

## **A Brief History of The Struggle Between Gonabadi Dervishes and the Islamic Republic of Iran (2005 - 2018)**

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### **Abstract**

The Gonabadi Sufi Order is one of the three main branches of the Nimatullahi Sufi order that was originated by Shah Nimatullahi Wali in the 14th and 15th centuries. The Dervishes, the best known of its followers, assert that they believe in peace, security, and equality and avoid violence and politics. The constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran is officially based on the “Twelver Shia” and only recognizes a small minority as a religion officially. In spite of this, even though they describe themselves as the “Twelver Shia”, they reject the principal foundations of the Islamic Republic of Iran’s official religion. As a result, dervishes were declared as “heretics” by the state. After the Revolution, especially after 1995, systematic attacks have intensified on members of the order and their Hosseiniyeh, where they performed their religious rituals. The Hosseiniyeh in Kerman was the first place to be attacked; the Hosseiniyehs in Qom, Tehran, Karaj, and Borujerd were also attacked and destroyed. Eventually, the scale of the attacks was expanded to the tombs of the prominent figures of the Gonabadi order. These conflicts increased in intensity after 2005, in Ahmadinejad’s presidency, and caused social outrages that resulted in death at various times. In this study, the background of these fierce conflicts will be examined and the history of the conflict will be conveyed. The events that led the dervishes, who define themselves peaceful at every opportunity, to such violent conflicts with the state will be perused. In addition, the reasons why the state sees these dervishes as an internal enemy will be examined.

**Keywords:** Iran, the Gonabadi Dervishes, Sufism, Shia, the Nimatullahi Order.

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## **Gonabadi Dervişleri ve İran İslam Cumhuriyeti Arasındaki Çatışmaların Kısa Tarihi (2005 - 2018)**

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### **Öz**

Gonabadi Dervişleri, Şah Nimetullahi Veli tarafından 14 ile 15. yüzyıllarda kurulmuş Nimetullahi Tarikatının üç ana kolundan birisidir. Halk arasında “Dervişler” olarak bilinen Gonabadiler kendilerini barışa, güvenliğe ve eşitliğe inanan, şiddet ve siyasetten uzak bir grup şeklinde tanımlamaktadırlar. Her ne kadar kendilerini On İki İmam Şia’sından tanımlasalar da İran İslam Cumhuriyeti’nin politik temellerini teşkil eden ve anayasasında da bulunan temel unsurları reddetmektedirler. Bu sebeple Dervişler devlet tarafından “sapkın” ilan edilmiştir. Devrim’den sonra, özellikle de 1995 sonrası gelişen süreçte bu grubun mensuplarına ve dini ibadetlerini gerçekleştirdikleri Hüseyniyelerine sistematik saldırılar yoğunlaşmıştır. İlk saldırı Kirman’daki Hüseyniyede gerçekleşmiş, ardından Kum, Tahran, Kerec ve Burucerd’teki Hüseyniyeleri saldırıya uğrayarak yıkılmıştır. En sonunda saldırıların ölçeği Gonabadi Dervişlerinin önemli isimlerinin mezarlarına kadar genişleyerek bu mezarlara saldırılar gerçekleşmiştir. Ahmedinejad’ın cumhurbaşkanı olduğu 2005 yılı ve sonrasında Gonabadiler üzerindeki baskı artmış ve gerilim yıldan yıla tırmanmıştır. 2005 ile 2018 yılları arasında yaşanan irili ufaklı birçok olay neticesinde çok sayıda derviş tutuklanmıştır. 2018 yılında yaşanan olaylar bu tırmanışın zirve noktası olmuştur. Bu çalışmada, bu şiddetli çatışmaların arka planı incelenecek ve çatışmanın tarihi aktarılacaktır. Kendilerini her fırsatta barışçıl olarak niteleyen Dervişlerin devletle neden sorunlar yaşadığı ve devletin de Dervişleri neden bir “iç düşman” olarak nitelendirdiği detaylıca irdelenecektir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** İran, Gonabadi Dervişleri, Sufizm, Şia, Nimetullahi Tarikatı.

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## 1. Introduction

Sufism or *Tasawwuf* has a long history in Iran. Sufism is “a mystical Islamic belief and practice in which Muslims seek to find the truth of divine love and knowledge through the direct personal experience of God”, according to Encyclopedia Britannica (Schimmel, 2019). The Gonabadi Dervishes define Sufism as “the spiritual reality of Islam, even if it was not known as ‘Sufism’ at the inception of Islam” (Pazouki, 2016, p. 439). In Iran, Nimatullahiyya and the Dhahabiyya have been two dominant Sufi *tariqas* -the Sufi doctrine or path of spiritual learning- since the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Lewisohn, 1998, p. 286). The Gonabadiyya (or the Gonabadi Dervishes) is the largest of the three main Nimatullahi orders and the predominant Shi'ite Sufi *silsila* (chain of spiritual authority) in Iran (van den Bos, 2013). Nimatullahi order has three branches: The Gonabadi-Nimatullahi (the main and largest), the Safi Ali Shah, and the Munawar Ali Shah (Algar, 2002; Lewisohn, 1998; van den Bos, 2013). Besides these orders, other Sufi orders in Iran such as Qadiriyya, Naqshbandis, and Ahl-i Haqq.

Shah Nimatullah-e Wali (Noor ad-Din Nimatullah Wali, d. 1431), Syrian born Iranian Sufi and the founder of the order, which spread rapidly since the 15<sup>th</sup> century, is a *Sayyid* (descendant of the prophet Mohammad) descendant of Mohammad Bagher, who is the seventh of the twelve Imam. Shah Nimatullah left Iran and received his education in various places. After returning to Iran, he settled in Mahan. He opened a *zawiya* (the place where cult activities are carried out) and, according to rumors, lived there until he died at the age of one hundred and five in 1431. He conveyed the order's lineage to Ali bin Abu Taleb through Juneyd-e Baghdadi. He also dressed his followers in twelve-slice hats representing the twelve imams (Ocak, 1992, p. 45).

Although Sufism has a long history in Iran, not all incidents will be discussed here. During the 17<sup>th</sup> century, in the Safavid era, several pogroms were launched against the Sufis, and that is why the Nimatullah order entered a period of stagnation until 1770 (Lewisohn, 1998, p. 439). According to Zayn al-Abidin Shirvani, aside from a few dervishes of the Nurbakhshi order and Dhahabi order, Sufism vanished. Shirvani says, “in the whole land of Iran, there is neither abode nor site a dervish can lay his head” (Shirvani, 1929, p. 258). The history of Sufism in Iran contains dozens of murders against Sufis, such as Seyyed Masum Ali Shah, the re-founder of the order, and the next two *qotb* (the leader of the order).

Seyyed Ali Masum Ali Shah's advent in Iran in 1770, the "Nimatullahi renaissance" began. He was a charismatic leader and traveled widely and often throughout Iran. He and his built *khanegahs* (the Sufi centers) in various Iranian cities, and he found to chance to stay in Shiraz in 1775. During his residency with his followers in Shiraz, his and his follower's charisma caused the Nimatullahi order ranks to swell to tens of thousands. The increase of his followers worried Timur Shah Durrani (Kucukkalfa, 2017, p. 305; Lewisohn, 1998, p. 443). However, the "bigoted" *akhunds* (mullahs) could change the air, and Karim Khan Zand, famous as a creator of Shiraz's liberal intellectual and social atmosphere, and initially warmly welcomed the Sufis, exiled the Sufis from the city (Lewisohn, 1998, p. 442)

On the other hand, the supporters of Masum Ali Shah were free to act from the clutches of "bigoted" mullahs, and it may be considered the neo-classical revival in Persian literature (*bâz-gasht-e âdâbi*) as a spiritual counterpart of the Nimatullahi revival that began at the same time. Noor Ali Shah went to Isfahan, but they were obligated to abandon the city after a bit. When they headed to Tehran, the ruler of Isfahan's police chief captured them and cropped their ears (Lewisohn, 1998, p. 443). After this incident, they traveled a lot from India to Najaf. Briefly, Masum Ali Shah came to Kerman, but Agha Mohammad of Qajar invaded Kerman in 1794 and massacred its male and enslaved its female inhabitants. Agha Mohammad Bihbâni, a fanatical Shiite cleric, constantly made anti-Sufi pogrom propaganda. His notorious sobriquet was *sufi-kush* (the Sufi-killer). Eventually, he secretly poisoned Masum Ali Shah in 1795. After a year, the next *qutbs*, Noor Ali Shah and Mozaffar Ali Shah, were murdered by Bihbâni. Hence, the first three *qutbs* of the Nimatullahi order were murdered by a mullah (Lewisohn, 1998, p. 441; Pourjavady, n.d.; Seyed Mostafa Azmayesh, 2003).

Rahmat Ali Shah (d. 1861) was the last universally accepted master of the Nimatullahi order in Iran. He was the deputy governor of Fars under Mohammad Shah Qajar. In his time, the order had reached the peak point of its external power. After his death, there were three claimants to his succession: Munawwar Ali Shah (see appendix 1), Saadat Ali Shah (see appendix 2) and Safi Ali Shah (see appendix 3) (van den Bos, 2013). Consequently, the order had split into three branches.

An Isfahani tobacco merchant, Saadat Ali Shah (Hajji Mohammad Kâzim Tanbâkû-furûsh, d. 1872), became the *qutb* of the Gonabadi branch of the order, and today, this branch is the most crowded Sufi group in Iran. The term “Gonabadi” refers to a city in Khorasan-e Razavi province where Soltan Ali Shah resided (Algar, 2002). The group primarily resides in Tehran, Isfahan, Khorasan, and Lorestan provinces (IRB, 2021).

The dervishes did not have significant problems with the government during the Pahlavi era. The government mostly tolerated the dervishes. For example, Reza Ali Shah (Soltan Hossein Tabandeh Gonabadi, d. 1992) had good relations with the government. For this reason, the Dervishes will be accused by their opponents in the future for the claim that they enlarged the order during the Shah period (Seda-ye Iran, 2018b, 2018a). On the other hand, he had criticized the government regarding the religious point of view (van den Bos, 2013). He also sent a congratulation letter to Ayatollah Khomeini upon Khomeini’s release from the prison. After the Revolution, he proclaimed his fealty to the new political establishment (Nurbakhsh, 1992).

After the Revolution, the dervishes gradually lost their religious rights. Therefore, the conflict timeline can be divided into two parts: after the Revolution and after 2005 when Ahmadinejad was elected. Also, the problems can be categorized into four categories: the rejection of Velayet-e Faqih (guardianship of the jurist, a theory developed by Ayatollah Khomeini), rejection of the concept of the *taqlid* (the conformity of one person to the teaching of another), disputes in the Islamic tax apportionment, and people’s interest in Sufism. Therefore, the first part will discuss the differences of opinion behind the conflict between the Dervishes and the government, and the second part will examine the incidents after 2005.

The main purpose of this study is to give a brief history of the conflict between the Gonabadi Dervishes and the Islamic Republic of Iran until 2018 and to discuss about the reasons behind the conflict by implementing historical descriptive approach through media review. Although there are many sources about Sufism, its history, and Iranian Sufism, there is a limited number of reliable sources about Sufism in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Moreover, in addition to the difficulty of accessing Persian resources, during the research phase of this study, the Gonabadi order’s official website was shut down. On the other hand, the Munawwar Ali Shah

Branch-Nimatullahi order leader, Dr. Alireza Noorbakhsh, lives in Oxford/England. He and his father, the previous *qutb*, Noor Ali Shah (Dr. Javad Nurbakhsh, d. 2008), published many books and articles about Sufism and the Nimatullahi Order. However, even though there are a couple of books of Majzoob Ali Shah, the Gonabadi Dervishes do not have that chance to publish their works as the other branch does. Only sources about them are a couple of encyclopedia articles, periodically published international human rights reports, and a few academic studies. There are also very few YouTube videos about them. On the other hand, many harsh texts (or video) describe how strange their prayers are, how heretic they are, or how they engage in *shirk* (polytheism), especially in Persian sources. Hence, the most challenging part of researching the dervishes is the lack of reliable resources.

Encyclopedia articles and academic works such as Leonard Lewisohn's work were beneficial in understanding the historical background of the order. In addition, human rights reports and news about the dervishes were also beneficial in understanding where they resided and the chronology of the incidents. Iran Human Rights Documentation Center's report dated March 2021 is the most comprehensive study ever prepared about the conflict. Finally, news, interviews, and videos published in 2018 during the Dervish protests gave much information about the dervishes.

## **2. Background of Conflict Between the Dervishes and the Government**

The first issue of conflict between the two sides is over Velayet-e Faqih. The Gonabadi Order does not accept the Velayet-e Faqih (Guardianship of the Jurist) theory which is the crucial pillar of the Revolution and the system (Algar, 2002; Ansari, 2018; van den Bos, 2013; Witschge, 2018). Naturally, this situation disturbs the establishment. Moreover, the Gonabadi Dervishes acknowledge the holiness and leadership of their Qutb, not Shiite clerics, during the Mahdi's occultation (IHRDC, 2021). Qutb is the highest rank in sufism. According to Oxford Dictionary of Islam, Qutb is, "in Sufi thought, a human manifestation of divine consciousness, only one of which exists in any age, and around whom the spiritual life of the age revolves, that is, through whom spiritual knowledge is gained. It is the

highest rank in the Sufi hierarchical structure of saints or walis, equivalent to the Shii understanding of the role of the imam” (The Oxford Dictionary of Islam, 2003).

Another reason is that Noor Ali Shah was a relatively politically active figure. He was a lawyer and served in Mehdi Bazargan’s provisional government. He also defended high-profile political prisoners. In one of his letters, he says, “Dervishes do not interfere in politics, But Dervishes do have free will” (IHRDC, 2021). Considering all this, apart from the historical incidents between the two groups, it is also seen that the conflict has other philosophical backgrounds.

Another essential conflict issue is the rejection of the concept of the *taqlid*. *Taqlid* (emulation) is “in religious laws means acting according to the verdict of a Mujtahid” (Sistani, nd). Senior Shiite clerics interpret the holy texts and traditions for laypersons, who have no choice but to follow them (Ansari, 2018; Iran Global, 2018). *Taqlid* is crucial for Shia, but the Gonabadi order does not accept the Velayet-e Faqih notion.

Disputes in the Islamic tax apportionment is another severe issue between the two sides. According to Shiite jurisprudence, Shiite Muslims should pay two types of taxes: *Zakat* and *Khums*. As these taxes are a matter of faith, the Iranian state does not enforce them like state-mandated taxes (IQNA, 2020). These taxes are collected in the Faqihs, and the Faqihs are highly dependent on the *Khums* as a financial resource. However, the Gonabadi Dervishes do not pay the *Khums*. They give one-tenth of their income to their Qutb under the name “Osheriyeh” to be used for charity. As a result, the Faqihs unanimously decided that this tax was against Islam (IHRDC, 2021). In summary, the Dervishes also conflict with faqihs financially.

Another subject of disagreement between the state and the dervishes is people’s interest in Sufism. The notion of love is at the center of the philosophy of Sufism. In brief, they argue that Islam spread that much with good words, not with the sword and the punishments (Ansari, 2018). The idea of Sufism about unity without discrimination attracts the attention of those who reject the Faqihs politically but do not want to abandon Islam. Moreover, this group is growing day by day (Saber, 2006). This is another issue that makes the establishment feel threatened.

That is why there is much anti-Sufi propaganda about the Gonabadi order. There are dozens of articles, news and, videos accusing that the Dervishes worship their Qutb, that they are heretic and apostate (Seda-ye Iran, 2018a; YouTube, 2016, 2017, 2018). There is even a website called “Majzooban-e Koor” (Sobers of the Blind) referring to the official website of the Gonabadi order, “Majzooban-e Noor” (Sobers of the Light, it is also referring the name of Qutb, Majzoob Ali Shah).

### **3. The Chronology of the Conflicts or the Attacks towards the Gonabadi Dervishes**

Although the dervishes are Twelver Shia (the largest branch of Shia Islam), and the sources indicate that they pray five times a day and fast during Ramadan (IRB, 2021), there are many fundamental differences between the Dervishes and faqihs as it will be explained further. The conflict between Sufis (*ashegh*) and Mullahs (ascetics, *zahed*) can be observed as a theme even in classical poetry in Iran, the Ottoman Empire, and India for centuries. The masters of the dervishes describe themselves as “*majzoob*” (sober) or “*masf*” (rapt) (van den Bos, 2013). This is related to the concept of “*ashq*” (love), “*asheq*” (lover), and “*mashooq*” (beloved). Mullah (or in poetry *zahed*) sees the Sufi (in poetry *ashegh*) as a heretic, and the Sufi always despises the Mullah not to understand the “secret”.

When the incidents in the sources are examined, it is seen that the point of view of the Mullahs towards the Sufis has never changed and vice versa. In brief, the fate of the Sufis has changed depending on whether the Shah or the ruler who came to power respects the anti-Sufi propaganda of the Mullahs or not. From a historical perspective, it is seen that the Sufis were subjected to pogroms and murdered in times when mullahs had power, like the Safavid era. At the same time, they even took office in the state in the more tolerant periods like the Qajars. In this context, the reasons can be understood why the tension between the Dervishes and the government increased during the Ahmadinejad era when there was intense conservatism.



### **3.1. The situation of the Dervishes After the Revolution**

The Mullahs in Iran have had the state's power by coming to power with the Revolution on February 11, 1979. Therefore, the above-mentioned Mullah-Dervish conflict has gone to another level. Just after the Revolution, there were attacks on dervish graves in Kerman. Then in November 1979, Moshir Al-Sataneh Hosseiniyeh (Amir-Soleimani Hosseiniyeh) on Behesht Street in Tehran was burned (DeutscheWelle, 2018). At the same time, there were attacks on the dervish leaders' tombs buried in the Shah Abdul Azim area in Shahr-e Reh, South of Tehran (IHRDC, 2021). The Shia clerics supported these attacks, and they justified their actions by accusing Dervishes of "misleading the youth and Hezbollah" (DeutscheWelle, 2018).

Hujjat al-Islam Mohammad Madani Gonabadi, a mullah who is famous for his hostility towards the Dervishes from the time of the Pahlavi, tried to influence the state by doing propaganda. He claimed that the Dervishes are always pro-Shah, and they reached current power with the Shah's support. He wrote two books about the Dervishes and organized the people against them (Seda-ye Iran, 2018a, 2018b). With his propaganda, people burned farms that belonged to dervishes. Moreover, he supported thugs to harass Soltan Reza Ali Shah. Subsequently, Soltan Reza Ali Shah relocated to Tehran from Gonabad (Ansari, 2018).

In 1983, a conservative group raided the Gonabadi Dervishes' Hosseiniyeh. After that, the municipality completely demolished the damaged building and turned it into a public park (Chamani, 2018). During this period, there were several attacks toward the Dervishes. At the end of the process, the leaders of the Dervishes were banned from free travel between cities. In 1980, a Gonabadi leader, Hedayat Ali Nasouti, was beaten and arrested by plainclothes police on his way from Shiraz to Jahrom in Fars Province (IHRDC, 2021).

After all these incidents, Ayatollah Khomeini granted the request to reconstruct Amir Soleimani Hosseiniyeh in 1981. He also guaranteed the safety of the Dervishes and the freedom to travel again (Ansari, 2018). It should not be forgotten that the Iran-Iraq War broke out at that time, and the establishment tried to prevent all kinds of issues that would cause internal unrest in the country. Another reason is the past good relations of Khomeini's family with the Gonabadi Dervishes (Ansari, 2018). However, things were changed after Khomeini's death.

The 1990s were the years when targeting against the Dervishes has begun. During these years, universities, especially in Qom, carried out “academic” activities against deviant groups, including the Gonabadi order (DeutscheWelle, 2018). In 1997, Saeed Emami, former deputy to the Minister of Intelligence and responsible for chain murders, made a speech about the Dervishes. Emami describes the Dervishes as “one of the four most dangerous groups”. This speech is considered a milestone by the Dervishes (VOA, 2015; YouTube, 2018). Another critical incident took place in 1991. A part of the Amir Soleimani Hosseiniyeh was set on fire. Soon after, a wall was built in the burned area, and the area was later occupied by a state foundation (Shabtab News, 2018).

### **3.2. The Situation of the Dervishes After 2005**

The conservative atmosphere in the country increased even more with Ahmadinejad becoming the president, and the situation has begun to deteriorate for the Dervishes. After this time, the Dervishes’ religious sites have started to be closed by the government (Ansari, 2018). In addition, many statesmen, even the Supreme Leader, made statements against the Dervishes. As a result, violence has escalated rapidly and reached the breaking point in the 2018 protests.

This part will explain how the events after 2005 escalated day by day and how the dervishes who describe themselves as “peaceful” were drawn into the circle of violence. In 2018, the Golestan-e Haftom incidents were the culmination of this process and resulted in police death. For this reason, the cornerstones of this process will be covered year by year in this section.

Between 2005 and 2018, almost all the Gonabadi order’s Hosseiniyehs were destroyed, many dervishes were arrested, and some died in custody. From the same year, propaganda activities about dervishes have also accelerated. For example, several anti-Sufi books were published and distributed widely in Qom (BBC-Persian, 2014), or many times, leaflets were distributed in various cities against the Dervishes, and they called them “the enemies of Mohammad” (IHRDC, 2021). Although Majzoob Ali Shah, the *Qotb* of the Gonabadi Dervishes at that time, wrote a letter to Rouhani after he was elected in 2013, the violence has continued (Bciran, 2013).

In 2006, the government prevented the Dervishes who wanted to open a Hosseiniyeh in Qom. Although the Dervishes attempted to overcome this problem, from distributing sweets and flowers to people in the streets to writing a letter to Khamenei, they could not get any results. Eventually, Basij, a paramilitary group of Iran, came in front of the Hosseiniyeh and set on fire and two houses belonging to the Dervishes next to Hosseiniyeh. Afterward, it was demolished with bulldozers. According to some Shiite clerics such as Shashhani, “in Islam there are only mosques, not *khanegahs*, like in Christianity there are only churches or in Judaism only Synagogues. So, therefore, there must only be mosques in Islam, and they will not tolerate building a *khanegah* next to the Masoumeh Shrine and the offices of senior Shia clerics in Qom”. As a result of the protests, around 200 Dervishes were injured, and many were arrested (IHRDC, 2021).

Similar incidents took place in Boroujerd in 2007. One of the Dervishes’ Hosseiniyeh was burned, and the media said that this incident was “the result of a fight between the Dervishes, who insulted the Friday Prayers, and the Basij”. As a result, 180 dervishes were arrested, and most of them were injured (IHRDC, 2021). According to the Dervishes, plainclothes Basijs surrounded the Hosseiniyeh and demolished the part of the wall. After the demolition of the walls, there was a clash between the Dervishes who wanted to protect themselves (BBC, 2007).

Due to city code violations, another Hosseiniyeh of the Gonabadi order was demolished in Chermahin, a small city in Isfahan Province, in July 2007. In June and October 2008, the Hosseiniyehs in Ahvaz and Omidieh, cities in Khuzestan Province, were attacked with Molotov cocktails. The Dervishes received threatening letters on the same days (Refworld, 2010).

In December 2008, security forces attacked another Hosseiniyeh in Kish Island while the Dervishes were inside. They beat and arrested the Dervishes and locked the Hosseiniyeh’s door. Afterward, lawyers who went to the Island to defend the Dervishes were also arrested (Pezhvak, 2008).

Funeral ceremonies were prohibited in Mazar-e Soltani, an important cemetery for the Order, located in Bidokht, the central city of the Gonabadi Order. The supervisor of Mazar-e Soltani was sentenced to one year in prison for the violation of this prohibition. The Dervishes who wanted to

protest this situation by sitting in front of the Provincial Governor's office in Gonabad in July 2009 were also arrested. In May 2010, 24 Dervishes were sentenced to prison, flogging, and internal exile (Refworld, 2010).

The central Hosseiniyeh was closed in 1995, and several Gonabadi leaders were forced to relocate from Isfahan. However, leaflets were distributed in Isfahan in the Friday Prayer in 2009. It calls people to attack the Gonabadi Hosseiniyehs. There was another Hosseiniyeh and library in Takht-e Foulad, a historical cemetery of the Dervishes. The Dervishes were concerned about the safety of their historical place, and several Dervishes started to stay overnight (Radio Farda, 2009b). On the night of February 18, 2009, the security forces attacked the Hosseiniyeh and library. Bulldozers destroyed both. Before the destruction, security forces collect all of the books and valuable things from the place. In the following days, the Dervishes gathered near the ruins and began to wait. This time, the Basij attacked them, several Dervishes were wounded and arrested again (Radio Farda, 2009a).

After 2010, the violence started to increase even more. In January 2010, a group of dervishes wanted to bury a body at Mazar-e Soltani Mausoleum in Gonabad. However, security forces prevented the Dervishes, and 24 Dervishes were arrested on charges of "disturbing public order and burying corpses at a forbidden place". Ten Dervishes were sentenced to five months' imprisonment, flogging, and internal exile for one year (IHRDC, 2021). In the same year, there were attacks on Sayed al-Shoada Hosseiniyeh in Karaj, but these attacks had less dire consequences than others (IHRDC, 2021).

During 2011, there were fatal attacks between Basij members and dervishes in small cities such as Kovar in Fars Province, and Fooladshahr, In Isfahan Province. Several Dervishes died as a result of these attacks (IHRDC, 2021).

In January 2013, the tension between the Dervishes and the government had begun to rise considerably. The attack on Shahr-e Kurd prayer center played an essential role in increasing the tension. The Shar-e Kurd municipality announced that a house in which dervishes held their gatherings and prayers must be destroyed because such usage in a residential dwelling was against the law (IHRDC, 2021). However, when the security forces

came to the place, they faced severe resistance and retreated. Dervishes from all over the country began to come to the city for resistance. They also sent open letters to high-ranking officers, including Khamenei (Asrar Haqiqat, 2013). After a bit of these incidents, another conflict occurred in Bandar Abbas and Khorramshahr in Khuzestan Province in May 2013. In the tension between the intelligence ministry local officers and the Dervishes, the Basij threatened the Dervishes and severely beat the two of them (IHRDC, 2021).

Dervishes describe themselves as peaceful and aloof from politics. However, hundreds of thousands of people exposed to such systematic attacks have become politicized and started organized civil resistance as of 2014. The Dervishes in Evin and Adel Abad prisons went on hunger strike because their friends could not access adequate medical treatment. The families of the imprisoned dervishes called for a gathering at the Tehran prosecutor's office to express their support on March 8, 2014. Despite the officials' promises, security forces violently attacked protesters and arrested at least 300 Dervishes (Haghighatnejad, 2014). According to the Iran Human Rights Documentation Center's Report, the security forces dragged the ladies on the ground, pulled on their hair, and their scarves fell off their heads (IHRDC, 2021). Soon after, on July 20, 2014, the Majzoooban-e Noor website called for a campaign named the *Kouch* (Migrate). This is quite an exciting campaign. They demanded a fatwa from the Ayatollahs about whether they were a heretic or not. They also demanded that all dervishes come to the Tehran Prosecutor's Office with their hands tied and blindfolded. Thus, they asked the government to arrest them all. On September 20, 2014, dervishes from all over the country arrived in Tehran. The police arrested 800 people and held them for two days. As a result, the campaign was unsuccessful (IHRDC, 2021).

### **3.3. The Golestan-e Haftom Incident**

The Golestan-e Haftom Incident or the Dervish Protests in 2018 is the peak point of the conflicts between the two sides. Basij placed a checkpoint near the house of the 90 years old spiritual leader of the Order, Noor Ali Tabandeh, in the northern Tehran, street of Golestan-e Haftom. The Gonabadi Dervishes were concerned that their leader would be arrested

and started to protest (IHRDC, 2021). Dervishes from all over the country gathered around Tabandeh's house. A few days later, the Dervishes started to patrol around the house because of rumors that their leader would be under house arrest (VOA, 2015; YouTube, 2018; Zimmt, 2018).

On January 31, the dervishes, who were sleeping in a car in a parking spot, were attacked by the Basij. In the following days, the Basij attacked the people by coming and escaping on their motorcycles. On January 17, several dervishes were arrested, including a 68-year-old dervish, Nimatullah Riahi (IHRDC, 2021). Two days later, a video of Noor Ali Tabandeh was posted on the Majzooaban-e Noor Telegram channel. In the video, Tabandeh urged the Dervishes to "stay away from violence and disperse" (Pooya, 2018; Witschge, 2018).

Nimatullah Riahi had severe health issues, and the Dervishes began to gather to stage a peaceful protest at the police station around noon to end his detention. A couple of hours later, several warning gunshots were fired from inside of the station. In response, the Dervishes started to chant "*Allahu Akbar*" and blocked the Pasdaran Avenue, where the police station was located. Thereupon, dozens of anti-riot police came to the area in a short time and fired tear gas and plastic bullets (IHRDC, 2021).

The Dervishes returned to Golestan-e Haftom street. The anti-riot police surrounded them, and they were attacked by people in plain clothes. Dervishes tried to defend themselves by creating barricades, throwing stones, and setting trash bins on fire (IHRDC, 2021; Witschge, 2018; Zimmt, 2018). The clashes continued all night. A bus came from Paydarfar Street and ran over polices. Three of them were killed. Later in the day, a car ran over a police group and ran away. At 2 pm, a group of security forces visited Tabandeh and a group of the Dervishes and asked them to help end this situation. Tabandeh and the Dervishes accepted (IHRDC, 2021).

As a result, 300 Dervishes were arrested on February 20, 2018. Police announced that, apart from the three officers, two more Basij members were killed. President Rouhani said, "he will not tolerate any violent behavior toward law enforcement officers". Noor Ali Tabandeh expressed his regret over the death of police and Basij forces. He said, "If you are worried about my health and you want to come to Tehran, thank God, I am well, and there is no concern about that. Do not come to Tehran during this

period”. Interior Minister Abdolrahman Rahmani Fazli stated that “those who clashed with police were not dervishes” (Al-Monitor, 2018). Those thought to be guilty were executed. The clashes between the two groups ceased since Noor Ali Tabandeh’s death in 2019. Iran’s current economic and political conditions also have a role because the establishment does not want any new protests.

When all these events are taken into account, it is seen that the reactions that started with the sit-ins from 2005 grew to the police crushing with bus and car in 2018. All of these incidents were widely covered in the domestic and foreign press. Moreover, human rights organizations closely followed and reported these events.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Both Sufism and the Sufi-Faqih conflict have a long history in Iran. Sufis have been accused of being a heretic by Faqihs and subjected to anti-Sufi propaganda in all eras. After a series of massacres in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Sufism declined in Iran. However, the “Nimatullahi Renaissance” began with the arrival of Seyyed Ali Masum Ali Shah in Iran in 1770. He was a charismatic leader and spread Sufism by visiting many parts of Iran. Thus, Sufism settled in Iran and found a chance to develop again.

The three branches of the Nimatullahi Order, founded by Shah Nimatullah-e Wali, are active in Iran today, and the Gonabadi branch is the most populous. Today, members of all branches are actively engaged in their activities. Among the tension that fell with the death of Noor Ali Tabandeh, as well as sanctions, economic problems, elections, and social issues, the attention is not on the Dervishes today. However, considering the historical process, it can be said that this issue may come up again in the future.

The problem between the Sufis and the Mullahs dates back to ancient times and has remained unchanged until today, and it does not seem to change. Because they have severe differences of opinion, they reject the most important pillars of the Islamic Republic by not accepting the Velayet-e Faqih, the concept of *taqlid*, and the *Khums* taxation. Thus, they stand against the Mullah both politically, theologically, and economically. This refusal is a major cause of all conflicts with government. In addition, the increasing interest of the people in Sufism and the crowded dervish

population made the establishment feel threatened. This perception of threat caused dervishes to experience years full of distress and pain.

Despite all the anti-Sufi propaganda, the Sufis lived relatively comfortably under the Qajar and Pahlavi Dynasties compared to the Islamic Republic. From the first month of the Revolution, the Sufis have constantly been attacked. Their Hosseiniyehs were destroyed, and their members were imprisoned. All this conflict peaked with the protests in 2018. The “peaceful” reactions of the dervishes turned violent with these events. As a result of the protests, hundreds of Dervishes were arrested, and those thought to be guilty were executed. The conflict between the two groups seems to have subsided since Noor Ali Tabandeh’s death in 2019. Iran’s current economic and political conditions also have a role in this because the establishment does not want any new social outbreak. At this stage, it is difficult to say that tensions will rise between the two sides in the near future.

### **Disclosure**

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### **Beyan**

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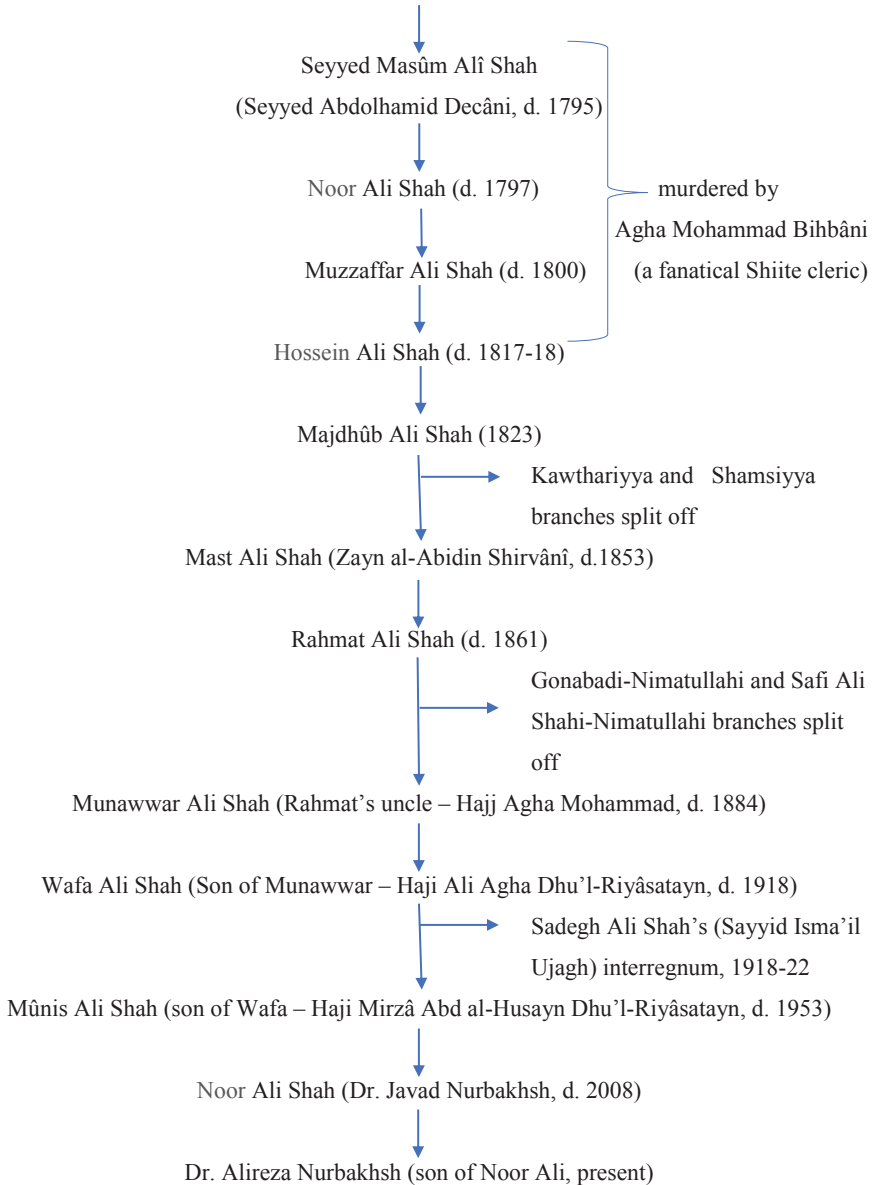
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## Appendices

### Appendix 1

#### The Lineage of Nimatullahiyya order (Munawwar Ali Shah branch)

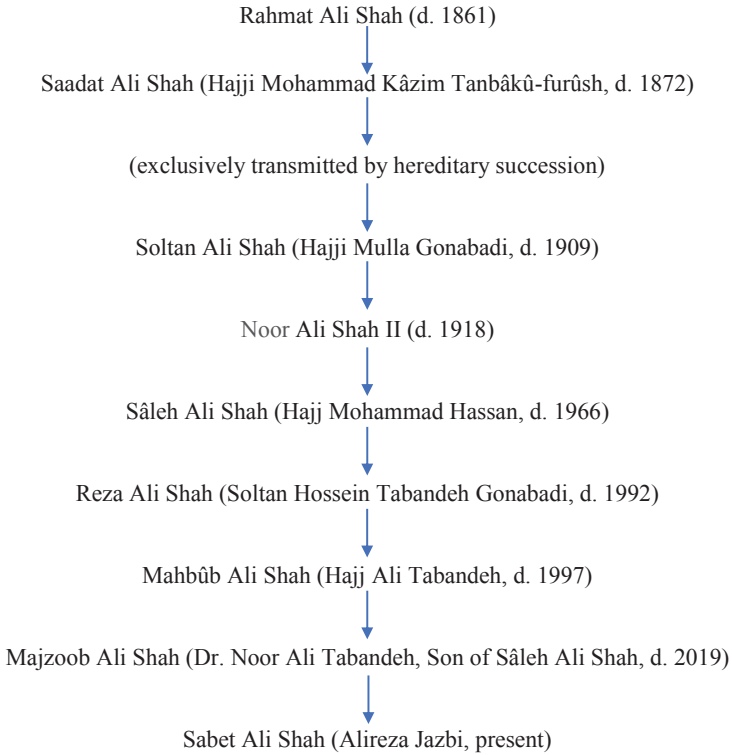
in 1770, Seyyed Masûm Ali Shah comes to Iran at the behest of Reza Ali Dikkani (d. 1796)



Source: (Lewisohn, 1998, p. 447)

## Appendix 2

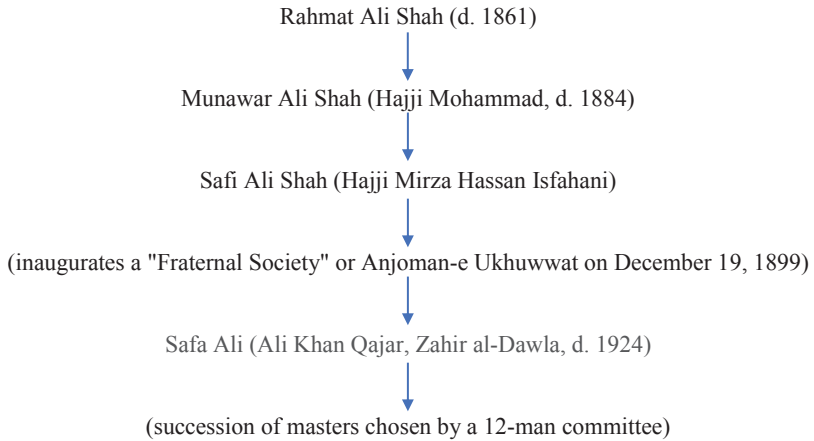
### The Lineage of the Gonabadi-Nimatullahi order



Source: (Lewisohn, 1998, p. 451)

### Appendix 3

#### The Lineage of the Safi Ali Shahi-Nimatullahi brotherhood



Source: (Lewisohn, 1998, p. 455)