

## Sufism, Counter-Extremism and Social Resilience: Comparative Evidence from Pakistan Iran and the Caucasus

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### Abstract

Mawlana Jalal al-Din Rumi stands as a towering figure whose mystical teachings and poetic oeuvre continue to resonate across Iran, Pakistan and the Caucasus, forming a shared spiritual substrate. In Iran, Rumi is venerated not only as a classical Persian poet and Sufi master but as an emblem of national and religious heritage, deeply embedded in the cultural imagination. In Pakistan, his legacy has been woven into the fabric of Sufi traditions such as Qawwali and his message of divine love and tolerance is frequently invoked as a bulwark against radical ideologies. In the Caucasus, particularly in Azerbaijan and parts of the North Caucasus, Rumi's philosophical and mystical heritage has been reinterpreted through local Sufi orders, contributing to intercultural cohesion and social resilience. This paper investigates the question: How does Rumi's Sufi legacy function as a counter-extremism resource and a component of social resilience in Iran, Pakistan and the Caucasus? Theoretical framing draws on soft-power theory, social resilience theory and constructivist international relations. A literature review (2000-2025) reveals scholarship on Sufism's role in community building in Pakistan, diplomacy and counter-extremism, including Mehmood Khan (2025) on Sufi diplomacy and Zavar & Riaz (2024) on community cohesion. The findings suggest that Rumi-inspired Sufi institutions and networks contribute significantly to social cohesion, tolerance and non-violent spiritual discourse, but they also face challenges from extremist narratives and state instrumentalisation. Ultimately, the study demonstrates that Rumi's legacy remains a living resource for moderate Islam and social resilience in these regions.

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## Introduction

Mawlana Rumi, born in the city of Balkh in the 13th century, is widely regarded as one of the most influential Sufi mystics and poets in Islamic history, whose Masnavi and ghazals continue to shape spiritual thought across Iran, Pakistan and the Caucasus. In Iran, his native cultural soil, Rumi's poetry is not only a literary treasure but also a part of national identity and mystical tradition; his verses are quoted in

religious gatherings, educational curricula and public celebrations, reinforcing a spiritual continuity. In Pakistan, Rumi's influence permeates through Qawwali and other devotional music: his poems are frequently sung by Sufi musicians, making him a spiritual guide for many who resist extremist ideologies. In the Caucasus, particularly in Azerbaijan and parts of the North Caucasus, local Sufi orders trace their philosophical inspiration to Rumi's metaphysics, adapting his message of inner transformation to the social and political contexts of post-Soviet societies. The resonance of Rumi in these regions provides a powerful transnational spiritual framework that supports Sufi institutions in promoting peace, tolerance and social resilience. Yet, these same Sufi traditions also face significant counter-narratives: in Pakistan, extremist ideologies have attacked Sufi shrines; in Iran, political co-option and suppression have challenged independent mystical orders; and in the Caucasus, the legacy of Soviet secularism and contemporary nationalism complicate the transmission of Sufi heritage.

A key narrative competing with Sufism in Pakistan comes from more puritanical movements which view Sufi practices as innovations or even heretical; such tension has contributed to attacks on shrines and the marginalisation of Sufi communities (Counter Extremism Project, 2025). In Iran, theocratic authorities have at times constricted Sufi orders, suspicion arising from their independent spiritual authority and potential sociopolitical influence (Iskandar, Ullah & Waseemullah, 2023). In the Caucasus, the legacy of Soviet-era atheism, combined with modern secular nationalism, poses a challenge to Sufi institutions trying to reestablish themselves in the public sphere (European Proceedings, 2021). Yet, Rumi's teachings continue to be invoked as a counter to both religious extremism and social fragmentation: his emphasis on love, universal human connection and spiritual introspection resonates with communities seeking to resist polarising ideologies. By centring on Rumi, this study explores how his spiritual legacy is mobilised in three distinct regions to reinforce social resilience and counter-extremist sentiment.

The research question, therefore, is: How does Rumi's Sufi legacy function as a mechanism of counter-extremism and social resilience within Sufi communities and broader societies in Pakistan, Iran and the Caucasus? To address this question, the study draws on soft-power theory, which posits that non-coercive cultural and religious influence can shape social norms and political behaviours, as well as on social resilience theory, which examines how communities recover and adapt in the face of ideological or social shocks. The theoretical framework is supplemented by constructivist international relations, which provides insight into how identity and discourse, as shaped by Rumi's legacy, inform regional cooperation and contestation. Methodologically, the research uses a comparative case-study design, combining qualitative interviews with Sufi practitioners, textual analysis of Rumi-inspired poetry and musical performance and discourse analysis of counter-extremism programmes in each region.

Existing literature from 2000 to 2025 provides vital context. For instance, Maryam Zawar & Muhammad Riaz (2024) argue that in Pakistan, Sufi shrines and khanqahs contribute significantly to social cohesion and countering extremism by promoting inclusion, education and welfare service (Al-Salihat, 2024). Assad Mehmood Khan (2025) analyses the diplomatic use of Sufism as soft power in counter-terrorism, showing how governments leverage mystical networks to foster moderation (Al Khadim Journal, 2025). Brookings scholars (2016) have likewise documented how Sufism was promoted internationally by Pakistan's government to project a "moderate Islam" during the war on terror (Brookings, 2016). In the Caucasus, European Proceedings (2021) show how Sufi schools rooted in Rumi's tradition contributed to social development and moral stability after the collapse of the Soviet Union (European Proceedings, 2021). Ethnographic work by Iskandar, Ullah & Waseemullah (2023) on Sufism in Abkhazia reveals how mystical practices help sustain community cohesion in post-Soviet contexts (Iskandar et al., 2023). In addition,

scholars like Itzchak Weismann (2007) highlight the ideological contest between Sufi brotherhoods and modern hardline movements, noting that Sufism historically offered a counter-narrative to puritanical forms of Islam (Weismann, 2007). These strands of literature, while rich, still leave gaps in our understanding of how Rumi's persona is explicitly mobilised in counter-extremism programming across these three regions and how effective such mobilisation is at building resilience.

This paper builds a theoretical framework combining soft-power theory, social resilience and constructivism to examine how Rumi's legacy is leveraged at multiple levels: grassroots Sufi institutions, national policy and interregional discourse. By viewing Rumi-inspired Sufi networks as a form of cultural capital, the study explores how they function as non-coercive actors in the ideological sphere, fostering tolerance, dialogue and resistance to violent extremism. Social resilience theory helps gauge how communities anchored in Rumi's teachings adapt to stressors such as sectarian violence or political repression. Constructivist international relations helps explain how identity shaped by Rumi's metaphysics becomes a resource for cross-border cooperation, especially between Pakistan, Iran and the Caucasus. This combined lens enables the analysis not only of Sufi internal dynamics but also of their political and diplomatic significance in counter-extremism strategies.

Preliminary findings suggest that Rumi's legacy plays several roles. In Pakistan, Sufi shrines inspired by Rumi act as communal hubs that foster inclusion, mitigate radicalisation and promote interfaith dialogue (Zawar & Riaz, 2024). In Iran, Rumi's poetry is employed in cultural programming and educational discourse to reinforce a tolerant, spiritual Islam that resists both extremist and secularising pressures. In the Caucasus, local Sufi orders rooted in Rumi's metaphysical tradition help to rebuild a sense of spiritual identity and social cohesion after decades of Soviet repression (Iskandar et al., 2023). However, there is tension: in Pakistan, Sufi institutions are sometimes co-opted by the state; in Iran, independent Sufi actors face suspicion from authorities; in the Caucasus, Sufi legitimacy can be challenged by secular national elites. Moreover, geopolitical and sectarian divides limit cross-regional cooperation and some extremist actors continue to portray Sufism as soft or superficial Islam. Nonetheless, Rumi-inspired Sufi networks appear to provide a durable, culturally embedded counter-narrative to violent extremism, contributing meaningfully to social resilience in all three regions.

Given these findings, it is now necessary to move towards a more detailed literature review that systematically examines empirical and theoretical work on Rumi's role in counter-extremism and resilience in Pakistan, Iran and the Caucasus from 2000 to 2025. Such a review will identify the mechanisms, challenges and gaps in existing scholarship and provide a foundation for policy-relevant recommendations.

## Literature Review

### Impacts of Rumi's Poetry in Pakistan

- 1) Sadia Noreen and Bushra Subhan (2025) examine the spiritual legacy of Rumi in Iqbal's philosophy and poetics, arguing that Allama Iqbal regarded Rumi as his spiritual guide and master, or "Pir-i-Rumi." Their study demonstrates how Iqbal channels Rumi's themes of divine love (ishq), selfhood (khudi) and spiritual movement into a modern metaphysical and political framework. They contend that Rumi's teachings provided Iqbal with a model for combining Islamic spirituality with socio-political activism. This link shows that Rumi is not simply a literary influence, but part of a resilient Sufi intellectual tradition in Pakistan (Noreen & Subhan, 2025). Their argument

suggests that Rumi's legacy helps ground Pakistani identity in a mystic but socially engaged Islam, potentially resisting extremist ideologies. However, Noreen and Subhan do not explicitly connect Rumi's legacy to organised counter-extremism programmes or community resilience strategies. This omission leaves open how Rumi-inspired Sufi thought is deployed in concrete social resilience efforts. Thus, their work is foundational in intellectual and spiritual history, but this paper will explore how that legacy is mobilised in counter-extremism initiatives.

- 2) Muntazar Mehdi, Bilal Hussain and Muhammad Abdullah (2021) critically analyse the "Rumi phenomenon" in Pakistani youth culture, specifically how Rumi's poetry is commodified by "New Sufism" writers in the West and re-consumed in Pakistan. They warn that much of the modern spiritual consumption detaches Rumi from his Islamic-Sufi roots, reducing his work to a therapeutic or decorative product (Mehdi, Hussain & Abdullah, 2021). Their paper argues that this decontextualisation risks hollowing out Rumi's deeply theological and mystical meaning, turning his verse into a self-help commodity. They also critique how foreign English writers oversimplify his metaphysics, thereby undermining his role in Islamic tradition. This commodified spiritual consumption, they suggest, weakens Rumi's potential as a source of moral and social resilience. The authors call for a re-anchoring of Rumi within classical Sufi orders and traditional scholarship. Nevertheless, their analysis does not engage fully with how Rumi's authentic Sufi message is strategically used in counter-extremism discourses or community-building. That gap is precisely what the present study addresses by exploring Rumi as a resource for ideological resistance.
- 3) Afshan Liaquat and Muhammad Aslam (2023) study the pedagogical relevance of Rumi's poetry in Pakistani universities, comparing student reception of Rumi and William Blake. Their survey of undergraduates in Lahore shows that students perceive Rumi's verses as deeply meaningful, transcending religious divides and providing spiritual solace (Liaquat & Aslam, 2023). They argue that teaching Rumi in a multicultural curriculum helps foster intercultural understanding, compassion and a non-violent spiritual outlook. This pedagogical role of Rumi supports resilience among youth by offering them a non-extremist, introspective spiritual model. The authors note, however, that institutionalisation of Rumi in academia often lacks connection with grassroots Sufi practices and community resilience efforts. They also observe a tension between academic appreciation and popular romanticisation of Rumi. While their research underscores Rumi's role in forming tolerant, reflective citizens, it does not link his influence to formal counter-extremism frameworks. Their findings thus point to a promising educational dimension, but one that is under-utilised in policy-level resilience strategies.
- 4) Khalid Saifullah (2016) conducts a discourse analysis of Sufi poetry, comparing Rumi with the Punjabi Sufi poet Bulleh Shah. He identifies shared themes such as universal love, purification of the soul, self-development and yearning for union with the Divine (Saifullah, 2016). Saifullah argues that these themes resonate strongly in Pakistani Sufi communities, offering a deeply rooted spiritual counter-narrative to sectarian and extremist discourses. By highlighting common rhetorical and metaphorical structures, he suggests that Rumi and Bulleh Shah help forge an inclusive spiritual identity that transcends sectarian divisions. His post-structuralist approach reveals how symbolic language of surrender and transformation offers moral resources for coping with social fragmentation. However, Saifullah does not examine how these discursive resources are actively mobilised in extremist-resistance community programmes or religious education.

Thus, while his study maps a rich poetic terrain, this research will explore how the shared Sufi discourse contributes to resilience and ideological resistance in Pakistan.

- 5) Dr Hasan Aziz, a neurologist and longtime Sufi practitioner based in Karachi, has reflected publicly on how Rumi's poetry underlies South Asian Sufi traditions and serves as a spiritual anchor for Pakistani Qawwali and devotional culture (Aziz, cited in Rumi Forum, 2015). Aziz has helped curate *Kalam-e-Arifan*, a collection of verified Sufi poetry in Urdu, Persian, Punjabi and Hindi, emphasising Rumi's role in everyday devotional practices (Rumi Forum, 2015). He argues that Rumi's metaphysical emphasis on oneness and compassion offers a counterbalance to rigidity in orthodox discourses. In his view, Rumi-inspired Sufi practices function as a means of soft resistance to extremism, by emphasising spiritual unity rather than sectarian division. Aziz's work highlights how Rumi's legacy is not merely literary but is actively embodied in ritual, music and healing practices. Yet, his reflections are not always translated into formal counter-extremism policy frameworks, leaving institutional potential underdeveloped. This gap supports the need for research into how Rumi-inspired Sufi networks might be formally engaged in resilience strategies.
- 6) Hakeem Muhammad Akhtar was a major Pakistani Sufi scholar and disciple of several Sufi orders; his well-known works include *Ma'arif-e-Masnawi*, a commentary on Rumi's *Masnawi* (Akhtar, d. 2013). Through his exegesis, Akhtar emphasises themes of divine love, moral purification and spiritual transformation, linking Rumi's message with Shariah-based Sufi practice (Akhtar biography, 2023). Akhtar's approach integrates Rumi's mystical teachings into a socially responsible Sufi tradition aimed at personal discipline and communal service. He saw Rumi's teachings not simply as poetic beauty but as a guide for spiritual and moral reform, which can counter nihilistic or extremist ideologies by redirecting energies toward self-knowledge. His institution, Khanqah Imdadiya Ashrafiya, remains active in Pakistan and promotes Rumi's legacy in education and spiritual mentorship. Nonetheless, academic analyses of Hakeem Akhtar's impact on counter-extremism discourse are still limited; most studies discuss him in terms of traditional Sufism rather than resilience-building. The present research will examine how such Sufi orders grounded in Rumi's thought can serve as bulwarks against radical narratives.
- 7) Dr Tahira Sarwar and colleagues (2023) in a study of the Barkat Ali Shrine in Faisalabad explore how neo-traditional Sufi practices informed by Rumi's teachings contribute to holistic healing — spiritual, mental and physical (Sarwar et al., 2023). They show that the shrine's ritual life draws significantly on Rumi's philosophy of *ishq* (divine love) and inner knowledge and that this creates a sanctuary for psychological resilience in an otherwise fragmented society. Their ethnographic method includes interviews and participant observation, revealing how worshippers interpret Rumi's metaphysics as central to their coping strategies. The authors argue that Sufi healing practices based on Rumi provide a culturally embedded alternative to Western biomedical models. This is important in the context of extremism because resilient spiritual identities rooted in Rumi's legacy can offer non-violent frameworks of meaning and purpose. However, their analysis does not explicitly engage with extremist discourses or how such shrines might be supported within broader counter-extremism initiatives. This omission signals a gap in connecting lived Rumi-inspired Sufi resilience to formal policy measures.
- 8) B. Saeed, S. S. Hasan, & M. A. Ajmal (2021) develop a grounded-theory model to assess the impact of Sufism in 21st-century Pakistani society, highlighting how Sufi practices and spiritual values promote psychological wellbeing and social cohesion (Saeed, Hasan & Ajmal, 2021). They draw on focus-group discussions involving students and teachers to show how Sufi concepts of love,

surrender and self-purification (many drawn from Rumi's tradition) foster a sense of community and shared meaning. Their findings suggest that Sufism in Pakistan remains a significant social force that counters alienation, sectarianism and the appeal of simplistic extremist ideologies. Though their study covers Sufism broadly rather than Rumi exclusively, Rumi's metaphors and ethics emerge as central reference points in their data. Their model positions Sufi spirituality as a therapeutic and communal resource, thus potentially contributing to resilience against radicalisation. Still, they do not trace how Rumi-inspired content is used in formal counter-extremism programmes or policy frameworks. This omission highlights the need for research into systemic mobilisation of Rumi's legacy for social resilience and ideological resistance.

- 9) M Akbar (2023), in *Religious Extremism and Community Resilience* published in a Pakistani journal, addresses the transformation of certain regions (e.g., Sindh) through extremist penetration and how local Sufi traditions can build resistance (Akbar, 2023). He notes that Sufi values of tolerance, unity and inward transformation -- often expressed in the poetry of Rumi -- provide alternate spiritual narratives to violent ideology. Akbar argues that community resilience is strengthened not just by institutional counter-extremism measures but by embedded spiritual traditions that emphasise pluralism and love. In his analysis, Rumi's legacy (mediated through local Sufi orders) supports a theological model of dissent against extremism. However, his study is more descriptive than programmatic and does not propose concrete ways to incorporate Rumi's poetry into policy or education. This leaves a gap in translating Rumi-inspired spiritual resilience into strategic counter-extremism operations. This gap is precisely what the present research proposes to address by linking Rumi's influence to tangible resilience mechanisms.
- 10) Amil Khan (2013), though not specifically a scholar of Rumi, writes a strategic communications report *Pakistan and the Narratives of Extremism* that is highly relevant for this study: he argues that effective counter-extremism must engage with Pakistan's existing metaphysical and religious narratives (Khan, 2013). While his focus is not on Rumi per se, his argument that counter-extremism should leverage deeply held cultural and spiritual narratives offers an implicit rationale for engaging Rumi's legacy. Khan contends that extremist movements succeed, in part, because they exploit emotionally resonant religious narratives; thus, moderating influences rooted in Sufi tradition -- like that of Rumi -- could form powerful counter-narratives. His work underscores the strategic importance of culturally embedded spiritual traditions in resilience-building. However, Khan does not detail how Rumi's poetry specifically could be operationalised in resilience or counter-extremism programming. This absence reinforces the need for research on how Rumi-inspired Sufi narratives can be systematically integrated into counter-extremism strategies -- which is what this study aims to explore.

### **Iranian Authors on Rumi and Sufism**

- 1) Seyed Buik Mohammadi offers a sociological reading of Rumi's work, focusing on the concept of "projection" in his mystical poetry and its social implications. In his article for *Islamic Perspective*, Mohammadi argues that many of Rumi's stories and metaphors can be interpreted as psychological projections that reveal inner spiritual dynamics (Mohammadi, 2015). He connects these projections to broader social processes, suggesting that Rumi's spiritual images can foster empathy, self-awareness and community cohesion. According to Mohammadi, when individuals project their fears and desires into Rumi's tales, they encounter a mirror of their inner life that

encourages self-discipline and generosity. He also notes that Rumi's allegorical language helps bridge psychological insight with mystical teachings, making his poetry socially transformative (Mohammadi, 2015). Importantly, Mohammadi warns that failing to attend to this psychological-social dimension risks reducing Rumi to mere literary romanticism. He proposes that reading Rumi in this way may strengthen social resilience by enabling personal transformation that ripples into community ethics. However, his work is largely theoretical and does not engage directly with how state or civil society actors might mobilise Rumi's projected imagery to resist extremist narratives. This gap is significant given the present study's focus on resilience and counter-extremism. Therefore, this research builds upon Mohammadi's insight by exploring institutional and grassroots applications of Rumi's projected psychology in resilience-building.

- 2) Abdolkarim Soroush, a prominent Iranian Islamic thinker, has extensively reflected on Rumi within his programme of religious intellectualism. Soroush treats Rumi not only as a poet but as a spiritual epistemologist whose mystical insight challenge rigid doctrinal certainties. He suggests that Rumi's understanding of *ilm* (knowledge) and *ishq* (divine love) points to a dynamic, living tradition of Islam that is open to renewal (Soroush, n.d.). For Soroush, Rumi exemplifies a theology of pluralism: his metaphors allow for multiple levels of meaning, thus resisting ideological monopolies. Soroush's intellectual project regards Rumi-inspired Sufism as a means to oppose extremist literalism by emphasising the inner path over dogmatic certainty. He argues that the existential and moral depth of Rumi's thought provides a counter-balance to ideological extremism by promoting humility, self-critique and self-transcendence. Yet, although Soroush's philosophical commentary is profound, he does not provide empirical case studies showing how Rumi's legacy is currently used in counter-extremism practices in Iran. That is a lacuna which the present study addresses by empirically tracing contemporary Sufi networks that explicitly deploy Rumi for resilience. By doing so, this research links Soroush's theoretical reflections to real-world community dynamics in Iran.
- 3) Seyyed Hossein Nasr, the towering Iranian philosopher and perennialist scholar, frequently engages with Rumi's metaphysical vision in his works on tradition and sacred knowledge. Nasr's scholarship highlights how Rumi embodies the principle of *ta'wil* (esoteric interpretation) and bridges exoteric religion and inward spiritual insight (Nasr, 2007). He argues that Rumi's poetry is a form of "sacred science," a vehicle for transmitting timeless spiritual truths that resist reduction to ideological rhetoric. For Nasr, Rumi's message contributes to the "resacralisation" of modern life by reminding contemporary Muslims of the inner dimension of Islam (Nasr, 2007). This resacralisation, according to Nasr, fosters resilience: individuals rooted in a tradition of interiority are less susceptible to simplistic extremist ideologies. Yet, Nasr's work is philosophical and normative; he does not explicitly frame Rumi's metaphysics as a tool for state-led or community-based counter-extremism. That said, the spiritual framework he articulates is deeply relevant to resilience-building discourses. The present study builds on Nasr's metaphysical insights by examining how institutional Sufi actors in Iran operationalise the kinds of sacred epistemology he describes in communal and counter-ideological settings.
- 4) Nahid Angha, an Iranian-American Sufi scholar and activist, has written extensively on Sufism and Rumi, advocating for a pluralist, inclusive safeguarding of spiritual traditions. Angha, as co-founder of the International Association of Sufism, argues that Rumi's heritage encourages interreligious dialogue and the empowerment of marginalized spiritual voices, including women's

spiritual leadership (Angha, n.d.). She emphasises Rumi's egalitarian metaphysics, where love and longing transcend doctrinal boundaries, thereby offering a spiritually resilient alternative to exclusionary ideologies. Angha also draws attention to how preserving Rumi's authentic Sufi legacy can help resist extremist movements that reject the mystical tradition. She points out that Rumi's works are misappropriated when stripped of their Sufi-Islamic context and warns that such reinterpretations can hollow out the tradition's moral potency. Her activism links scholarship to lived Sufi practice: she supports programs that teach Rumi's poetry in community centres as a tool of social transformation. However, Angha's work is cross-cultural and not always Iran-specific; she rarely addresses how Rumi's legacy is used in counter-extremism strategies within the Islamic Republic itself. Therefore, this research contributes by examining how Iranian Sufi communities mobilise Rumi in the face of radicalising discourses in their own national context.

- 5) Rasoul Rahbari Ghazani (2025) provides a hermeneutical study of Rumi's mystical epistemology through the lens of the Iranian Sufi thinker Sayyid Ḥaydar Amuli. His article in *Islam and the Contemporary World* explores different modes of "unveiling" (kashf) in Rumi's work—distinguishing between divine revelation (waḥy) and spiritual inspiration (ilham) (Rahbari Ghazani & Davoodi Kahaki, 2025). He argues that Amuli's typology of uncovering, both imaginal and spiritual, can clarify Rumi's epistemic status and offer a structured mystical epistemology. For Ghazani, this conceptual clarity lends Rumi's legacy normative force: his revelation becomes a model for spiritual insight rooted in disciplined Sufi tradition. Ghazani further suggests that understanding Rumi's epistemology in this way may provide spiritual communities with deeper resilience against extremist discourses that claim a monopoly on divine truth. He sees Rumi's unfolding of meaning as inherently pluralist, encouraging interpretive humility rather than ideological certitude. While Ghazani's analysis is rigorous, he does not examine how this epistemology is institutionalised in contemporary Iranian Sufi networks engaged in countering violent ideologies. This study addresses that omission by tracing how modern Sufi organisations grounded in Amuli-Rumi epistemology contribute to social resilience.
- 6) Taha Abdollahi Sohi investigates contemporary Iranian attitudes toward the legacy of Ibn 'Arabi and, by extension, Rumi, situating those developments within debates of identity and mysticism in modern Iran. In his article *Ibn 'Arabi in Contemporary Iran: Some Currents and Debates* (2024), Sohi describes how some Iranian scholars and Sufi orders rehabilitate Ibn 'Arabi (and by connection Rumi) as part of a pluralist mystical tradition (Sohi, 2024). He identifies three main currents: conservative juristic critics, moderate mystical renewalists and more radical esoteric reinterpretations. Sohi argues that for "renewalist" Sufi thinkers, Rumi's metaphysics provide a vital counterpoint to literalist and politico-religious extremism. These thinkers frame Rumi's path of love, annihilation and return as a model for spiritual resilience, resisting both orthodox clerical rigidity and ideological dogmatism. Nevertheless, Sohi notes that Iranian authorities remain wary of independent mystical currents, sometimes co-opting or suppressing them because they see mystical orders as potential alternative sources of legitimacy. Although his work maps intellectual trends, Sohi does not provide detailed case studies of grassroots Sufi actors using Rumi-inspired teachings to build communal resilience. This research fills that gap by exploring how contemporary Sufi networks in Iran operationalise the currents that Sohi describes.
- 7) Seyed Salman Safavi (LAIS) contributes a hermeneutic structural reading of Rumi's *Masnawi* in Persian through his work on the sixth book's introduction (Safavi & Alavi, 20-?). In an analysis

published through the London Academy of Iranian Studies (LAIS), Safavi disentangles the theological meaning of the opening 128 couplets, arguing that they articulate a foundational vision of divine unity (tawhid) that underlies the entire Masnavi (Safavi, LAIS). He contends that these verses do more than launch a narrative -- they define a metaphysical orientation to being and spiritual quest. Safavi's approach shows how Rumi's conceptual structure is not simply poetic ornament but a disciplined mystical doctrine. He also suggests that a close reading of such passages is crucial for contemporary Iranians who seek spiritual depth beyond ideological Islam. In this way, Safavi's scholarship implicitly provides a resource against radical ideologies by reaffirming a theological Sufi core of love, humility and interior transformation. However, he does not explicitly tie his exegesis to contemporary resilience or counter-extremism programmes. That gap is addressed in the present study by examining how Rumi's doctrinal structure, as interpreted by scholars like Safavi, is employed in institutional resilience efforts within Iran.

- 8) In the journal *Mysticism Studies*, an article examines the historical behaviour of early Islamic Sufis in Iran, such as burning or discarding their own writings, to illustrate a radical interiorism in mystical tradition (*Mysticism Studies*, 2022). The authors draw on Magiran-published Persian sources to argue that this practice represented a symbolic renunciation of ego and attachment, deeply resonant with Rumi's teaching of annihilation (fana') (Magiran, 2022). They suggest that such practices show a long-standing Sufi ethos in Iran that privileges interior transformation over external structures. This tradition of austerity and detachment, they argue, provides spiritual resilience and serves as a counter-narrative to formalism and extremism. By highlighting this radical Judaism of the early Sufis, the study implicitly connects with Rumi's own emphasis on inner purification. However, the article does not directly discuss how Rumi's poetry today is used in counter-extremism or social resilience contexts. The current research therefore builds on these historical insights by tracing how Rumi-inspired practices of self-renunciation persist in modern Iranian Sufi communities and contribute to societal resilience.
- 9) Mohammad Ali Rabbani, writing for LAIS, examines the role of Iranian Sufism (especially Rumi-inspired Sufism) as a cultural bridge between Iran and Southeast Asia, thus highlighting Rumi's transnational spiritual legacy (Rabbani, 2019). He argues that the Iranian mystical tradition, rooted in figures such as Rumi, has facilitated intercultural dialogue, peace and spiritual solidarity in Muslim-majority societies beyond Iran's borders (Rabbani, 2019). For Rabbani, Rumi's universalist language of love and unity provides a soft-power resource that can counter radical ideologies and sectarian conflict. He further emphasises that Rumi's legacy is being revitalised in Iran's cultural diplomacy, as Sufi centres and conferences promote global understanding. Yet, Rabbani's work is more descriptive than programmatic; he does not document how these Sufi networks concretely resist extremism at the grassroots level within Iran. This research addresses that limitation by investigating how domestic Sufi orders inspired by Rumi contribute not only to cultural outreach but also to local resilience against ideological violence.
- 10) Mahmoud Shabestari, though a classical Sufi poet, has had a modern revival in Iranian scholarship, where his thematic affinity with Rumi is emphasised in contemporary mystical studies. Recent Iranian researchers (e.g., in *Journal of Iranian Mysticism Studies*, 2021) draw parallels between Shabestari's *Gulshan-e Raz* and Rumi's *Masnavi*, arguing that both authors articulate a vision of spiritual freedom, love and non-violent transformation (*Mysticism Studies*, 2021). Scholars highlight that the modern revival of interest in Shabestari-Rumi comparative study provides a subtle but potent intellectual form of resistance to ideological extremism: by emphasising inner

journey rather than external power. They argue that this revival reinforces a Sufi epistemology of humility, non-conformity and self-transcendence, which is at odds with absolutist ideologies. However, these studies rarely examine how Rumi-Shabestari discourse is operationalised in contemporary Sufi social organisations for resilience-building or deradicalisation. This gap motivates the present research to explore how such comparative Sufi philosophical frameworks are enacted by Iranian spiritual communities to build resilience in the face of ideological extremism.

### **Azerbaijani and Caucasus Authors on Rumi and Sufism**

- 1) Nermin Rzayeva (2025) provides a detailed historical and analytical study of Rumi's legacy in Azerbaijani literary scholarship. She argues that Rumi's *Masnavi*, ghazals and metaphysical corpus are deeply embedded in Azerbaijani literary-philosophical traditions, functioning not just as poetic art but as a source of Sufi metaphysical discourse in the region. Rzayeva traces early reception through figures like Azada Rustamova, who interpreted Rumi via symbolic architecture, emanationist cosmology and mystical unity. She emphasises how Rumi's metaphors of love, purification and spiritual ascent have been localised in Azerbaijani thought, thereby shaping a culturally rooted Sufi ethos. Importantly, she documents how modern Azerbaijani authors and scholars engage with Rumi philosophically rather than merely poetically, indicating a sustained metaphysical tradition. Her work also highlights tension: while Rumi is widely admired, his legacy can be appropriated for nationalist or cultural identity projects, potentially diluting his spiritual universality (Rzayeva, 2025). This reflects broader regional debates about how to reconcile Rumi's universalism with particular national narratives. However, Rzayeva does not fully explore how this intellectual engagement translates into resilience against radical or extremist ideologies. That gap is critical: this study examines whether Rumi's metaphysical legacy is mobilised in Azerbaijani Sufi communities to foster social cohesion and ideological resistance.
- 2) Amina Aliyeva and A. Aliyeva (2025) present a comparative philosophical analysis of Jalal al-Din Rumi and Seyyid Yahya Bakuvi, the fifteenth-century Azerbaijani Sufi. They argue that both spiritual figures endorse a philosophy of life rooted in love, tolerance, self-knowledge and inner purification (Aliyeva & Aliyeva, 2025). According to their research, Bakuvi's mystical teachings significantly resonate with Rumi's metaphysical worldview and this common heritage contributes to a culture of tolerance within Azerbaijani Sufism. They note that Bakuvi's approach has contemporary relevance in promoting interreligious dialogue and a spiritually grounded pluralism in Azerbaijan. Their study asserts that this shared legacy supports societal resilience, particularly in a context where secular nationalism and religious orthodoxies vie for influence. Yet, their analysis remains largely theoretical; while they highlight spiritual tolerance, they do not examine how Rumi-Bakuvi philosophical alignment is concretely deployed by Sufi institutions or civil society actors in counter-extremism programmes. The present research fills this gap by empirically investigating how Sufi orders in Azerbaijan draw upon Rumi-Bakuvi teachings to build social cohesion and resist polarising ideologies.
- 3) In his work on Seyyid Yahya Bakuvi, Azerbaijani scholars emphasise his role as a spiritual successor of Rumi-inspired metaphysics. According to the Republic of Azerbaijan cultural history publication, Bakuvi's *Shafa' al-Asrar* remains a foundational text for Azerbaijani Sufism,

articulating a vision of spiritual seclusion (khalwa) and mystical purification. (Republic of Azerbaijan, 2025). This text, deeply influenced by Rumi's ideas of inner journeying, has shaped Sufi pedagogy, ritual practice and community identity in Azerbaijan. The publication argues that Bakuvi's spiritual model offers moral resources for confronting social fragmentation, by encouraging self-discipline, reflection and ethical living. These virtues resonate in a post-Soviet context where identity politics and ideological vacuums persist. However, although the text underscores the social role of Bakuvi's Sufism, it does not analyse how Rumi's metaphorical and mystical legacy is mobilised specifically to counter extremism or radicalisation. This omission underlines the necessity of the present study, which explores how Rumi-inspired Sufi traditions in Azerbaijan contribute to social resilience and ideological resistance.

- 4) Rauf Iskandar, Waseemullah and Sifat Ullah's (2023) article *Sufism in Abkhazia* sheds light on Rumi-inspired mystical practices in a post-Soviet Caucasian context. They examine Naqshbandi-oriented Sufi communities in Abkhazia (in the Northwest Caucasus), exploring their belief systems, rituals and historical lineage (Iskandar, Waseemullah & Ullah, 2023). The authors find that many local dervishes draw upon Rumi-derived metaphors of the "beloved," annihilation and spiritual journey to define their identity and communal practice. These Sufi communities emphasise purification, meditation and submission within turbulent political frames, thereby cultivating resilience amid ethnic conflict and socio-political uncertainty. The study also notes the role of pilgrimage, zikr and oral transmission in sustaining Sufi life in Abkhazia, even though formal Sufi orders faced suppression during Soviet rule. Importantly, Iskandar et al. argue that Rumi's legacy provides a stabilising, non-violent spiritual alternative to radical or politicised Islam in the region. They suggest that this legacy supports social resilience by offering meaning, community and moral coherence. Nevertheless, their article does not deeply explore how these Rumi-inspired practices are integrated into formal counter-extremism programmes or whether they explicitly frame themselves in opposition to extremist ideologies. The current research addresses this by investigating the institutional and discursive deployment of Rumi's legacy in Caucasus Sufi activism and community resilience.
- 5) The IX International Rumi Symposium organised by Khazar University in Baku (December 2024) is itself a testament to Rumi's continuing importance in Azerbaijani intellectual life (Khazar University, 2024). According to the university, dozens of scholars from Azerbaijan, Turkey, Iran, Northern Cyprus and beyond discussed Rumi's philosophy, literature and Sufi teachings at this event (Khazar University, 2024). Such scholarly gatherings reflect an institutional commitment to Rumi studies, signalling that his metaphysical and ethical frameworks remain central to regional Sufi discourse. The symposium also highlights how Rumi's work is not just studied academically but integrated into cultural diplomacy, network building and interfaith engagement. These platforms potentially function as soft-power resources, promoting moderation, unity and spiritual dialogue across the Caucasus and beyond. Nevertheless, despite the significance of such intellectual forums, there is limited published research on how symposium outcomes translate into grassroots resilience-building or counter-extremism programmes in Azerbaijan or neighbouring regions. Such a gap suggests that while Rumi's scholarship is institutionally honoured, its practical mobilization in social resilience remains underexamined. This research seeks to bridge that gap by tracking how the networks and ideas emerging from such symposia feed into community-level Sufi initiatives that resist radicalism.

- 6) Karomat Kilicheva (2023) offers a comparative and philosophical exploration of Rumi's Sufi and philosophical heritage, reflecting on his relevance to Turkic Eurasian contexts including the Caucasus (Kilicheva, 2023). Although not Azerbaijani by nationality, her work emphasises how Rumi's metaphysics of ascent, purification and divine love resonate among post-Soviet spiritual seekers. She argues that Rumi's allegorical language facilitates a cross-cultural Sufi identity that transcends national borders and supports spiritual resilience in societies undergoing rapid transformation. Kilicheva also notes that communities in the Caucasus may draw on Rumi to reconstruct a sense of spiritual depth lost during Soviet secularisation. However, she cautions against romanticising Rumi: her analysis shows how some contemporary actors may instrumentalise his legacy for nationalist or ideological ends. While her scholarship illuminates how Rumi's philosophy circulates in post-Soviet spiritual discourse, she does not directly assess how this interaction contributes to structured counter-extremism strategies or resilience programmes. The present study addresses this oversight by empirical inquiry into how Rumi-inspired frameworks are adopted by Sufi actors in the Caucasus to resist ideological radicalism.
- 7) According to cultural-historical accounts of Islam in Azerbaijan, the region once hosted dozens of Sufi orders (*turuq*), but under Soviet rule many fragmented; contemporary attempts to revive these orders often invoke Rumi's teachings (Islam v Prostranstve-Vremeni Azerbajjana, 2023). The text reports that by the 1990s Sufi brotherhoods were largely dormant, but in recent decades there has been a growing revival, with Rumi-inspired literature and study circles playing a role in that resurgence (Islam v Prostranstve-Vremeni Azerbajjana, 2023). This revival is not just spiritual but sociocultural: Sufi communities now contribute to Muslim identity reconstruction in post-Soviet Azerbaijan. Rumi's metaphysical legacy becomes a bridge between tradition and renewal, offering existential meaning in a society negotiating secular modernity. At the same time, the text notes the challenge: some state or religious actors view these revived Sufis warily, perceiving them as potentially 'non-conformist.' Although the historical revival is documented, the source does not systematically examine how Rumi's poetry and metaphysics are mobilised in community resilience against extremism. This suggests that while Sufism is re-emerging, its capacity as a counter-extremism resource has not been fully mapped -- a gap this study seeks to fill.
- 8) In Azerbaijani mystical-philosophical literature, Sayyid Abulqasim Nabati is often compared to Rumi for his asceticism and mystical poetics (NEU Journal of Scientific Mysticism & Literature, 2024). Nabati, a dervish-poet, lived a life of renunciation, composed ascetic poetry and exemplified a mystical path similar to Rumi's in its focus on non-existence (*fana*) and union with the divine (NEU J SML, 2024). Scholars note that his biography includes extensive travel, meditation and engagement with symbolic metaphysics, bearing the stamp of Rumi's influence (NEU J SML, 2024). Researchers argue that Nabati's teachings provide an indigenous Sufi paradigm in Azerbaijan that draws explicitly on Rumi's motifs of love, self-annihilation and spiritual transformation. Through this paradigm, some Sufi communities articulate spiritual resilience: they resist materialism, secular uniformity and ideological extremism by rooting themselves in Rumi-inspired ascetic ethics. However, while scholarly comparisons are rich, there is a paucity of research on how Nabati's Rumi-inflected legacy is institutionally mobilised in resilience or counter-extremism programmes. The current study addresses this by examining how local Sufi orders use the Nabati-Rumi connection to build cohesive community responses to radicalisation.

- 9) Allahshukur Pashazade, the Grand Mufti (Sheikh-ul-Islam) of the Caucasus Muslims' Office, is a significant religious leader in post-Soviet Azerbaijan who has publicly referenced Rumi's mystical heritage in sermons and writings. According to his biographical material, Pashazade has promoted spiritual education and interreligious dialogue, often drawing on Sufi metaphors of divine love, unity and self-purification (Pashazade, biographical record, n.d.). His leadership role gives him theological and institutional leverage; by framing Rumi's legacy as a source of moral and spiritual guidance, he potentially channels mystical traditions into mainstream religious discourse. Observers argue that this offers a stabilising force: in a region vulnerable to religious politicisation, Pashazade's invocation of Rumi supports a moderate, spiritually grounded Islam. However, academic analyses of his use of Rumi are limited: few studies explore whether his invocation constitutes a deliberate counter-extremism strategy or simply a pastoral discourse. This gap is addressed by the present study, which investigates how high-level religious actors in Azerbaijan mobilise Rumi's Sufi metaphysics in institutional resilience and ideological contestation.
- 10) Finally, Rauf Iskandar in his ethnographic work also highlights the role of pilgrimage and heritage in preserving Rumi-inspired Sufi practices in the Caucasus (Iskandar, 2023). He reports that for Sufi dervishes in Abkhazia, Rumi's poetry is chanted, meditated upon and used as a compass for communal ritual practice. These practices, according to Iskandar, help maintain spiritual identity in a context of socio-political instability and contested national belonging. He shows that Rumi's legacy is not just a textual inheritance but a living tradition, integral to how communities sustain meaning and resist fragmentation. Importantly, his fieldwork suggests that these Sufi practices contribute to social cohesion and resilience, offering non-violent spiritual frameworks amid competing ideologies. Nevertheless, while Iskandar describes the community-level importance of Rumi, he does not systematically analyse how these practices feed into structured programmes of ideological resistance or formal counter-extremism initiatives. This study fills that gap by tracing how Rumi-inspired Sufi networks in the Caucasus operate not only spiritually but as resilience actors in a broader ideological ecosystem.

## Conclusion

"Without understanding the past, we cannot comprehend the present." This Russian proverb encapsulates the essence of examining the transnational influence of Rumi and Sufi aesthetics across Pakistan, Iran and the Caucasus. The study has demonstrated that Rumi's mystical poetry is not merely a literary artifact but a living framework shaping spiritual, social and moral resilience in diverse societies. In Pakistan, Rumi-inspired Sufi traditions provide a moral compass and ethical grounding that counteract extremist narratives and foster intercommunal harmony. In Iran, Sufi interpretations under the guidance of contemporary scholars and orders articulate a pluralistic and reflective path that strengthens personal and societal resilience while navigating ideological tensions. Similarly, in Azerbaijan, Georgia and Chechnya, Rumi's metaphysics and allegorical motifs inform cultural identity, communal cohesion and non-violent responses to ideological polarization. Across all contexts, the research highlights the enduring capacity of Rumi's teachings to serve as a counterbalance to extremism by promoting love, humility and self-transcendence. The comparative analysis underscores that while historical and socio-political contexts vary, the universal ethical and mystical principles in Rumi's works remain relevant. The study also identifies gaps in how these traditions are institutionalized and operationalized for resilience, pointing to areas for further research and practical engagement. Ultimately, the lesson is that Rumi's Sufi heritage

offers actionable guidance for cultivating social and ideological resilience, emphasising that spiritual wisdom can serve as a potent tool against extremism in contemporary Muslim societies.

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