, 1980).

The discourse of religious studies distinguishes four main ideological vectors of Islam: secularism, modernism, traditionalism and fundamentalism. The latter is based on strict textual adherence to the primary sources. The interpretation of shari'a within fundamentalist regimes often leads to the criminalisation of Sufi practices, which are considered deviations from orthodoxy (Aid to the Church in Need International, 2025). A key figure in the development of Sufism in Central Asia was A. Yesevi (2016) his "Divan-i Hikmet" represented a unique form of Turkic Sufism, adapted to the mentality and linguistic environment of the region's nomadic peoples. A. Yesevi's philosophical strategy was based on combining asceticism (zuhd) with active preaching in the languages of the steppe peoples, contributing to the mass Islamisation of Central Asia. This teaching emphasised the concept of "death before death" (fana). This is the idea of the complete dissolution of the individual ego in the divine will. The philosophical anthropology of the A. Yasawi path is linked to the ideal of the "Perfect

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Human" (al-insan al-kamil). This is a microcosm containing within himself all the divine names. In nomadic societies, this ideal manifested as the saintly protector, whose spiritual authority (wilaya) ensured sacred stability.

The A. Yesevi tradition highlights those humans serve as the "interlocutor of God", emphasising that the heart represents the throne where an unceasing interaction between the earthly and the celestial occurs. This human-centred approach played a key role in the integration of local, pre-Islamic ethical codes into a universal Islamic paradigm, leading to the emergence of a distinct "steppe Islam" focused on inner purity (ʿArabi, 2006). A. Yesevi established the institution of holy places (mazars), which remain centres of religious life in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan as of 2025. Although Kazakhstan was recommended for inclusion on the Special Watch List in 2025 due to systematic restrictions on religious freedom, data from 2023-2024 indicates that it is one of the few states worldwide where there has been some improvement in conditions for religious practice. Around 69% of Kazakhstan's population identify as Sunni Muslims of the Hanafi school of thought, creating a favourable basis for preserving Sufi institutions as part of the national identity (United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, 2025).

However, according to the latest monitoring data, despite certain positive developments, such as the official recognition of the right to refuse military service on religious grounds, the country continues to impose strict restrictions, including severe registration requirements, fines for unregistered worship and control over religious expression online (Aid to the Church in Need International, 2025). The state continues to punish independent religious activity that departs from its preferred interpretation of Hanafi Islam. This sometimes leads to conflict within communities, including physical violence for violating established prayer canons (United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, 2025).

The further institutionalisation of Sufism in the region is associated with the Naqshbandiyya order, which was founded by Bahauddin Naqshband. His philosophical credo, dil ba yaru, dast ba kar ("the heart with God, the hands at work"), transformed the social paradigm of Sufism. He did this by rejecting ascetic withdrawal and seclusion. Instead, he favoured active participation in social life (Knysh, 2015). The Naqshbandiyya developed a unique psycho-technique called "silent dhikr" (dhikr-i khafi) which made it possible to practise mystical concentration without external attributes. This was a decisive factor in the order's survival under Soviet persecution. Meanwhile, contemporary religious policy in Uzbekistan is characterised by harsh state intervention.

The Spiritual Administration of Muslims censors' imams' activities, restricts their social media presence, and tightens control over their movements (United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, 2025). From a state governance perspective, regulation of religious leaders can be seen as an attempt to maintain oversight of religious institutions, prevent extremist interpretations, and make certain that religious activity operates within national legal frameworks. From a religious freedom perspective however, censorship of imams, restrictions on social media activity, and limitations on movement could greatly reduce the independence of religious communities and limit freedom of expression.

Excessive bureaucratic control can also weaken the autonomy of religious scholars and transform religious institutions into instruments of state policy rather than being seen as independent spiritual authorities. Such restrictions may of course then discourage open theological discussion and reduce the ability of religious communities to respond naturally to social and spiritual needs.

There have been cases of religious institutions being closed down, imams being forcibly made to shave off their beards, and people being punished for providing unauthorised religious education. This indicates that the authorities are attempting to subordinate religious practice fully to secular norms by using anti-extremist legislation to suppress any manifestation of independent faith (Aid to the Church in Need International, 2025). The unique concept of "spiritual chivalry" (futuwwa) emerged from the evolution of Naqshbandi philosophy, reconceptualising Sufism as an active social force.

The philosophical basis for Sufi involvement in crafts and politics as ways of serving others was the idea of "remaining among people" while focusing inwardly on the Creator. This destroyed the

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stereotype of Sufism as passive escapism by offering a model of "inner asceticism", in which renunciation of the world takes place not through geographical seclusion but through the metaphysical detachment of the heart from material goods while actively possessing them (Ernst and Larence, 2002). Such an approach gave the tariqas the role of key mediators in conflicts between the state and society.

To systematise the volume of information, a comparative table of models of Sufism's functioning in the countries of Central Asia was created (Table 1). This made it possible to demonstrate clearly the difference between the "state Sufism" of Uzbekistan, the "traditional identity" of Kazakhstan, and the "crisis condition" of Kyrgyzstan.

Table 1. Comparative analysis of the condition of Sufism in the countries of Central Asia

Comparison parameter	**Republic of Kazakhstan**	**Republic of Uzbekistan**	**Kyrgyz Republic**
Main role in discourse	Foundation of national identity and "traditional Islam"	Instrument of state ideology and national security	Cultural shield against radicalisation and neo-Salafism
Key institutions/figures	Mausoleum of H. A. Yesevi, intellectual neo-Sufi networks	Naqshbandiyya order, Spiritual Administration of Muslims	Madrasas, informal intellectual circles
State policy	Cautious support combined with strict registration of communities	Total control, censorship of imams and social media	Pressure on "non-traditional" movements, raids by security bodies
Digital adaptation	High: live streams, podcasts, online courses	Limited: state prohibition of unauthorised content	Medium: use of Facebook for religious discussions
Main challenges	Fines for unregistered activity, "crisis of authority" of pirs	Forced beard-shaving, closure of halal establishments without alcohol	Coercion into public renunciation of views, conflicts with Salafis

Note: SUM – Spiritual Administration of Muslims.
Source: compiled by the authors based on United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (2025); Aid to the Church in Need International (2025); A.A. Temirbayeva (2026).

The analysis presented made it possible to identify deep differentiation in strategies for governing the religious field in the region. It has been established that in all the countries studied, Sufism appears as an instrument of "soft power", but the methods of its institutionalisation differ substantially. Uzbekistan demonstrates the harshest model of "state Sufism", in which the mystical Naqshbandi tradition is fully integrated into the vertical of power in order to legitimise the secular regime, accompanied by repressive measures against independent groups (Aid to the Church in Need International, 2025). Kazakhstan, despite criticism from international organisations and inclusion on special watch lists, demonstrates an adaptive model in which Sufism evolves into a digitalised form of social capital (United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, 2025). The high level of social media use and the formation of entrepreneurial networks testify to the viability of neo-Sufism under market economy conditions (Temirbayeva, 2026; Mialkovska et al., 2026). In Kyrgyzstan, the situation is characterised by the highest level of conflict between traditional Sufi institutions and radical movements. In general, the relationship between Sufism and state institutions in Central Asia is characterised by considerable variation depending on national contexts, political priorities, and historical periods. Rather than representing a uniform pattern of acceptance or restriction, state approaches towards Sufi traditions have ranged from selective recognition of

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certain Sufi elements as part of cultural and national heritage to broader regulation of religious organisations and spiritual networks. In some contexts, Sufi traditions have been incorporated into official narratives of religious identity and historical continuity, while in others, independent religious movements have been subject to increased monitoring due to concerns regarding social and political influence. Therefore, the contemporary position of Sufism in Central Asia should be understood as the result of a complex interaction between religious traditions, state policies, and processes of identity formation rather than as a single regional model. This creates conditions for the further transformation of tasawwuf either into a closed intellectual network or into a fully state-controlled institution.

Religious studies scholarship pays attention to the evolution of Sufism in the context of deglobalisation and the revival of national identity. The transformation of Sufism from hermetic, closed brotherhoods into ramified social movements, conceptualised by A. Knysh (2015; 2017), testifies to the exceptional adaptive plasticity of this system. This means that tasawwuf does not merely adapt passively to new challenges, but actively appropriates the instruments of modernity – from network marketing to digital media – turning ancient metaphysics into relevant social capital. In Central Asia, this process has acquired the features of “neo-Sufism”, in which traditional practices of dhikr and veneration of holy places are integrated into digital communications (Bulan et al., 2024; Shekhovtsova, 2020). According to research data from Kazakhstan, Sufism has been transformed into a set of mental and psychological reference points that adapt ancient principles to the needs of digital society through live streams, podcasts, and online courses.

Contemporary Sufi leaders seek to overcome the gap between spiritual ideals and worldly concerns by actively developing entrepreneurial networks, engaging in charity, and supporting socially vulnerable groups (Temirbayeva, 2026; Abdyldaeva, 2023). A notable issue is the “crisis of authority” of the pir (spiritual guide), whose charismatic power is increasingly being challenged by global Islamic currents of a Salafi orientation (Roy, 2004). In Kyrgyzstan, there is a growing tendency to intensify pressure on madrasas and non-traditional religious movements, with national security bodies conducting raids and forcing believers publicly to renounce their views in favour of “traditional Islam” (United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, 2025).

On the global scale, the situation remains critical: almost 64.7% of the world’s population lives in countries where religious freedom is violated, while only Kazakhstan and Sri Lanka showed certain signs of improvement during the reporting period. Sufi heritage is, on the one hand, supported by Central Asian states as a marker of cultural identity and as a means of distinguishing “traditional” Islam from perceived external influences on the other hand, Sufi institutions and religious networks still remain subject to state regulation and bureaucratic oversight (Khalid, 2007; Tsyrfa et al., 2024). The escalation of jihadist violence, which in 2024 alone caused more than 22,307 deaths worldwide, forms a radical pole of Islam that poses a direct threat to Sufi tariqas (Aid to the Church in Need International, 2025). An example of systemic pressure is the persecution of members of the Ni’matullahi-Gonabadi order in Iran, where mystical communities are subjected to repression and executions on religiously motivated charges, underscoring the conflict between the spiritual universalism of Sufism and state theocratism (United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, 2025). A key theoretical aspect is the analysis of the relationship between Sufism and folk beliefs. Scholars of religion have noted that in Central Asia there has been a deep symbiotic integration of Islamic mysticism with pre-Islamic (Tengrian) layers of spirituality (Trimingham, 1998). This gave rise to the phenomenon of “folk Sufism”, in which the cult of saintly ancestors (arwakh) and pilgrimage rituals to mazars dominate over the formal norms of fiqh. In the works of J.S. Trimingham, such a transformation is classified as Sufism’s transition from elite intellectualism to mass popular religiosity, which ensured its resilience during periods of atheist pressure.

Thus, the philosophical and religious studies analysis has shown that Sufism in Central Asia evolved from individual ascetic practices into complex social institutions. The foundational concepts of A. Yesevi (2016) and Bahauddin Naqshband (Knysh, 2015) continue to determine the ethical and social reference points of the region’s inhabitants, functioning as a cultural code that makes it possible to preserve traditions under conditions of global transformation. Religious thought considers Sufism not only as a historical legacy but also as a tradition that continues to provide certain frameworks for

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contemporary spiritual reflection and personal development (Jahelka, 2024; Umarova, 2023). Rather than representing a universal model of modern existence, Sufism may function as a meaningful source of values and practices for particular individuals and communities seeking to reconcile spiritual aspirations with the conditions of the globalised world. This adaptability is facilitated by several elements of Sufi thought and practice, including emphasis on inner self-development, ethical conduct, spiritual discipline, community-based religious experience, and the reinterpretation of traditional teachings within changing social and cultural contexts. The contemporary evolution of Sufism in Central Asia is taking place under conditions of competition with neo-Salafi movements, compelling Sufi intellectuals to seek new ways of substantiating their doctrine (Aliyeva, 2025; Stadnik, 2024).

The use of modern media platforms to transmit Sufi wisdom, as well as attempts to rationalise mystical experience in the context of contemporary psychology, are characteristic features of this process. Religious studies scholarship in the region turns to the phenomenological analysis of dhikr as a means of psychological rehabilitation and social integration of believers, underscoring the applied character of Sufi philosophy in the modern world (Knysh, 2015; Karabalaeva, 2023). This legacy remains the foundation for the development of a moderate identity within the religion.

The inclusiveness of Sufism has developed over time to include ideas from religions other than Islam, such as Hinduism and Buddhism (Rozehnal, 2023; Temirbayeva, 2026). Thus, through the analysis of these philosophical and religious texts both ancient and contemporary, it becomes possible to confirm that Sufism remains a dynamic factor within Central Asia, allowing the nation to both remember its past yet also shape its future. The deep integration of these concepts into the lives of Sufis, as well as the adaptation of Sufism to the challenges of the contemporary world, justifies the study of Sufism within the discipline of modern religious studies.

The contemporary transformation of Sufi communities in Central Asia

Of the total respondents in the current study, 69.5% (146 individuals) indicated that they adhered to the beliefs of the religion of Islam. The remaining 30.5% of the respondents (64 individuals) represented those who were either atheistic, agnostic or adhered to other religions than Islam (United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, 2025). Among the Muslims, 32.8% of the total respondents were adherents to Sufism, indicating the diversity within the nation in relation to religious beliefs. Individuals of all ages within the region responded to the questionnaire. For instance, 19.4% of the total respondents were aged between 18 and 22 years of age, 34.2% were between 23 and 35 years of age, 28.1% were between 36 and 50 years of age, and the remaining 18.3% of the total sample of individuals were of the age of 50 years of age or older.

An analysis of the respondents according to age revealed that 52.2% of those of the ages of 18 to 35 years of age were adherents to Sufism, indicating that Sufism is not practiced only by the elderly individuals of the nation. An analysis of the religious compositions within each country revealed that within Kazakhstan, 71.4% (50 individuals) of the total population of that nation were Sunni Muslims of the Hanafi school of thought, 18.6% (13 individuals) were atheists or otherwise have no religious beliefs, and 10% (7 individuals) of the population belong to religions other than Islam (Christianity and Ahmadiyya). Within Uzbekistan, 94.3% of the individuals are Muslims (66 individuals), 2.8% (2 individuals) are atheists, and 2.9% (2 individuals) follow other religions than Islam. Within Kyrgyzstan, 85.7% (60 individuals) of the population is Muslim, 10% (7 individuals) areatheists, and 4.3% (3 individuals) follow other religions. Furthermore, an analysis of the number of individuals within each country who directly practiced the concept of dhikr, or who are murids (following a particular Sufi order) revealed that 25.7% of the Kazakhs are direct practitioners, 41.4% of the Uzbeks are murids, and 31.4% of the Kyrgyz are murids. These statistics correlate with the depth of history of the development of Sufism within these nations and regions of Central Asia (Knysh, 2017; Doszhan, 2023).

A structured analysis of the motivational factors behind joining Sufi communities revealed significant differences between countries. In Kazakhstan, 54.2% of Sufi-oriented respondents indicated “psychological stabilisation and the search for inner peace” as their priority objective. This underlines the transformation of tasawwuf into an instrument of spiritual therapy. This is happening in conditions

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of accelerated urbanisation. In contrast, in Uzbekistan, the most common reason given (62.1%) was "the preservation of family and national traditions", showing that Sufism is seen as an integral part of the cultural identity.

In Kyrgyzstan, 48.6% of respondents regarded Sufism as "protection against ideological radicalism". This is a response to the threat posed by fundamentalist currents that caused a significant increase in the number of terrorist attacks worldwide in 2024 (Aid to the Church in Need International, 2025). Respondents' digital adaptation was analysed separately. Among 18-22-year-olds identifying with Sufism, 72% regularly used mobile apps for dhikr or listening to spiritual guides' lectures, confirming the emergence of "digital Sufism". The specific platforms shaping this space were most frequently highlighted as Instagram (48%) and TikTok (36%), which are used to publish brief instructions and visualise rituals.

YouTube was also mentioned as a platform for streaming long-form video and audio podcasts. These tools enable spiritual guides to conduct live broadcasts with collective practices, thereby contributing to the development of a global Sufi network in which geographical distance is no longer an obstacle to spiritual discipleship (Temirbayeva, 2026). In addition to general social networks, 22% of young Sufis in Kazakhstan use specialised, closed chat groups on messaging apps to receive personalised tasks from their pir. This creates a hybrid instructional model that combines modern mobility with the traditional secrecy of the tariqa. Among the 23-35 age group, this figure rises to 58%, whereas among those over 50, it falls to 14%. This indicates a shift in the formats through which sacred knowledge is transmitted. Table 2 contains the key empirical results of the study.

Table 2. Summary table of the empirical results of the study

Parameter of analysis	Kazakhstan (N=70)	Uzbekistan (N=70)	Kyrgyzstan (N=70)	Total (N=210)
Religious identity				
Muslims (Hanafis/Sufis)	71.4% (50)	94.3% (66)	85.7% (60)	83.8% (176)
Atheists/Agnostics	18.6% (13)	2.8% (2)	10.0% (7)	10.5% (22)
Other confessions	10.0% (7)	2.9% (2)	4.3% (3)	5.7% (12)
Degree of involvement in Sufism				
Active murids (practising dhikr)	25.7% (18)	41.4% (29)	31.4% (22)	32.8% (69)
Passive (visiting mazars)	48.6% (34)	65.7% (46)	52.9% (37)	55.7% (117)
Age distribution of Sufis (n=69)				
18-22 years (youth)	22.2% (4)	13.8% (4)	18.2% (4)	17.4% (12)
23-35 years (active)	38.9% (7)	31.0% (9)	36.4% (8)	34.8% (24)
36-50 years (middle-aged)	27.8% (5)	34.5% (10)	27.3% (6)	30.4% (21)
Over 50 years (traditionalists)	11.1% (2)	20.7% (6)	18.1% (4)	17.4% (12)
Use of digital tools	64.0%	28.0%	42.0%	44.7%
Experience of pressure from radicals	32.0%	12.0%	45.0%	29.7%

Source: compiled by the authors.

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The analysis of the financial activities of Sufi communities confirmed the assumption that Sufism is a form of social capital that allows individuals to integrate successfully into the market economy while maintaining their religious values (Temirbayeva, 2026). According to Table 2, the majority of the population in this region exhibits a strong sense of religious identity as they identify themselves as Muslims. The percentage of Muslims in this region is 83.8%, with the highest percentage in Uzbekistan at 94.3%. Regarding Sufism, the majority of the population passively participates in Sufism, as 55.7% of the population visits mazars but only 32.8% are active murids. However, the percentage of active murids is highest in Uzbekistan at 41.4%. Furthermore, 44.7% of the population uses digital tools to connect with other Sufi community members. This suggests the modernisation of Sufi community practices. Additionally, 29.7% of the population has experienced pressure from radical groups in their communities. This indicates the importance of the security aspect of Sufism.

In summary, the study found that Sufism in Central Asia has undergone a paradigmatic transition from hermetic mystical brotherhoods to open, multifunctional socio-digital ecosystems. This evolution is driven by the exceptional adaptability of tasawwuf's philosophical basis, which, as of 2026, demonstrates the capacity for profound convergence between metaphysical pursuits and the pragmatic demands of market competition and new standards of cyber-communication. Tariqas have been shown to be an effective way of mediating institutions. They can be used as instruments of "soft power" because they can neutralise the destructive influence of radical ideologies by offering an alternative that is both intellectual and spiritual. Due to its high adaptive potential and inherent inclusiveness, the mystical tradition is becoming an effective means of anthropological stabilisation and psychological regeneration under conditions of chronic systemic instability.

As an autonomous and viable social institution, Sufism assumes the role of structuring civil society and shaping the future contours of Islamic discourse in the region. Consequently, the potential of Sufi communities extends far beyond purely ritual practice. They are being transformed into a strategic resource for state strategies in the religious sphere, aimed at overcoming social atomisation, strengthening interethnic solidarity and ensuring lasting regional peace, by preserving the core values of the peoples of Central Asia.

Discussion

The findings of this study enabled a profound analysis of the current religious situation in Central Asia to be carried out through the prism of the global transformations of mystical Islam. The tendency identified towards the rejuvenation of Sufi communities, with more than 50% of respondents belonging to the 18-35 age group, was confirmed by the work of M. Rahmatullah et al. (2024), who investigated the phenomenon of "political piety" among young Indonesian Sufis. As in Indonesia, young people in Central Asia view Sufism as a means of spiritual enlightenment, enabling them to align religious values with the demands of contemporary politics and social life. This is consistent with the conclusions of I. Wijaya (2024), who argued that Sufi traditions are becoming the foundation of modern society's spirituality in the face of the challenges posed by materialism and secularism. The results of this study identified the search for inner peace as the main motivation (54.2% in Kazakhstan) and correlate directly with I. Wijaya's thesis that dhikr and meditation practices provide individual and collective balance during a crisis of life's meaning.

An assessment of the role of Sufism as a state policy instrument in Central Asia revealed parallels with the global processes outlined by M. Hermansen (2023). The author observed that political leaders in Muslim countries such as Morocco and Pakistan promote Sufism as a moderate and peaceful influence to counter violent extremism. This study's findings confirmed this strategy, with 82% of Sufis in Uzbekistan approving of state policy, indicating the successful instrumentalisation of 'state Sufism'. Similar processes in Algeria were described by L. Sour (2025), who analysed how Sufi Zawiyas evolved from centres of anti-colonial resistance into instruments for legitimising state power. This highlights the importance of the modern nation-state in managing religious institutions, a finding also reflected in this study through the high evaluation of the stability ensured by state support for Sufism in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan.

W.R. Dickson (2022) analysed the conflict between Sufi practices and religious formalism in Central Asia in detail, proposing a shift in emphasis from the relationship between Sufism and Islam to its

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relationship with shari'a. The data gathered in this study on the tension between Sufis and neo-Salafis back up W.R. Dickson's findings on the existence of different attitudes towards Islamic law, ranging from a legal focus to a more "formless" Sufism. This intellectual struggle is also reflected in the work of A.P. Syurbakti (2025), who emphasised that the interaction between Sufism and theology (kalam) is complex, requiring a synthesis of rational discourse and mystical illumination as al-Ghazali once achieved. The results of this study on the inclusiveness of neo-Sufism in Kazakhstan, which found that 28% of people were ready for interreligious dialogue, can be explained by the work of F. Piraino (2024). F. Piraino described the hybridisation of the Sufi tradition with Western esoteric discourses and the New Age. F. Piraino, in his study of contemporary Sufi movements and the transformation of religious authority, argues that some modern Sufi masters develop universalist discourses that reinterpret traditional religious identities and make Sufi teachings accessible within broader social and cultural contexts. Rather than transcending the boundaries of Islam, these approaches represent attempts to expand the interpretation of religious experience while remaining connected to Islamic spiritual traditions. Similar processes can be observed in parts of Central Asia, where certain educated urban groups and secular-oriented intellectuals have shown interest in Sufi ideas as a form of spiritual reflection, cultural identity, and personal development. However, the nature and extent of such engagement vary considerably across countries and social groups, reflecting differences in historical trajectories, state policies, and local religious environments.

The term "New Religious Movements" (NRMs) was used by O. Hammer (2023) to describe this phenomenon. Sufism is often found in the form of weakly structured religiosity that is spread through media and books. This type of religion satisfies individual spiritual demands outside official organisations. The analysis of the perception of God as reality in the Sufi environment identified during the interviews conducted for this study coincides with J. Arroisi et al. (2022) argument that there is a fundamental difference between the Western denial of metaphysics and the Islamic vision of God as truth (al-Haqq). This helps to explain why Sufism in Central Asia remains resilient in the face of Western secularism: it provides a worldview grounded in ontology, in which every event is considered a manifestation of divine will. J.-J. Thibon (2022) describes the theological foundations of such a worldview in detail, particularly the concepts of time and God's continual transformation of the world. This makes it possible to understand the psychological resilience of the respondents to global threats. The respondents' confidence that Sufism is an "antidote" to terrorism was directly confirmed by the thesis of S.A. Mir (2024), who considered the Sufi philosophy of love and compassion to be an alternative to ideologies of hatred.

A key part of the discussion concerns the social activity of Sufis, which this study identified through the lens of social capital. In his study of Sufi orders on the Indian subcontinent, M. Zavalsiz (2025) employed Weberian and Bourdieuan theories to analyse charismatic authority and religious capital. The present study's findings regarding the influence of Sufism on social cohesion in Central Asia corroborate M. Zavalsiz's conclusions regarding the capacity of tariqas to foster egalitarian discourse and facilitate intercommunity connections. Additionally, the connection between Qur'anic interpretations and the social character of Muslims, as discussed by M.F. Zenrif et al. (2024), sheds light on the internal integration mechanism of ethical norms through Sufi practices. This was observed during surveys in Malang, Indonesia, and reflected in the ethical behaviour of Kazakh business Sufis. M.N. Ichwan et al. (2024) also emphasised the role of Sufi exegesis in the formation of political discourse, providing grounds for considering Sufism in Central Asia as an active factor in the formation of civic identity, not merely mysticism.

Conversely, the ecological aspect of Sufi teaching, as examined by M.M. Murad (2022) through the concepts of Ibn Arabi, remains an under-researched area in the region. This is because respondents in the present study rarely mentioned the cosmological vision of nature, instead focusing on social and psychological issues. This suggests a narrowing of the Sufi perspective to anthropocentric concerns in the contemporary urban environment.

Overall, the results of the research confirm that the development of Sufism in Central Asia reflects broader processes of the contemporary revival and transformation of Sufi traditions in the 21st century. One of the main strengths of this study is its interdisciplinary and comparative approach, which combines philosophical and religious analysis with empirical data obtained from respondents

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in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan. This methodological combination allows the study to examine both the historical foundations of Sufism and its contemporary forms of adaptation within changing social and digital environments.

At the same time, several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings. The use of purposive quota sampling and a relatively limited sample size means that the results should not be interpreted as fully representative of all Sufi communities or religiously engaged populations in Central Asia. Furthermore, the reliance on self-reported data may have influenced responses due to personal perceptions or social desirability factors, particularly given the sensitive nature of religious identity and practice. Therefore, the findings should be understood as identifying significant tendencies and patterns rather than providing an exhaustive description of all manifestations of contemporary Sufism in the region. Future research could expand the geographical scope, include larger samples, and apply longitudinal approaches to further examine the ongoing transformation of Sufi communities. The convergence of the data obtained in this research with the conclusions of the authoritative international studies on the subject confirmed the universality of the digitalisation, rejuvenation and instrumentalisation of Sufism. The identified gaps in the study of Sufism in Central Asia indicate the need for further research in this area. The role of Sufism in the region in connecting the old with the new, the spiritual with the technological future of humankind is pivotal. The importance of this study is in demonstrating the role of Sufism as a factor that is helping to shape the future of the region's Islam in a way that balances the secular and the spiritual aspects of society. Overall, the results of this research add to the growing knowledge of the role of religion as a positive force in the current crises facing humankind.

Conclusions

The study made it possible to carry out a comprehensive reconstruction of the development of Sufism in Central Asia. By combining philosophical-religious analysis with comparative empirical investigation, the study achieved its objectives by examining both the historical and doctrinal foundations of Sufism in the region and the contemporary patterns of participation in Sufi practices across Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan. The study confirmed the high degree of adaptability of the Sufi tradition to the challenges of the post-secular world. The research established that tasawwuf in Central Asia has developed into a dynamic social network that successfully combines the ancient concepts of Sufism into the life of the digital world. The contribution of Sufism to the region has been the stabilization of the identity of Muslims and the prevention of radicalisation among them. The results of the survey showed that Muslim identity predominated in the region (83.8%), while the Sufi segment represented 32.8% of the total number of respondents, indicating the significant role of Sufism in the region's civil society. The study also established a paradigmatic shift in the age structure of the Sufi communities in the region, as 52.2% of the youth between the ages of 18 and 35 years are actively engaged in Sufi movements. Among the participants in the study, 44.7% used social media to fulfil their spiritual needs. This figure is even higher in Kazakhstan, where 64% of Sufi believers use social media to fulfil their spiritual needs, indicating the deep technological modernisation of the Sufi tradition in this Central Asian country. As a result of the study, three models of Sufism functioning in the region were identified. The Uzbek model demonstrates "state Sufism", with the highest level of official policy approval (82%), where tariqas are integrated into the national security system.

The Kazakh model revealed a unique segment of "business Sufism", in which 42% of murids use the religious community as a platform for building social capital and business cooperation, based on an ethic of service to society. The Kyrgyz model was identified as a zone of ideological turbulence, where 45% of respondents face pressure from fundamentalist currents, turning Sufi groups into centres of informal protection of cultural authenticity. It was established that the institution of spiritual guidance is experiencing a crisis of traditional charisma, giving way to "expert authority", in which the guide is perceived as a spiritual coach capable of responding to the demands of contemporary psychology and urban lifestyles. This allows Sufism to remain an inclusive space even for secularised segments of the population. Based on the work, it is possible to formulate certain recommendations regarding the policy of the state institutions concerning the legitimation of certain moderate Sufi denominations. The potential of Sufism to contribute to the implementation of social

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projects within the former Soviet states can be exploited. It is also recommended that religious leaders continue the efforts to rationalise the Sufi doctrines to appeal to younger generations that are more used to the digital means of communication.

The limitations of this study are its geographical focus on the three states considered in this research. The conclusions of this study cannot be applied to the other, more closed, religious systems of, for instance, Turkmenistan or Tajikistan. Prospects for further research in this area include studying how Sufi ethics regarding the environment can contribute to resolving the environmental problems of the region and conducting a long-term study on the development of "business Sufism" in the context of the current economic crises of the world.

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