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# Internal and External Toleration of the *Tariqa Alawiyya* Towards Conversions to Shi'ism and Salafism

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### ABSTRACT

Studies on the *Ba'alawi*, a clan hailing from the Hadhramaut valley in Southern Yemen who claim to be descendants of the Prophet Muhammad, tend to discuss their association with the Sufi pathway known as the *Tariqa Alawiyya* and its influence on not only the Hadhrami society but also the Malay world. The *Ba'alawi* has successfully propagated their brand of Islam which is rooted in Sunni-Shafi'i beliefs in the Malay world, as evident from the various Islamic rituals that Muslims in the region take part in which has its origins in the *Tariqa Alawiyya*. However, Muslims have been increasingly exposed to other forms of Islam such as Salafism and Shi'ism, resulting in the *Tariqa Alawiyya* having to vie for its legitimate place in the Islamic ideological battleground. Resultantly, many of the members of the *Tariqa Alawiyya* have moved from their autochthonous belief system to Shi'ism or Salafism. By reviewing the books either recommended or borrowed from 45 *Ba'alawi* individuals from Indonesia, Singapore and Malaysia on the *Tariqa Alawiyya*, this article seeks to understand the *Tariqa Alawiyya* views towards other belief systems and its perspective towards converts out of its path. Utilising Spinner-Halev's model of religious toleration, this paper argues that though the *Tariqa Alawiyya* is externally tolerant and inclusive, welcoming of other belief systems into the fold of Islam, it is internally intolerant and exclusive, admonishing and proscribing its *Ba'alawi* adherents from converting out of the path. By doing so, the *Tariqa Alawiyya* ensures its continued preservation as a belief system in Islam.

## 1. Introduction

In 2007, Yusuf Al-Qaradawi, chairman of the International Union of Muslim Scholars (IUMS), shocked the Muslim world. He had taken the opportunity to condemn Shi'ite religious tenets and berate Iran for its proselytization mission in Sudan and Egypt during the *Rapprochement Among the Schools of Fiqh* conference in Doha, Qatar [30]. This event seemed to be a continuation of his criticisms in 2006 when he claimed that Shi'ites were using the Hezbollah win against Israel to convert Sunnis in Egypt to Shi'ism. Sunni reproval towards Shi'ism like that of Al-Qaradawi's is not something new. It had begun very early in Islamic history extending to the later period of Islamic empires such

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as the Ottomans and remains salient in the modern period today [2,44]. Shi'ites have then face discrimination and persecution by various ulama throughout the centuries, many of which were restrained from labelling the group as infidels curbed by the Sunni emphasis on inclusivity [44].

Nevertheless, what was surprising about Al-Qaradawi's case was that he was not known previously for his anti-Shi'ite stance. For years, he had advocated ecumenical rapprochement (*taqrib*) between Sunnism and Shi'ism, stating that the disjuncture between the two were minor (*fu'ru*) jurisprudential issues. So invested was he in rapprochement that he appointed the Shi'ite Ayatollah, Muhammad Ali Tashkiri, as one his deputies in IUMS. So liberal was he in his approach towards other Islamic belief systems that he received criticisms from a large swath of the Salafi brethren [36]. Yet, he had stood firm against these criticisms for years. However, his opinion took a drastic turn as a response towards the "Shi'a surge" or *al-"madd al-Shi'"* [sic] in the Middle East (Elad-Altman, 2007: 1) [30]. The supposed increase in conversions from Sunnism to Shi'ism taking place around the Middle East had raised alarms amongst Sunni Muslim leaders in the region, including himself. This then became the impetus for him to strengthen his resolve against Shi'ism. Evidently, the change in his stance was triggered by the spectre of mass Sunni conversions to Shi'ism. Therefore, his willingness towards rapprochement with Shi'ism was compounded upon Shi'ites *staying in their lane* and not converting people. Such an approach could no longer be employed once they tried to bring Sunnis into Shi'ism.

Consequently, Al-Qaradawi's stance can be divided into two. Firstly, he had a specific position towards other belief systems in Islam. Secondly, he took a different position on conversions towards conducted by other belief systems in Islam. As an important religious figure in the Islamic world, Al-Qaradawi's position towards Shi'ism provides an exemplary fodder for the main thesis of this paper. The *Ba'alawi*, members of an Arab community from the Hadhrami valley in Southern Yemen, have traditionally been seen as adherents of the Sunni-Sufi brotherhood known as the *Tariqa Alawiyya*. However, they have also played an important part in shaping the increased trajectory of various belief systems within Islam including Salafism and Shi'ism not only in their homeland but also in the Malay world. As such, there has been a recent flourishing of studies [refer to the works within the volume edited by [34] and [47] that describe the *Ba'alawi* as not only converting *to* but as the catalyst *for* the increase in conversions to Shi'ism and Salafism in the Malay world, one of which is the Ph.D. thesis that this paper is based on. Their influence on the growth of Salafism and Shi'ism then meant that they have experienced conversions outside of their *tariqa*. This paper then takes its inspiration from the short summary of Al-Qaradawi's approach towards other belief systems in Islam first outlined in its exordium. As such, this paper is then divided into two aims. It aims to understand the stance of the *Tariqa Alawiyya* towards other belief systems within Islam that has come to increasingly gain influence on the *Ba'alawi*. It then proceeds with looking at the *Tariqa Alawiyya* responses towards conversions of the *Ba'alawi* to other belief systems.

In order to present this, this paper first outlines a short overview of the *Ba'alawi* and its *tariqa*, the *Tariqa Alawiyya*. Then it includes literature that discusses the *Ba'alawi* relationship with other belief systems, particularly Shi'ism and Salafism. It highlights how these two belief systems represent a threat to the *Tariqa Alawiyya*. This paper then identifies the *Tariqa Alawiyya* position on other belief systems in Islam and conversions to these other belief systems by the *Ba'alawi*. In other to explore this, this paper proposes for the use of Spinner-Halev's [66] model of internal and external toleration. After a short exposition of the methodology used in the study, this paper argues that whilst the *Tariqa Alawiyya* is externally tolerant in embracing other belief systems as part of Islam, it is internally intolerant towards the conversions of its adherents, especially the *Ba'alawi*, to these other belief systems. By adopting this model, the *Tariqa Alawiyya* then ensured its continued saliency as an Islamic belief system despite having its position increasingly challenged. Since this paper

represents an exploratory study, it concludes with several propositions for future study to further develop the thesis presented.

### 2.1 *The Ba'alawi and The Tariqa Alawiyya*

Another key figure within the Islamic world apart from Al-Qaradawi is a man living in the barren desert of the Hadhramaut valley in South Yemen, Habib<sup>†</sup> Umar bin Hafiz. Habib Umar bin Hafiz has become one of the most influential Muslims in the world, being anointed with the top spot in 2024 by The Muslim 500, an annual publication listing the most influential Muslims in the world [64]. His influence radiates from *Darul Mustofa*, an institute of religious high learning which he founded in 1993. This school became a popular institution for students around the world especially in the countries within the Malay region such as Indonesia, Singapore and Malaysia. In fact, the school was founded for the very reason of Indonesians wanting to study under Habib Umar's tutelage [51]. Alumni from the school have then set up *Muwasala* which ensured the further perpetuation of his sermons and religious teachings especially online through various social media platforms where his reach number in the millions [64].

The school, together with most other institutions in the Hadhramaut, promulgates a specific type of Sufi Islam called the *Tariqa Alawiyya*. Having been born there, the *Tariqa Alawiyya* is a Sufi brotherhood indigenous to the Hadhramaut valley. While the term *tariqa* (pl. *turuq*) means Sufi brotherhood or spiritual pathway, the term *Alawiyya* is the patronymic derivative from the *Ba'alawi*, a tribe of the valley which Habib Umar belongs to [61]. The *Ba* in *Ba 'Alawi* is a Hadhrami derivative meaning *Bani* or progeny in English. Alawi is the grandson of a migrant from Basra, Iraq to Hadhramaut named Ahmad ibn 'Isa al-Muhajir (d. 956), a man who traced his lineage to the Prophet (further discussion on his migration and lineage can be found in [45]). It is through these individuals that the *Ba'alawi* claim their bloodline to the Prophet [68].

Due to their claims of descent [refer to [54] for a comprehensive discussion on the recent controversy in Indonesia stemming from a riposte against these claims], the *Ba'alawi* have quickly rose the social ladder of Hadhrami society despite being children of a migrant to the land [26]. The *Ba'alawi* then became revered and were looked upon as religious leaders and teachers in Hadhrami society [69]. The *Tariqa Alawiyya* then became the conduit that solidified the *Ba'alawi* status as religious leaders not only in the Hadhramaut valley but across the Muslim world especially the Malay peninsula and archipelago, a region which the *Ba'alawi* have been credited for taking part in influencing the trajectory of Islam [38,42,67]. The *Ba'alawi* had transformed itself to a Sufi brotherhood as a result of a man known as Muhammad ibn Ali *al-Faqih al-Muqaddam* (d. 1232). As a result of receiving the *khirqah*, spiritual mantle, from the famed Maghribi Sufi scholar Shaykh Abu Madyan al-Ghawth in the 6 and 7<sup>th</sup> century, *al-Faqih al-Muqaddam* then united the *Ba'alawi* genealogical chain with a Sufi chain, thereby creating the *silsila dhahabiya* (golden chain) to the Prophet [62]. The *Ba'alawi* spiritual order therefore is rooted in the genealogical family tree of its adherents.

According to Syed Farid Alatas (2005: 238) [8], the *Tariqa Alawiyya* is a "way of life" as it encompasses "the entire range of beliefs/knowledge and practices of" the community and individual. As a result, many scholars assume that to be *Ba'alawi* meant that one is automatically within the *Tariqa Alawiyya*. This alludes to a *Ba'alawi* being born into the *Tariqa Alawiyya* rather than entering it voluntarily. As Syed Naquib Al-Attas [9] explained, it is rare for non-*Ba'alawi* members to be found in this spiritual order. This means that the very sustenance of the *Tariqa Alawiyya* is dependent upon

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<sup>†</sup> Habib (pl. Habaib) is a term of respect which means beloved of Allah that is used for *Ba'alawi* religious leaders.

the membership of the *Ba'alawi*. Abandoning the *Tariqa* for another belief in Islam would have an impact on its continued survival. The *Ba'alawi* has then been stylised as a Sufi brotherhood which follows the al-Ghazali model of *tasawuf* (spirituality) whilst entrenching its creed and jurisprudence in Ash'arism and Sunni-Shafi'ism respectively [29].

## 2.2 The *Tariqa Alawiyya* Relations with Salafism and Shi'ism

The 19<sup>th</sup> and early to mid-20<sup>th</sup> centuries (1839-1967) marked a turn in the *Ba'alawi* homeland of Hadhramaut, when it saw itself being ruled by the British [24]. As a result of the role of the colonial administration in the Hadhramaut, the *Ba'alawi* came head-to-head with supporters of Wahhabism who wanted to eradicate *Tariqa Alawiyya* teachings and the social hierarchy which placed the *Ba'alawi* at the top of the social stratification system [59].

Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab (d. 1792), the 18<sup>th</sup> century founder of Wahhabism, had a great impact on the trajectory of the belief system in the 19 and 20<sup>th</sup> century. He had popularised the strict scripturalist teachings of Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 1328), a late 13<sup>th</sup> century scholar of the Hanbali school of jurisprudence which then gave birth to Salafism. Although aware of the Salafi indignation of equating Salafism with Wahhabism [46], this paper follows Fatimah Husein's [39] short description of Salafism to define the two. She identified three features of Salafism. First, similar to the *tariqa*, Salafism adopts a path which it calls a *manhaj*. Taking on the *manhaj* of a proper Muslim scholar who follow *salaf* (the first three generations of the Muslim community) will guarantee the adoption of the second feature, which is the literalist and purist understanding of the Quran and recorded Prophetic sayings and actions known as the Hadith. This would then necessitate the third feature which is *al-wala' wa al-bara'*. This involves loyalty to Salafi Muslims and a rejection of non-Salafi Muslims for espousing a form of Islam that transgress the first two features.

As followers of the Sufi *Tariqa Alawiyya* filled with various rituals related to Islamic mysticism, the *Ba'alawi* then became a target of Salafism. This caused a rise in migration of the *Ba'alawi* to the Malay world facilitated by the advent of the steamship which allowed travel across the Indian Ocean. In their new homelands, across the Malay world, the *Ba'alawi* then actively propagated and ossified their teachings [55].

Ironically, it is within the Malay world that the main opponents of the *Tariqa Alawiyya*, most of which also belonged to the lower rungs of the Hadhrami stratification system, would arise. Known as the *Irshadi*, this movement was born in Indonesia and quickly spread to other parts of the Malay world, including Singapore, before entering into Hadhramaut society [42]. Its founder, Ahmad Surkati, was highly critical of the various tenets within the *Tariqa Alawiyya* that helped to cement the social hierarchy that privileges the *Ba'alawi* status quo [69]. The *Irshadi* then sought to create a more egalitarian form of Hadhrami community within the diaspora by tapping into Salafi ideals. In their bid for religious purification based on the Hadith and Quran, the *Irshadi* movement then proposed cleansing the Hadhrami community by ridding it of rituals practiced by the *Ba'alawi* deemed to be *bid'ah* (innovations) [41] [refer to [58] who outlines the various Islamic rituals conducted by Muslims in the Malay world which mirror or have their origins in the tenets of the *Tariqa Alawiyya*]. The removal of the *Tariqa Alawiyya*, its rituals and its tenets would then facilitate a more pure, egalitarian form of Islam.

As the *Tariqa Alawiyya* faced antagonism from Salafism, there then emerged studies that outline the strategies that members of the *Tariqa Alawiyya* have taken in order to justify their belief system against the accusations hurled at them by Salafis. Many non-Ba'alawi Arabs critical of the *Tariqa Alawiyya* had returned from *Darul Hadith al-Khairiyyah*, a prominent Salafi institution founded by Sheikh Muqbil bin Hadi al-Wadi'i in the Northern Sa'da province of Yemen in 1979. Knysh [42]

speculated that Habib Umar bin Hafiz then set up *Darul Mustafa* in the south of Yemen as a counter measure to *Darul Hadith al-Khairiyyah*.

In the case of the Malay world, the *Ba'alawi* had to remind their Wahhabi and Salafi counterparts that, unlike Wahhabism/Salafism, the *Tariqa Alawiyya* were the first to introduce Islam into the Malay world. The Indonesian *Tariqa Alawiyya* scholar, Novel bin Muhammad Alaydrus [12], laid out a letter sent to various Indonesian state and religious leaders dated in 1962 which included one hundred and sixty-five signatures from not only the religious leaders of the *Tariqa Alawiyya*, but also those indigenous to Indonesia who confirmed the *Ba'alawi* and *tariqa* role in the promulgation of Islam within the country. Therefore, Wahhabis/Salafis were counselled against pejoratively labelling *tariqa* practices as *bid'ah* because of their prolonged perquisite to the indigenous community [15]. So juxtaposed with the more autochthonous *Tariqa Alawiyya*, Salafi thought was framed by writers such as Habib Ali bin Husein al-Attas as a foreign import which needed to be eradicated [48]. In the southern state of Johor, Malaysia, the Indonesian born *Ba'alawi* mufti, Syed Alwi, spent two of his terms, first between 1941 and 1943, and second between 1947 to 1961, condemning and criticizing modernists and Salafis/Wahhabis [57]. In Singapore, Syed Ahmad Semait, explained the definition of *bid'ah* in detail using the Qur'an and Hadith in hopes of rectifying the Salafi definition of the term [55]. Most of the studies then discuss *Ba'alawi* leaders' attempts to counter Salafi criticisms of the *Tariqa Alawiyya*. Nevertheless, there has been limited studies that discuss how the *Tariqa Alawiyya* understand the *position* and *status* of Salafism and other belief systems *as a form of Islam*.

Thus far, the relationship between Salafism and the *Tariqa Alawiyya* has been shown to be antagonistic, with Salafism being highly critical of the *Tariqa Alawiyya* and the *Tariqa Alawiyya* generating various strategies to defend itself against these criticisms. However, there are other studies that discuss not only the *Ba'alawi* affinity to Salafism, but their conversions and support towards the belief system. The most prominent of this is those published on the Jamalullail royal family of Perlis. The Jamalullail is a clan within the *Ba'alawi* who were involved in shaping the religious laws in the Malaysian state of Perlis and Perak when they became the Malay *rajās* (term for non-Malay kings) of the state [47]. In the mid-1920s, the *raja* supported the rise of the *Kaum Muda* (Young People) group, an Islamic reformist movement made up of graduates from the Middle East, which aimed to reform and purify Islamic rituals from its cultural and innovative undertones [47]. Salafism had then found itself a home within not only the state of Perlis, but also in the hearts of its patron *Ba'alawi raja*. Whilst the Jamalullail family embraced Salafi ideas, some within the *Ba'alawi* also acknowledged Salafi criticisms of their practices. Resultantly, many in Hadhramaut such as Ibn Sumayt started connecting with reformist scholars such as Muḥammad 'Abduh and Sayyid Hamud [25]. In the Malay world, some *Ba'alawi* reportedly defected to the *Irshadi* movement, whilst prominent Malay thinker Sayyid Shaykh bin Ahmad al-Hadi started corresponding with renowned prominent Salafi intellectuals such as Muḥammad Rashid Rida [8]. This then resulted in al-Hadi publishing magazines such as *Al-Iman* and *Al-Ikhwan* that feature Abduh's work.

The case of the Jamalullail *Ba'alawi* and the other *Ba'alawi* individuals who either accept Salafi criticisms of the *Tariqa Alawiyya* or even become Salafis is the main trigger for this paper. There has been much documentation on the strategies that the *Tariqa Alawiyya* took to defend itself from Salafism. However, how the *Tariqa Alawiyya* sees Salafism as a belief system within Islam and also understands conversions of its *Ba'alawi* members to this belief system has not been elaborated. This then becomes the main impetus for this paper.

Nonetheless, this paper does not seek to look at *Tariqa Alawiyya's* understanding of just Salafism alone *per se*. Rather, it wishes to explore the *Tariqa Alawiyya's* understanding of other belief systems in Islam in general and approach toward the conversions of its *Ba'alawi* adherents to these other

belief systems. As such, other than Salafism, Shi'ism has been one of the other belief systems in Islam that has been highlighted as a major competitor for adherents.

Unlike Salafism, there are not many studies between the *Tariqa Alawiyya* and Shi'ism that cover the criticisms of the latter towards the former. However, there has been a substantial number of studies that discuss the elevated number of the *Ba'alawi* converting to Shi'ism. Some of these studies would mention that the migrant ancestor of the *Ba'alawi*, Ahmad ibn Isa al-Muhajir, was a Shi'ite, thereby further facilitating the ease at which *Ba'alawi* members become Shi'ite [7,16,33,52] has even written a book in which he explicates the long history of Shi'ism as practiced by the *Ba'alawi* predecessors. Edaibat [29] has since created a rather convincing argument that posits al-Muhajir as a religious scholar capable of adopting the legal opinions of his predecessors rather than that of Shi'ism or even Sunnism.

Beyond al-Muhajir, many scholars have argued that the *Ba'alawi* were indeed Shi'ite. Sayyid Hasan Jamalullail, credited to have formulated the Ninety Laws in the Malaysian state of Perak, was identified as having an affinity towards Shi'ism [53]. Similarly, Rakhmat [60] and Shamsudin Harun [63] saw the *Ba'alawi* as Shi'ite. Though it cannot be denied that there were *Ba'alawi* who were indeed Shi'ite, to generalise all the *Ba'alawi* and the *Tariqa Alawiyya* as such would then ignore the genuine claims and experiences of the *Ba'alawi* as following a Sufi brotherhood staunchly entrenched in Sunni Islam.

In sooth, Sufi brotherhoods do intersect in their practices with Shi'ism because they both trace their fermentation to the son-in-law and cousin of the Prophet Muhammad, Ali ibn Abi Talib [53]. However, unlike Shi'ism, Sufism does not base its spirituality on the rejection of several of the Prophetic companions and wives who were seen as being against Ali, nor are their rituals based on the remembrance of the death of the Prophet's grandson, Husayn during Ashura' [4]. As such, unlike Shi'ism, Sufi brotherhoods such as the *Tariqa Alawiyya* should be seen as performing a form of 'Alid piety [4]. The *Tariqa Alawiyya* is then a Sufi brotherhood which is imbued with 'Alid piety that is distinct from Shi'ism, whilst advocating for Sunni/Shafi'i jurisprudence and Ash'arite creed [17,29].

This means then that any conversions to Shi'ism by the *Ba'alawi* signified a belief in the imamate (successorship) of Ali, a rejection of Prophetic companions seen to have usurped the rights of Ali and the family of the Prophet (*ahl al-bayt*, which is made up of Ali, his wife and the Prophet's daughter Fatima, and their two children Hassan and Husayn), and a focus in Ashura' rituals. The form of Shi'ism that is taken into account is Twelver Shi'ism which practices the *Jafariya* school of jurisprudence [refer to [22] for a detailed explanation of the issues related to defining Shi'ism].

Conversions to Shi'ism amongst the *Ba'alawi* went on overdrive after the 1979 Iranian Islamic Revolution, with individuals such as the *Ba'alawi* religious scholar Abdul Qadir Bafagih proudly declaring that he had converted [22,23]. Twelver Shi'ism then drew the interest of several *Ba'alawi*, including its own religious leaders [33,50,70]. Alkadzim [17] explained that the family was an important mode of transmission for the *Tariqa Alawiyya*. As such, returning *Ba'alawi* students from Qum, Iran transmitted knowledge of Shi'ism to their closest kin [33,70]. Such individuals then threaten the continued longevity of the *Tariqa Alawiyya* as they not only transmit Shi'ite knowledge to the younger generations instead of the tenets of the *tariqa*, but their role as knowledgeable religious scholars would also lend credibility to their propagation efforts, further attracting others away from the *tariqa*. The impact of this phenomenon on the *Tariqa Alawiyya's* stance towards Shi'ism vis-à-vis its stance towards Shi'ism if conversions had not occurred, would then be interesting. The next section then provides the conceptual framework from which to understand the *Tariqa Alawiyya's* position towards other belief systems, such as Salafism and Shi'ism, as a belief system in Islam and conversions towards these other belief systems.

### 3. Conceptual Framework

In his study of conversion, Spinner-Halev [66] outlined two types of religious toleration - internal and external toleration. *Internal toleration* deals with allowing adherents of the religion to convert to other religions. *External toleration* involves the religion's views of other religions. For Spinner-Halev [66], Protestantism counsels the individual to seek the true path individually. Starting from the reformation period, individuals were then urged to choose their belief based on their conscience rather than through compulsion. As a result, Protestantism is seen as internally tolerant, as it allows for exit from the church since religion is a matter of personal faith. However, this exit involves moving from one church or denomination to another Protestant church or denomination. So, whereas Protestantism can be internally varied and one may choose from these different manifestations of Protestantism, truth does not belong to religions outside Protestantism. Accordingly, Protestants are externally intolerant.

Hinduism, on the other hand, is aware that people are born to different religions and do not lay claim as the only truth. Therefore, Hinduism has external toleration as it "allows other groups to live by their religious practices" (Spinner-Halev, 2005: 37) [66]. However, Hinduism, is "practice-based, inegalitarian, and allows for exit only with great difficulty, if at all" (Spinner-Halev, 2005: 35) [66]. As such, whilst it respects every religion as possibly holding other pathway for truths, those who find themselves within the Hindu faith are not allowed to leave it. Therefore, it is hard for people who are born a Hindu, to abandon the religion for another [66]. So, one cannot leave certain central social practices especially that of the caste system. Even if a Hindu goes to religions so far removed from their belief structure such as Islam and Christianity, their Hindu caste would still follow them [66]. A *Dalit* (lowest caste in the Hindu stratification system) is still a *Dalit* even if he chooses to no longer be a Hindu. His Hindu identity can never be removed. As such, whilst Hinduism is externally tolerant as it sees other belief systems as possibly holding the truth, it is internally intolerant, preventing its adherents from converting to other belief systems.

This study adopts Spinner-Halev's (2005) [66] model by postulating that when it comes to its relations with other belief systems in Islam, the *Ba'alawi* is externally tolerant and inclusive. However, in response to conversions of its *Ba'alawi* adherents to these belief systems, the *Tariqa Alawiyya* becomes internally intolerant and exclusive.

### 4. Methodology

The data that is utilised for this study comes from in-depth interviews with 45 individuals in the *Ba'alawi* community. This article focuses on the books recommended by the individuals interviewed, or from *Ba'alawi*-owned publishing companies and bookstores in Singapore, Indonesia and Malaysia. Some informants have also kindly loaned books from their personal libraries to be analysed for the purpose of this research. The books acquired are not exhaustive and act as case studies for this article.

### 5. Findings

#### 5.1 External Toleration

The *Tariqa Alawiyya* is a belief system that is externally tolerant and inclusive towards other belief systems within Islam. An individual interested in knowing about the *Tariqa Alawiyya* is exposed to a Sufi brotherhood which is aware of the multitudes of belief systems that are present within Islam.

Such can be seen in a work by a religious scholar introducing his readers to the *Tariqa Alawiyya*. Within this work, the scholar acknowledged the multiple paths towards God:

“They separated into nations of Islam and differed in their external rules...  
They differ in their ways of drawing near, and the means to attain strength of acquisition...  
Others, if they strive to purify themselves, The Lord will assist them towards their goal...  
Others have a burnings desire in awe of extreme compassion...  
Others are immersed in the ocean of generosity, martyred with the sword of unveiling  
and witnessing”

(Al-‘Aṭṭās [sic], 2021: 68-71) [10].

As such the *Tariqa Alawiyya* is framed as not only being cognizant of the variety of belief systems within Islam, it also embraces these different belief systems. This can be seen by the following quote which states that the *Tariqa Alawiyya*:

“do[es] not oppose them [other belief systems], deny them or criticise them, as the number of paths to Allah are as many as the breaths of mankind” (Al-‘Aṭṭās, 2021: 74) [10].

This paper argues that the ability for the *Tariqa Alawiyya* to not only be aware of other belief systems within Islam and also tolerate them is a consequent of its self-conceptualisation. The *Tariqa Alawiyya* models itself as a spiritual pathway rooted in the Qur’an and *sunna* (practices of the Prophet). The Quran and *sunna* as recorded within the *hadith* are the two paramount canons agreed upon and employed by the for their everyday belief and action [11]. By framing itself in general terms as a Sufi path which is solely based on the canon of Islam, the *Tariqa Alawiyya* would then envelope every Muslim as being under it, *by default*. This then produced an image of the *Tariqa Alawiyya* as a Sufi path for all Muslims and therefore allows it to acknowledge the existence of other belief systems without having to compromise its own legitimacy.

This is further strengthened through a tenet that the *Tariqa Alawiyya* has held strongly upon. Those within the *Tariqa Alawiyya* are advised not to partake in debates that would necessitate it to draw a redline between itself and the other belief systems. Discussions on the status of the companions of the Prophet and theology and creed which would then force it to take a definite stance against or for Shi’ism and Salafism are not part of the doctrine of the *Tariqa Alawiyya* [31]. This then enables it to take on a more tolerant stance towards these other belief systems [31].

Resultantly, the *Tariqa Alawiyya* is able to become externally tolerant and inclusive. This is achieved by defining itself in generalised terms that are accepted by the whole Muslim community, that is following the Quran and *sunna*, and refusing to engage in polemical debates which would force it to draw boundaries between itself and other belief systems. This would then allow for the religious leaders in the *Tariqa Alawiyya*, such as Al-Masyhur [18], to frame the *Tariqa Alawiyya* as a moderate, simple path which accepts even those who are not in line with its beliefs.

## 5.2 Internal Toleration

### 5.2.1 Unquestioning obedience to the middle path

The *Tariqa Alawiyya* thrives on simplicity and generality of statements in order to embrace other belief systems. This would also allow it to be successfully seen as a legitimate belief system within Islam, drawing others into it. On the other hand, it has developed a more elaborate stance towards



prohibiting and admonishing members who attempt to convert out of the *tariqa*. As Serjeant [65] informed, the *Ba'alawi* were not allowed to leave the *Tariqa Alawiyya*. Therefore, whilst the *Tariqa Alawiyya* embraces an external inclusivity, it practices an internal exclusivity. The next few sections highlight how the *Tariqa* approaches the issues of potential conversions.

Whilst, Al-'Aṭṭās [10] acknowledged the presence of multiple belief systems, he also warned those who have chosen a particular path against straying from that path, in this case, the *Tariqa Alawiyya*. Similarly, regarded as the renewer (*mujadid*) of the *Tariqa Alawiyya*, Imam Abdallah ibn Alawi al-Haddad (d. 1720) [1,5,31] reminded that the *Tariqa Alawiyya* is the truest, most ideal and straightest path [21]. Assuaging Salafis, Imam al-Haddad then presented the core tenets of the *Tariqa Alawiyya* as being based on the Quran, *sunna* and teachings of the *salaf* [3]. Though, it has to be noted here that the term *salaf* denotes the pious forefathers of the *Ba'alawi*, rather than the first three generations of the Muslim community as understood by Salafis [37]. Meeting the needs of Shi'ites, he continued that the *Tariqa Alawiyya* is passed down from generation to generation, from father to son, within the family of the Prophet Muhammad in a golden chain known as *silsila dhahabiya*.

Another scholar of the *Tariqa Alawiyya* called it as a Sufi brotherhood that followed the concept of *wasatiyya* (moderation) [48]. *Wasatiyya* is a positive concept that has been adopted by most belief systems within Islam [refer to [28] and [35] for examples; Abdel-Fadil [20] provides a short description of how Al-Qaradawi is at the forefront of this movement]. As opposed to extremism, *wasatiyya* is branded as an ideal within Islam [56]. Seen as a concept derived and in alignment with the Quran and hadith, a belief system that has *wasatiyya* would then be painted as fair, balanced and moderate in its tenets and actions [49]. This would then make it the best belief system.

Thus, the *Tariqa Alawiyya* offers itself to be in the path of *wasatiyya* by portraying itself as integrating both the teachings of Salafism and Shi'ism, making it the most attractive belief system of the three. Due to this, al-Haddad continued that the *Ba'alawi* should not question or criticise any of the tenets of the *Tariqa Alawiyya* or worse, eschew it, since it is validated by the Quran, *hadith* and opinions of *salaf* [18]. In other words, the *Ba'alawi* should be unquestionably obedient to the *Tariqa Alawiyya*. Not only is it indecorous for a *Ba'alawi* to convert out, scholars of the *Tariqa Alawiyya* make it an obligation of the *Ba'alawi* to proselytize the *pathway*, since it is the prime path to Allah. As such, the *Tariqa Alawiyya* is internally intolerant and exclusive, expecting its adherents to not only be loyal to the path, but also promulgate it to others.

### 5.2.2 Dream as conversion prevention

Al-Habsyi [14] explained that leaders within the *Tariqa Alawiyya* actively prevent their students from following or experimenting with other *Tariqa* or oscillating their religious learning from one teacher to another. He then narrated the story of a man named Syekh Barakwan who had visited Tarim, Hadhramaut, the spiritual heart of the *Tariqa Alawiyya* [42], to educate the *Ba'alawi* in his path. However, he was prevented from doing so after getting a dream-vision of Muhammad b. Ali al-Alawi *al-Faqih al-Muqaddam* (d. 1256), who told him to leave the city so that the *Ba'alawi* progeny would not be fooled by the beauty of Barakwan's behaviour leading them to leave the *Tariqa Alawiyya*. It is interesting here that Barakwan was praised for his beauty first, thereby displaying the externally tolerant nature of the *Tariqa Alawiyya* which accepts Barakwan's form of Islam as legitimate. However, it is internally intolerant as in the dream, *al-Faqih al-Muqaddam* then ejected Barakwan from Tarim in order to prevent the defection of the *Ba'alawi* from the *Tariqa Alawiyya*.

It is rather extraordinary that Barakwan would heed a dream and leave Tarim immediately as a result. Ewing [32] considered dreams as effective in directing an individual's particular course of social action. This is especially true for Sufism, whereby dreams are used as a Sufi master's tool of

communication with others. Muhammad b. Ali al-Alawi *al-Faqih al-Muqaddam* was known as the founding father whose initiation brought the *Ba'alawi* under the cloak of Sufism, giving birth to the *Tariqa Alawiyya* [40]. It is then only natural that he would be manifested in a divine form through a dream in order to protect the sanctity of the *tariqa*. Furthermore, Ewing [32] explained that dreams can be considered as God-sent and therefore true within Islamic traditions. It was then incumbent upon Barakwan to heed the warning of *al-Faqih al-Muqaddam*. This narration then successfully illustrates the internally intolerant and exclusive nature of the *Tariqa Alawiyya* where the adherence of the *Ba'alawi* to the *Tariqa Alawiyya* is protected. Additionally, the nature of the message by *al-Faqih al-Muqaddam* being packaged as a dream and therefore God-sent further frames the *Tariqa Alawiyya* to be seen as the most ideal belief system.

### 5.2.3 The unlearned *Ba'alawi* and the Sunna of the *Tariqa Salaf*

Leaving a belief system is a dolour experience [27]. This is the case for both the individual that leaves and the belief system that is being left. Affected by those who left, those within the belief system would then formulate pejection towards the life of the individual who has left that belief system. As such, Imam al-Haddad, had a bleak perspective of *Ba'alawi* members who converted out of the *Tariqa Alawiyya*:

“As for those among the *Ahl al-Bayt* who are not upon the ways of their pure forefathers, and have caused confusion due to their ignorance, then they must still be honoured and respected due to their relationship with the Messenger of Allah, but those who are qualified must counsel them. They should be encouraged to follow the way of their pious forefathers with regards to acquiring knowledge, performing pious actions, having a good character and praiseworthy traits. They must be told this is more appropriate and a greater obligation upon them above all other people.”

(Sayed, 2021:13-14) [62]

The *Ba'alawi* convert is respected in so far that he is a descendant of the Prophet. However, his choices to leave the *Tariqa Alawiyya* is not accepted. This is because the precepts of the *Tariqa Alawiyya* are founded upon the *silsila dhahabiyya* (golden chain) [62]. The Prophetic knowledge is passed down concurrently with the Prophetic light through the loins of the *Ba'alawi* from the father to his son. As the above quote shows, the *Tariqa Alawiyya* then sees it incumbent upon the *Ba'alawi* to pass down the knowledge of the *Tariqa Alawiyya* as was transmitted by his forefathers. The *Ba'alawi* then should not leave the *Tariqa Alawiyya*, as leaving it would mean disrupting the chain of transmission to future generations, leading to the possible demise of the *Tariqa Alawiyya*.

Additionally, the above quote also shows how the *Tariqa Alawiyya* framed the *Ba'alawi* who leaves the *Tariqa Alawiyya* as being unlearned and ignorant of his duties and the tenets of the belief system, thereby causing disharmony in the community as a result of his conversion. It is then the task of *Ba'alawi* scholars to ensure that he is deprogrammed from the new belief system so that he might re-enter the *Tariqa Alawiyya* through embodying the conduct of the pious predecessors. The process of reconversion of the *Ba'alawi* who has disaffiliated from the *Tariqa Alawiyya* then mandates an embodied conduct by members of the *Tariqa Alawiyya*.

Evidently, the reader is not informed of real-life examples of successes that such embodied conduct has in drawing back individuals to the *Tariqa Alawiyya*. However, what this narrative does is then places the disaffiliate of the *tariqa* in a pejorative light, whilst continuing to posit the *tariqa* as the ideal belief system, a notion that would have been severely shaken as a result of the conversion

of its own *Ba'alawi* members out of the *Tariqa Alawiyya*. The *Ba'alawi* consider their pious forefathers as the *salaf* [17], a term that usually denotes the first three generations of the Muslim community after the Prophet. According to Ismail Fajrie Alatas [6], whilst the term *sunna* today is utilised exclusively to meet the sayings and actions of the Prophet, early Muslim communities saw the *sunna* as being embodied by not only the Prophet, but also his successors. This conceptualisation of a *sunna* alive and embodied in the successors of the Prophet is still adopted by the Sufi *Tariqa* with the teachers manifesting its embodiment [6]. In other words, the line of pious forefathers and teachers, past and present, or the *salaf* of the *tariqa*, then connects the individual to the Prophet. Imam al-Haddad saw the *Tariqa Alawiyya* as preserving the *sunna* of the Prophet through the inward and outward religious embodiment of its *salaf* [3]. By informing the reader that the *Ba'alawi* individual can be returned to the *Tariqa Alawiyya* by educating him in the conduct of *his* pious predecessors, the *Tariqa Alawiyya* acknowledges the phenomenon of conversion without having to undermine itself as a legitimate belief system in Islam. In fact, the remedy for that conversion, which is to follow in the *sunna* conduct of the pious predecessors to be reconnected to the Prophet, further illustrates the *tariqa* as the true, middle path.

#### 5.2.4 Eternal damnation

Alyedreessy [19] explained that within Islam, apostasy or *riddah* meant the individual has reneged and betrayed the loyalty of his community. It is therefore rather pertinent that the *Tariqa Alawiyya* have chosen to frame leaving its path within a similar light. The previous section displayed how a member of the *Ba'alawi* who has left the path is seen as creating confusion amongst his brethren. Alyedreessy [19] further explained that apostasy also meant eternal damnation in this world and the hereafter for the defectors. Reading al-Habsyi's [14] warning for *Ba'alawi* members against abandoning the *Tariqa Alawiyya* would send shivers down one's spine. Those who leave the *path* would experience the same fate as those who left Islam as they would succumb to a life of eternal damnation in this world and the next. One of al-Habsyi's (2021: 106) [14] warning reads:

"Whomever makes his own path, different from his pious predecessors... and take a path that they [the pious predecessors] did not take, then their lives will end in vain and humiliation, and they will not be elevated to the level achieved by their pious predecessors, and all their affairs will be left to themselves without any intercession from their pious predecessors."

Additionally, throughout the book, al-Habsyi [14] reminded readers that abandoning the *tariqa* would cut off one's connection with one's pious predecessors thereby preventing one from drawing help from them. The belief of intercession by one's pious predecessors to gain access to heavenly salvation is an important concept codified within *Ba'alawi* texts and rituals [17,43]. So, the individual's choice to leave the *Tariqa Alawiyya* meant that he has been suspended from the *silsila dhahabiya*, the golden chain of transmitted piety.

Therefore, the onus is on the *Ba'alawi* to attract others to join the *tariqa* instead of leaving it as their bloodline sustains the line of piety. As such, Imam al-Haddad then informed that:

"Anyone from the family of Abi Alawi, who leaves the Path of his ancestors, may God be pleased with them, and dons the garb of others, loses all *baraka* [blessings] in his endeavor. [sic]" (al-Badawi, 2020: 20) [13].

Naturally, the *Ba'alawi* are then warned that those who stray from the path of the *Tariqa Alawiyya* for another path would be pushed away from the path of God, for the *Ba'alawi* path is the straightest path [13]. Consequently, the individual would not be blessed but succumb to a life of eternal damnation as a result. Such damnation would then be inscribed upon their bodies as Shaykh Salim ibn Sumayyir warned that these individuals “will either go mad or die” (al-Badawi, 2020: 38) [13]. Hence, so dire was it when a *Ba'alawi* deviates from its path that [18] dedicated one whole chapter speaking on this matter.

Threats of eternal damnation is a powerful tool used within Islam to prevent conversions. In the study of apostates to Islam, Cottee [27] highlighted narratives of fear of eternal damnation amongst these individuals who have left Islam, planting seeds of doubt about their disaffiliation from the religion. For some of them, this fear was then an important tool of religious indoctrination to prevent individuals from leaving the religion. Similarly, this was then a tool used by the *Tariqa Alawiyya* to prevent conversions from the *tariqa* to other belief systems of Islam, thereby further showing that it fundamentally was a Sufi pathway that was internally intolerant, disallowing its adherents from converting out of the religion without any repercussions.

## 6. Future Research

This study represents a nascent exploration of the forms of toleration that the *Tariqa Alawiyya* has towards other belief systems. Therefore, further research is required to further assess and substantiate the findings outlined.

Future research would also necessitate subjecting an understanding of these different tolerations through a macro lens of the politics and societal milieu that they are in. Alkadzim [17] explained that the *Tariqa Alawiyya* underwent restructuring and codification in the 16 and 17<sup>th</sup> century as a response to the changing socio-political environment in which the scholars were living in such as the rising threat of Wahhabism and also the increased migration of the *Ba'alawi* from Hadhramaut to other locations across the Indian Ocean. Similarly, as stated earlier in this article, today, many of the *Ba'alawi* have turned to Salafism and Shi'ism as a result of the socio-political factors that have made these two belief systems more attractive, such as the 1979 Iranian revolution. More recently, the *Ba'alawi* claim as being the descendants of the Prophet, a pivotal element that lends legitimacy and credence to the *Tariqa Alawiyya*, has been questioned by other ulama in the Malay world [see [54] for a detailed description]. Additionally, Salafism and Shi'ism continue to present not only a religious but also a political challenge, trying to inhibit or support the practices of the *Tariqa Alawiyya*, thereby potentially shaping the trajectory of its existence [4,39]. The level of hostility engendered within the social-political landscape that the *Tariqa Alawiyya* is in may then further explain the reasons for the forms of toleration that the *Tariqa* produces.

As such, future research on the trajectories of toleration that the *Tariqa Alawiyya* have towards other belief systems within Islam should then be conducted taking into account the political and social developments that are occurring in Hadhramaut, its birthplace, and in the Malay world.

## 7. Conclusion

Belief systems within the Islamic world have tend to be seen as antagonistic to one another. However, as the beginning of this article showed through the life of Al-Qaradawi, religious scholars may not necessarily be inimical to belief systems other than their own. Such hostility may only be triggered when that belief system is seen as a threat to one's own. This paper posits that threat as conversion. Al-Qaradawi's admonishments to Shi'ism began as a result of an alleged rise of Shi'ite

conversions. Evidently, this showed that Al-Qaradawi might have two views towards Shi'ism - one that is tolerant of it as a belief system within Islam, another is an intolerance towards Shi'ism as a missionary belief system proselytizing others to it. This then necessitates a more nuanced approach towards understanding intra-religious relations within Islam that takes into account both identities.

It is this desire for a nuanced approach towards intra-religious relations that this exploratory study on the *Ba'alawi*, an important community which has shaped the trajectory of Islam in the Malay world has been conducted. Utilizing Spinner-Halev's [66] model of toleration, this paper argues that the *Tariqa Alawiyya* is externally tolerant to other belief systems but is internally intolerant prohibiting its members from converting to other belief systems. By becoming externally tolerant yet internally intolerant, the *Tariqa Alawiyya* would then not only carve a name for itself as a legitimate belief system within Islam, but also sustain itself as the most ideal belief system especially in light of increased conversions to other belief systems. This exploration of the *Ba'alawi* hopes to provide a more nuanced approach towards looking at intra-religious and inter-religious studies related to Islam. A religion may seem tolerant to another, but might not be tolerant enough to allow its members to leave it for the other.

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