

# SUFISM IN THE MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY IRANIAN POLITICS

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## Abstract:

*The objective of this article is to explore how political Sufism, in conjunction with political Shī'ism, influences contemporary Iranian internal and external affairs, the decision-making process, and the future political ideology. While religion has consistently been an integral part of Iranian state and culture, the primary faith has not always played a definitive role in political decisions throughout history, particularly in recent decades. To gain a deeper understanding of Iranian politics and its future trajectory, it is essential to comprehend the role of Sufi elements within it. This work elucidates the core political Sufi ideas and their persistence and development within Persian borders up to the present day, despite facing substantial opposition from the ulama. Furthermore, in order to identify these Sufi elements within the current Iranian political landscape, the article analyzes all presidential administrations since the Revolution and highlights how political Sufism has become ingrained in both the decision-making process and political propaganda.*

**Key-words:** *Sufism, Iran, politics, Shī'ism, propaganda, eschatology*

## INTRODUCTION: WHY SHOULD WE FOCUS ON POLITICAL SUFISM

In order to truly understand the manner in which the Iranian state and leadership functions, it is absolutely necessary to acknowledge the importance of the most defining element for Iran both as a country and culturally: religion. Even though Twelver Shī'ism is the state religion of Iran and the most common one inside the Persian borders, it is not the single one that shaped the mentality and traditions of Iranians over the centuries. Surprisingly enough, even the

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modern and contemporary political sphere has not escaped from this external influence. Along Shī'ites, there are important communities of Sunni, Zoroastrian, Christian, Hindu, and, probably the most relevant, Sufi people (officially about 7%<sup>1</sup>), each putting its print on the original Shī'i eschatological and messianic story, which is commonly used to legitimize everything in Iran from its inception and particularly since 1979.

It is neither strange nor new in Iran's long and violent history for religion and politics to be intermingled, especially throughout and after Khomeini's reign. However, not just Shī'ism played an important role in this perpetual connection between religion and politics, but also Sufism, the mystical non-branch of Islam that evolved over centuries from complete asceticism and indirect social involvement to today's relative direct approach to Iranian political and popular issues.

This implication in the state affairs of Sufism alongside Shī'ism is interesting and essential to be understood from three main aspects:

First of all, many Sufis consider state meddling in private affairs to be a "nuisance" (*mozahem*). Usually, individuals are targeted by Sufi values in their private lives, but today the influence on state politics is most obvious in public publications and audiovisual productions<sup>2</sup>. After 1989, there has been an ideological convergence between Sufism and the state that was triggered by the establishment of state mysticism on the one hand, and Sufism's ongoing ethical *réveil* on the other.

Second, most of the leaders of Iran from the Qajar Era until the present were highly influenced (sometimes involuntarily) by Sufi practices or had an affinity for mysticism. This can be observed in the cases of several Shāhs, majlis, ministers, members of the Assembly, and even Supreme Leaders (both Khomeini and Khamenei), as well as presidents (such as Rafsanjānī, Khatami, Ahmadīnejād or Rouhani).

Last but not least, even the existence of the Sufi orders under the second Pahlavi Shāh (1941-1979) was largely unknown until the publication of Richard

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<sup>1</sup> Sufis can be Shī'ah or Sunni (Sufism is not a classic Muslim branch), so a statistical parallel including all three of them would be impossible. US Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, *International Religious Freedom Report 2007: Iran*, 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Such as <https://www.majzooban.org/fa/> or website of the Permanent Secretariat of the Biennial Symposium Examining the Existential Dimensions of the Divine Mahdī (*Dabirkhana-yi da'imi-yi ijlas-i dusalaneyi barrasi-yi ab'ad-i vujud-i hazrat-i Mahdī*).

Gramlich's seminal study in the 1960s<sup>3</sup>. Several authors<sup>4</sup> have just begun to fill the void in the early 1990s, but there is still much more to discover regarding the implications of Sufism in the political sphere.

That being the case, the purpose of this article is to find how is Sufism involved in today's Iranian politics, how do political Shī'ism and Sufism manage to coexist despite their discrepancies and if Sufism is going to maintain its position and be relevant in the following decades.

## 1. SUFISM IN MODERN TIMES

Today, according to the studies and approximate calculations of Sir John Malcolm, Gramlich, or Ja'far Shahri<sup>5</sup>, about 1/5 of the entire Iranian population is Sufi, and at least 2/5 is strongly influenced by their practices and ideas<sup>6</sup>, but it wasn't always the case.

Sufism began to develop in Iran as early as the 4th century<sup>7</sup> AD, given the influence of Christian ascetics, Neoplatonism, or neo-Pythagoreanism on pre-Islamic society. In the 7th and 8th centuries, it became extremely popular among the common people, helping them to think independently (positive Sufism), but at the end of the 8th century, Sufism had already turned into a "negative" one, in which the intellectual society and culture suffered from stagnation and even regressions due to the promoted irrationality through mysticism. Consequently, it played a key role in the development of Iranian thinking, in a direct manner at first and indirectly during the post-Timurid Era.<sup>8</sup>

As a result of this early implication in the Islamic decision-making process, Sufism has influenced the development of Islam since its inception and

<sup>3</sup> Richard Gramlich, *The Shī'ah Dervish Orders of Persia 1: The Affiliations*, German Oriental Society: Wiesbaden, 1965.

<sup>4</sup> Such as Karamali Ghadamyari, Abbas Amanat, Matthijs Van den Bos, Mohammad Abu Rumman or Seema Golestaneh.

<sup>5</sup> Ja'far Shahri, *Ta'rikh-i ijtimā'i-yi Tihiran dar qarn-i sizdahum*, Moin: Tehran, 1990, ii, p. 287.

<sup>6</sup> These numbers are completely different from the official approximation (and more reliable) because of two reasons: it is very difficult for the state authorities to make accurate Sufi statistics (because Sufism is not a branch and can have very complex forms) and a considerable part of the Iranian Sufis are afraid of officializing their faith.

<sup>7</sup> It appeared in the 3rd century but had no organized form.

<sup>8</sup> Marietta Stepanyants, "Sufism in the Context of Modern Politics", *The Journal of Oriental Studies*, 2009, pp. 178-179.

has played an important role in the concept of Muslim religious orientation. It opposes religious obedience, replacing it with education and knowledge, the importance of material elements is diminished, while the idea of the essence of the soul and its liberation is essential. Theological knowledge is considered incomplete or even useless without realizing the symbiosis between it and what the person feels.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, not even *sharī'ah* is followed *ad-literam*. Rather each law should be analyzed and only after to be decided what is still valid and what should be considered as law.

Unlike legalists, Sufis do not regard the Qur'ān or Hadith as absolute authorities. Being written by man (even if they were guided by divinity), they are considered limited and subjective. Sufis respect them, especially at the beginning of their journey to the Absolute Truth (*ṭarīqah*), but continue their cognitive mission until the end of life. Moral and ethical conduct is considered to transcend legal limits, thus it is sometimes ignored by Sufis, because *sharī'ah*, for example, is a legal code only for the visible world. Also, the imposed faith is impossible, precisely because man cannot truly have faith without personal experience.<sup>10</sup>

Sufism is based on the *zahir-batin*<sup>11</sup> duality and follows the idea that there is no belief superior to another, because, in according to them, there is a unity of humanity beyond the visible world, therefore believers of other religions are not considered to be inferior either. Additionally, there is the idea of a "perfect man" (*al-insan al-kamil*<sup>12</sup>), who believes in Allāh, seeks him, and perceives him

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<sup>9</sup> "Notice in your heart the Prophet's knowledge, without book, without teacher, without instructor." - The Qur'ān, Al-Takathur 102:1-8 (quran.com, 2022).

<sup>10</sup> Ignaz Goldziher, *Introduction to Islamic Theology and Law*, Princeton N.J.: Princeton U.P., 1981, pp. 140-143.

<sup>11</sup> Zahir = refers to the outer dimension, or the outer face, of the Islamic faith (the act); "the outer or apparent meaning of the Qur'ān is made known traditionally through the discipline of *tafsir* (exegesis), while the hidden meanings of the text are accessed through the esoteric hermeneutical process known as *tawil*" (John L. Esposito, *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam*, 1st ed, Oxford University Press: New York, 2003, s.v. "Zahir");  
Batin = refers to the inner, spiritual dimension (the intention); "is made known only through the hermeneutical process known as *tawil*" (John L. Esposito, *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam*, 1st ed, Oxford University Press: New York, 2003, s.v. "Batin").

<sup>12</sup> Al-insan al-kamil = refers to a person that has reached perfection; a concept usually used to describe the Prophet or the Imams in Shī'ism; "the origin and goal of the universe" (John L. Esposito, *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam*, 1st ed, Oxford University Press: New York, 2003, s.v. "Haqiqah al-Muhammadiyah").

through his interpretation of the soul. Iqbal, the Sufi philosopher, even goes further and suggests that man is so independent of Allāh, here in this world, that he could also act as his associate. This is mainly due to the creative function of man, similar to The Creator.

This mystical form of Islam is compatible with secularism, being tolerant of other beliefs. However, it cannot be seen as a viable option against fundamentalism, because Sufism can also take less pleasant turns. After all, throughout history, the "mystical way" was both a social form of protest against the political system and the power that legitimized it: advocated for free religious expression, but opposed rational thinking; urged the love for life, but also for the renunciation of worldly activities unworthy of finding the Absolute Truth; the Sufi community is able to escape the purely religious and legalistic leadership, but can just as easily become dependent on the *shaykh*, thus being manipulated.

Even though, Sufism began to transform into a true political movement only after the writings and movements of Al-Ghazālī, in Iran it has always been a diplomatic and mitigating bridge between Sunni and Shī'i conflict or between radicalism and progressive thinking. Sufism and Sufi practices were and are still used in order to change or at least make more acceptable the rigid and fanatical Shī'i ideas, to which the youth become distant today.

Sufism played for the first time an important role on the Persian political stage after the extremely deep marks left by the invasions of the Tatar and Mongol hordes. Seeking refuge, the people of the time turned away from institutions and legalism, trying to find solace in the Sufi mysteries, which managed to treat the social and religious pain of the population.<sup>13</sup> This is the span in which Sufism changes from its "positive" to its "negative" form, largely due to the economic chaos of the time. Moreover, this period marks both a new era of popularity for Sufism, this time at the level of all social strata, and a degradation of it (because the basic principles deteriorate after realizing the possibility of popularity, money, and social position). However, not even in this state of degradation or stagnation, Sufism has ever actually become irrelevant in Iran.

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<sup>13</sup> Karamali Ghadamyari, "Sufism Impact on Iranian Society, Culture and Literature", *European Journal of Experimental Biology*, 2012.

The Sufi orders that contributed the most to the Persian life (particularly today's life) were the *Ni'matullahiyya* and *Dhahabiyya*<sup>14</sup> ones, but their impact was rather bottom-up, as they initially affected only the common people, having no access to political or social elites.<sup>15</sup>

The social and political movements in the Iranian history and the incidents among the intellectuals of the *Ni'matullahiyya* Order present three periods into which the historical development of Sufism in Persia may be divided, starting from the nineteenth to twenty-first centuries: 1770-1898 (until the beginning of the constitutional idea); 1898-1978 (failure of the constitutionalists and appearance of the new revolutionary ideas); and 1978 to present day.

In the attempt to take over the Sufi popularity in connection to the sanctity and assumption of the hierocratic functions among the population, the *ulama* played an important role in marginalizing and persecuting the Sufis in the Safavid period and early Qajar. This conflict has forced Sufis to adapt to the new situation and borrow certain non-Sufi political and populist strategies in order to maintain their position in society.

Beginning in the 19th century (very late 18th century, to be more precise), although institutional Sufism was considered undesirable by state authorities, it started to become relevant among the common people, achieving a Sufi cultural revitalization. Even if they were not directly represented politically, during the various military conflicts, the generals sought the help and blessing of the *shaykhs*, either in order to attract more people to join the army or to give the soldiers hope and confidence in victory.<sup>16</sup>

Religious discretion and the pious preservation of the esoteric, for the sake of social conformity, are two characteristics that helped Sufis survive in Iran and assert their viewpoint at certain moments. Thus, often different Sufis

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<sup>14</sup> The *Khaksar* Order is also usually specified alongside the two orders in this matter, but there is not much clear information about how it has worked in the last decades or how it is organized today.

<sup>15</sup> The *Naqshbandiyya* Order, which has influenced much of the history of the Persian world, even with links to the leadership of the Iranian states, still exists today but only in Kurdistan, in rural areas, not having much involvement in the development of today's Iranian mentality.

<sup>16</sup> Leonard Lewisohn, "An introduction to the history of modern Persian Sufism", *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, University of London, 1999, pp. 437-461.

or individuals with strong Sufi inclinations claimed to be Orthodox and later managed to penetrate the *ulama*.<sup>17</sup>

In the middle of the 19th century those certain clerics with strong Sufi inclinations were appointed to key positions in the Persian state. Many political and religious leaders of this period were trained in Isfahan, where Sufism flourishes.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, Sufism started to have important political representatives in every region of Iran and a significant number of members in the Parliament and Government.

However, during those times, exclusivist political readings of Shī'ism have managed to be institutionalized in the new state structures. Therefore, Sufis have had to downplay associations (especially between 1978 and 1990) between Sufism and alternative spiritual authority as embodied in the figure of the *shaykh*, *pīr*, or *qutb*, while supporting the concept of *wilayat* (or *walayat*) as an essential central idea of both Islamic Republican ideology<sup>19</sup> and Sufi notions of spiritual authority.

Even Khomeini has had good relations with Sufi leaders before the Revolution (with, *Sultan`alishahis*, for example). He had a similar education to them (so intellectual paradigms were often similar) and considered his actions to be 'perfect mystic'<sup>20</sup>, like a true Sufi believer. However, Sufism was seen by revolutionary elites as incompatible with the new socio-political movement, although the Revolutionary Movement itself used many Sufi elements and habits with strong Sufi influence. In fact, Khomeini's movement based on *wilayat-i faqih* had many elements borrowed from the Sufi *wilayat*<sup>21</sup> (which has little to do with Khomeini's model, but they have the same basis, with a slightly different interpretation and certain commonalities). The Sufi *wilayat* rather opposes, on the political side, monarchy (and absolutism) and suggests the

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<sup>17</sup> Husayn 'Ali, a prominent member of the *Ni`matullahi* Order, successfully infiltrated the *ulama*, kept his beliefs secret, managed to facilitate information within the clergy, and influenced certain *ulama* decisions.

<sup>18</sup> Abbas Amanat, *Apocalyptic Islam and Iranian Shī'ism*, I.B Tauris: London, New York, 2009, pp. 2-14.

<sup>19</sup> Matthijs van den Bos, "Elements of Neo-Traditional Sufism in Iran", Martin van Bruinessen; Julia Day Howell (eds.), *Sufism and the 'Modern' in Islam*, I.B Tauris: London, New York, 2007, p. 66.

<sup>20</sup> Ibn Arabi's mystical concept of the "Perfect Man" had impacted Khomeini from an early age.

<sup>21</sup> *'irfan*-type *wilayat*, which is more of a social ideology rather than a political system.

necessary existence of political pluralism and democracy.<sup>22</sup> Therefore, the Revolutionary sympathizers opposed institutionalized Sufism rather than Sufism itself, and, eventually, many revolutionary elites, were trained in *'irfan*<sup>23</sup>, especially in the way perceived by the *Sultan`alishahis*.<sup>24</sup>

In the 20th century, Sufis became heavily involved in local and legislative politics, being pro-constitution (not pro-*Usūli*), as well as in the media, being widely present in the major Iranian newspapers. Publication of new works and reprinting of old works on Sufism under the *Ni`matullahi* print house has been banned since 1995 by the Ministry of Islamic Guidance<sup>25</sup> but the ideas continued to spread through other newspapers, in a more subtle, but efficient manner.

During Khomeini's Revolution, the Sufis were again persecuted. Even so, today, Sufis remain active supporters of the fundamentalist ideology of the Islamic Republic, a political stance that reflects this branch's emphasis on the preservation of the monocentric side of Islamic teachings (*hifz-i zdhir*) and its concern for pure *shari`ah* affairs. Additionally, even though they suffered a lot during the Revolution (many orders having to regroup in other states), in the post-revolutionary period most of them alongside sub-orders began to flourish and have become more and more relevant in the following years. This is due to the fact that especially during the Khatami period, the strictness and control of the state regarding the activity of the institutional Sufism (and not only) were drastically improved.

Today, direct involvement of Sufism in current state policy is unlikely due to the strict Sufi view that the current Islam practiced in Iran is not "The

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<sup>22</sup> But not completely incompatible with Khomeini's regime, as Matthijs Van Den Bos suggests: "Several Sufis whom I met, in their turn, projected into Khomeini an immaculate *qoth*, who had been surrounded, however, by evil court mongers. These men of politics had kept him from revealing his true identity. Wretched and ignorant court mongers, they said, accounted for Khomeini's silence during the era of revolutionary violence and repression." (Matthijs Van Den Bos, *Mystic Regimes: Sufism and The State in Iran, From The Late Qajar Era to The Islamic Republic*, Brill: Leiden, Boston, Köln, 2002, p. 180).

<sup>23</sup> Even Khomeini was familiarized with it, alongside *'erfan*, which is (in his case) the Sufi interpretation of how the Iranian state and society should function in relation to political ideology (Matthijs Van Den Bos, *Mystic Regimes: Sufism and The State in Iran, From The Late Qajar Era to The Islamic Republic*, Brill: Leiden, Boston, Köln, 2002, p. 180).

<sup>24</sup> Van den Bos, *op. cit.*, pp. 64-65.

<sup>25</sup> Lewisohn, *op. cit*/, p. 461.

True One", and certain public debates on various state policies could put them in a dangerous position. However, this does not stop Sufis or those with a penchant for mysticism from getting involved in an indirect manner, influencing policies and state decisions either using media or through certain politicians who are easy to be manipulated.

In today's Parliament, Sufis are on both sides of the political spectrum: some pro-*ulama* and some against it; conservatives, but also progressives. However, usually, Persian Sufis and their supported figures have often aligned themselves (and still do) as advocates of secular liberalism and modernization, expressing sympathy for democracy<sup>26</sup> and opposing an absolutist Islamic state. Unfortunately for them, though, they are not enough to create a coalition of Sufis and reformists.<sup>27</sup>

## 2. POLITICAL SUFISM AND SHI'ISM IN CONTEMPORARY IRAN

After Khomeini's death in 1979, the powers of the Supreme Leader of Iran dimmed, as people no longer had trust in this form of absolutist leadership. As a result, a significant number of powers were transferred from the substitute of the Imām to the president, while the Parliament and government rebecame relevant in the state, facilitating a more democratic environment regarding the state affairs.

### **Rafsanjānī and Khatami Period**

The first president, Rafsanjānī was to serve for two terms in what became known as the 'era of reconstruction', to be followed by eight years of 'reforms' under Khatami. The Rafsanjānī period could be characterized as one of reconstruction because Iran managed to get out of the economic crisis created by the democratic states' embargo. It was lifted shortly after the president and his close allies started to promote commerce and free trade of goods, showing the west that Iran is willing to change and cooperate. His Five-Year Developmental Plan, which emphasized the importance of an increased role for

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<sup>26</sup> However, paradoxically enough, Sufis are unwilling to have spiritual authority subject to questioning, especially to some sort of intrusive inquiry that is central to the idea of democracy.

<sup>27</sup> Matthijs van den Bos, "Elements of Neo-Traditional Sufism in Iran", in Martin van Bruinessen, Julia Day Howell, *Sufism and the 'Modern' in Islam*, I.B Tauris: London, New York, 2007, pp. 70-71.

the private sector and foreign investments, and his moderation in Iranian foreign policy (which reflected in Iranian behavior during the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait), represent best the way in which the first president of the new Islamic Republic was seeing both internal and external state affairs. However, this economic recovery has not been achieved in a sustainable way, but based strictly on trade and almost nothing at all on investments.<sup>28</sup> As a result, this issue not only kept potential foreign businessmen away but also encouraged corruption among traders and ordinary people selling in markets.

Rafsanjānī supported the idea of *wilayat*, but was much closer to the Sufi perspective, by flirting with the idea of making the transition to democracy in Iran, supporting political pluralism<sup>29</sup>, and trying to combat the intellectual purges made by revolutionaries (especially against the leftists), upholding democratic and western principles or values, attempting to get closer to capitalism in order to coexist with other states and facilitating a better life for the population<sup>30</sup>, while also keeping many elements of theological faith and perception in Iran's state policy. Even more, during the 8 years of his presidency, he managed with the support of the Parliament and population to diminish the powers of the Supreme Leader.

Speaking about Rafsanjānī's closeness towards Sufism, one of the clearest events suggesting inclination of the state to mysticism occurred at the end of the 1990s. In 1997, the administration openly invited 22 foreign diplomats to Kerman to visit the mausoleum of the "Renowned Mystic Poet Shāh Ni'matullāh Vali" in the city of Māhān. Such event has not happened (officially) since the pre-Qajar period: the state leadership to visit (alongside diplomatic guests) a Sufi monument. This event and previously noted decisions, offered the next administration the chance to repair the relationship between Sufis and state, while also consolidate the new "shy democracy".

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<sup>28</sup> Ali M. Ansari, *The Rafsanjani and Khatami Presidencies*, The Adelphi Papers, 2017, 47:393, pp. 13-14, DOI: 10.1080/05679320701868128.

<sup>29</sup> He reintroduced the possibility of forming political parties and reusing left and right ideas.

<sup>30</sup> Many of the measures were also took to preserve his power and many policies were populist rather than in direct service of the people.

Khatami's reformist period was marked by his attempts to democratize the state, eliminate corruption in institutions, and refocus state's economy to investments, not just letting it sustain itself on trade.<sup>31</sup>

Seeking to appease the social tensions created by Khomeini and his Revolution, Khatami made a further step in comparison to Rafsanjānī and invited *shaykhs* and Sufi masters (who were forced to flee out of Iran before and during the Islamic Revolution) to come back.

Following, the Sufi political perception started to gain popularity, influencing, for the most part, the young urban population, which even today is extremely interested in and influenced by mysticism, despite the authorities' attempts to redirect their attention to Orthodox Shī'ism.<sup>32</sup> Carols Castaneda's ideas, Kurdish Sufi miracles, Gnosticism, or Hindu teachings all have a more appealing character to young Iranians in comparison to the Islamic treatises or theological law.<sup>33</sup> Few of them even become part of organized/institutionalized Sufism and most of those who do become part of them are usually doing it after the discovery of certain "revealing" materials on the Internet by mistake. This inclination of today's population to Sufism is not surprising at all considering that after Khomeini's death, the Iranian society was highly impregnated with mysteries, practices, writings, and Sufi or non-Sufi mystical art, which were presented through Sufi materials or intermediaries. Even many personalities of the Revolutionary Guard use today or used in the 1990s and 2000s, to go to all sorts of legacy Sufi mystical readings.<sup>34</sup>

### Ahmadīnejād Presidency

The Ahmadīnejād period commenced in 2005, and throughout his eight years in office, he revitalized the public perception of Revolutionary and eschatological ideas, reversing many democratic advancements made by his predecessors. Not only did he align Iranians with the state's religious objectives

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<sup>31</sup> Matthijs Van Den Bos, *Mystic Regimes: Sufism and The State in Iran, From The Late Qajar Era to The Islamic Republic*, Brill: Leiden, Boston, Köln, 2002, pp. 173-174.

<sup>32</sup> "The young generation is indeed attracted to Sufism. They understand that the *mollahs'* Islam will not take them anywhere, but are simultaneously deeply religious - as are the Iranian people. It is only logical, then, that they would come to [this] *Hoseyniye*" (Matthijs Van Den Bos, *Sufi Authority in Khatami's Iran...*, p. 365).

<sup>33</sup> Matthijs Van Den Bos, "Sufi Authority in Khatami's Iran. Some Fieldwork Notes", *Oriente Moderno*, vol. 21 (82), no. 2, 2002, pp. 363-365.

<sup>34</sup> van Den Bos, *Mystic Regimes...* p. 173.

and foreign affairs, but he also introduced a new perspective on eschatological and messianic principles.

He was supported by Khamenei and the Revolutionary Guard in the presidential campaign and initially posed as the perfect successor of Khamenei, suggesting a connection between him and the Supreme Leader similar to the one the current Supreme Leader had with Khomeini.<sup>35</sup> However, in reality, Ahmadīnejād rapidly completely changed this popular belief, perhaps as a result of power-seeking. Not only that the former mayor of Teheran was opposing some important initiatives of the Supreme Leader, but also decided to change the central point of the eschatological story from the state objective to people's one, mainly by giving specific and messianic meanings to buildings, projects, policies or political statements.<sup>36</sup>

Although the town of Jamkaran has never been more than a small locality near Qom, it has been elevated by Ahmadīnejād to the state of religious center (hundreds of millions of dollars invested in the construction of the site) to become the representative place of the new messianic idea promoted by the president. Jamkaran became a very important religious site also because of the political and social context of that time, being intensely promoted by clerical supporters of the anti-Khatami movement. In this case, just like Khomeini did previously, the radical conservators relied heavily on the diffuse nature of the messianic story left by the revolutionary era and lack of coherence in folk tales about the "End of the Time" event.

Starting in Khatami's times, but flourishing during Ahmadīnejād and lasting even today is the fact that the new messianic movement promoted by the state is no longer transmitted only in madrassas or orally, but also on the Internet. There is a whole virtual infrastructure through which the Islamic Republic develops its religious propaganda, sometimes even in other states<sup>37</sup>. The most successful sites were initiated and/or influenced by former members of Hujjatiyya (an order of Sufi origins), such as the website of the Permanent Secretariat of the Biennial Symposium Examining the Existential Dimensions of the Divine Mahdī.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> He even militated for increasing the powers of the Supreme Leader.

<sup>36</sup> Abbas Amanat, *Apocalyptic Islam and Iranian Shi'ism*, I.B Tauris: London, New York, 2009, pp. 227-232.

<sup>37</sup> Some sites are also in English, French, Urdu, Arabic, etc.

<sup>38</sup> Amanat, *op. cit.*, pp. 233-234.

The current Mahdist movement (since Ahmadīnejād came in office), just like the one in Timurids' time, has a rather Christian, Jewish, and Zoroastrian character in terms of apocalyptic myth, which are today propagated more through Sufi stories and traditions among the urban population, deviating from the traditional ideas and introducing new elements. Interestingly enough, the current media and politicians are using the anti-Zionist Semitism sentiment shaped by Khomeini, to propagate the modern messianic idea among all the social strata. Additionally, another renewed aspect from Khomeini's time is the one related to how demonic is the west and that it has plans to destroy the Islamic world. The new insertion in this story is the orientation towards the fact that the west is the reason why the Mahdī will soon return and lead the Islamic world to victory in the final battle.<sup>39</sup> In a nutshell, the confrontation is not anymore between some unspecified good and evil forces, but between Muslims (Shī'ah people are the only ones worth considering as being true Muslims) and "the others" that want to destroy the "chosen community" by spoiling its beliefs, values, and faith.

Ahmadīnejād's reelection as president<sup>40</sup> has heightened these apocalyptic ideas, as he believes that any universal values such as human rights, religious tolerance, political moderation, democracy, or scientific objectivity are negative for the Iranian community due to the fact "they originate in or belong to the west". The manner and timing of the Mahdī's reappearance were usually predicted in Khomeini's style, without emphasizing much on his ideas related to how the state should be governed and most of the time ignoring and hiding any issue of the Islamic Republic, in order to present his incumbency to the people as functional as possible. What is not necessarily in Khomeini's style, when we are talking about Ahmadīnejād's discourse are the presumed "miracles" (that already happened or will happen) correlated by the former president to every single major decision that he was taken. In this case, just like the change of eschatological perspective, it could be a heavy indirect Sufi influence. In the Sufi tradition, truly relevant theological, social, and political results always appear in the form of or are somehow connected to a miracle

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<sup>39</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 230-238.

<sup>40</sup> By obviously and outrageously rigging the elections. This led to powerful protests in the urban areas, where people felt the need to defend their democratic rights (reformed, Sufi view), while the rural population was now perceiving Ahmadinejad as illegitimate because he obtained the position through tyranny (conservative, Shī'ah view).

(*karamat*) and the miracles induced to the population by Ahmadīnejād perfectly fit the description.

### **Rouhani and the current Iranian Parliament**

On a platform of internal and international change, Ḥasan Rouhani, a pragmatic conservative, was elected president of Iran in June 2013. He attempted to address the country's deepening economic crisis, ease social restrictions, and free political prisoners<sup>41</sup> (particularly the 2009 reformist presidential candidates Mir-Hossein Musavi and Mehdi Karrubi). Rouhani also tried to improve relations with the international scene in order to reduce the sanctions imposed during Ahmadīnejād's time and agreed in 2013 to temporarily suspend the nuclear program in exchange for removing a good chunk of those sanctions.

All of these won him significant support from the country's urban youth, middle class, minorities and Sufi leaders. Not only that but his approach gained acceptance from reformists and moderates, and it was tolerated by nationalists and radical conservatives. Even though neither did he have too many notable achievements during his 8 years in the office (or at least not too many controversies, which would have made him popular worldwide), nor did he take any relevant decisions for this work rather than those already specified, he managed to propel himself among the favorites to take the position of the next Supreme Leader. Clearly, such an event would mean a closer Iran to democracy and religious toleration, while gradually diminishing the eschatological mission of the state<sup>42</sup> (without completely abandoning it, because, after all, it represents the Iranian identity).

Now speaking about the Parliament, during and after Ahmadīnejād's presidency (until present) its constituency changed significantly. If in the Rafsanjānī period a new type of conservatism emerged<sup>43</sup>, during Ahmadīnejād the mainstream parliamentarians, especially those who entered the Parliament in 2009 (who became the majority in the meantime), were neither pro-Rafsanjānī (conservatives), nor pro-Khatami (progressives), nor pro-

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<sup>41</sup> Thomas Juneau, *Iran under Rouhani: Still Alone in the World*, Middle East Policy, 2014, 21(4), pp. 92-104.

<sup>42</sup> However, reality shows us that the chances of this happening are low and we will see why later in this chapter.

<sup>43</sup> Ali M. Ansari, *The Rafsanjani and Khatami Presidencies*, The Adelphi Papers, 2017, 47:393, pp. 19-20, DOI: 10.1080/05679320701868128.

Ahmadīnejād (nationalists), but pro-Khamenei. Today's manner in which the Parliament is actually divided is not necessarily based on these political orientations, but into the "Interactionist Bloc" and "Conflictualists".<sup>44</sup>

Reformists, pragmatists (modern conservatives), and traditional conservatives who back Rouhani's ideas or previous President Muḥammad Khatami make up the Interactionist group. The state administration and bureaucracy are where their influence is concentrated. Here we can find most of the parliamentarians that represent Sufis or are highly influenced by Sufi ideas.

Hardline conservatives, including the Supreme Leader, clerics in the Guardian Council, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), and the Basij civil militia make up the Conflictualists. They shaped Iran's "deep state," as Iranian experts refer to it. Conflictualists advocate for re-Islamization of society, as well as increasing government control over "morality". They think that self-sufficiency and resistance to Western hegemony will address Iran's problems. Also, Conflictualists prefer maintaining Iran's historical policy of selective engagement, since they fear Western norms becoming normality and people revolt against Iran's religious elite.

However, in order to spot the differences, moderates or pragmatists (who are the main representatives of the Interactionist Bloc), advocate for "limited social and cultural emancipation", as well as international participation and acceptance of the international order's reality, which can be both found in the Sufi version of *wilayat*. President Hojatoleslam Ḥasan Rouhani, Minister of Intelligence Hojatoleslam Seyed Mahmud Alavi, Ayatollah Ebrahim Amini (a member of the Expediency Discernment Council), and Ayatollah Muḥammad Emami-Kashani are among the most powerful figures connected with this political coalition against the ultra-nationalist alliance. Therefore, we can see a clear political conflict not only between ideologies but also a religious-driven battle between Shī'ah ultra-nationalist and moderate Shī'ah, alongside "non-religious"<sup>45</sup> and Sufis or Sufi-influenced individuals.

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<sup>44</sup> Saeid Golkar, "Iran after Khamenei: Prospects for Political Change", *Middle East Policy*, 2019, 26(1), pp. 81-82.

<sup>45</sup> Not literally "non-religious" because it would be impossible in today's Iran to be a member of the Parliament without being a declared Shī'ah. In this context, I am using the term "non-religious" as referring to those reformist politicians that do not emphasize almost at all the religious aspects or importance on any legislative or executive decision.

Aside from the members of the assembly's political views, theirs and state institutions' association with religious schools is another factor that influences the political decisions taken by the legislative. Iran's politics are influenced by four major Shī'ah seminaries: Najaf, Qom, Mashhad, and Isfahan. While the Najaf seminary has long been the most revered among Shī'ah clerics, the Qom seminary has grown the most in importance when speaking about Iranian politics, particularly since the 1979 Revolution. Along with Najaf and Qom, the notoriety of Mashhad and Isfahan seminaries has also grown under the religious government, and they now play a larger role in Iranian politics. However, Isfahan is probably the single one whose importance flourished the most in contemporary times, being the only seminar closer to the moderate and reformist ideas of Rafsanjānī, Khatami, and Rouhani, by integrating into the Shī'ah teaching and also promoting Sufi ideas, traditions, and values.<sup>46</sup>

### **'Alī Khamenei and the Future of the Supreme Leader Position**

The last political figure that should be analyzed for the sake of this work is Ahmadīnejād's main supporter: 'Alī Khamenei. The position of *faqih* in Iran became less important after Khomeini's death, until Ahmadīnejād came into office, as it no longer enjoyed the status of *marja'*, making the new designated Supreme Leader not respecting all the necessary requirements to occupy this position.

The Supreme Leader's privileges over domestic decisions, army, and foreign policy were transformed only to ensure continuity of the political system<sup>47</sup> and clerical supremacy. Meanwhile the Office of the Presidency was designed to facilitate the good functioning of the state as a republic and to evolve as new political figures appeared on the domestic and international stage. The position was made incapable to control the entire state by

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<sup>46</sup> For more information regarding the four seminars, see Saeid Golkar, "Iran after Khamenei: Prospects for Political Change", *Middle East Policy*, 2019, 26(1), p. 83. Qom promotes Sufi ideas as well, but pales in comparison to Isfahan on this matter.

<sup>47</sup> According to the new constitution, the *marja'iyat* criterion was eliminated from the requirements for occupying the Supreme Leader position and was replaced by the criterion of either being an Islamic jurist or a *mujtahid*. However, even so, Khamenei was still not qualified, since he was not even a full jurist or a *mujtahid* when he came into power, according to some information in a leaked video taken behind the closed-door session of the Assembly of Experts (Saeid Golkar, "Iran after Khamenei: Prospects for Political Change", *Middle East Policy*, 2019, 26(1), pp. 75-88).

maintaining a balance between the multiple centers of power in the Iranian political, economic and social spheres. In return, these actors offer their loyalty to the one whose aura of invincibility is essential for maintaining system cohesion.<sup>48</sup> The Supreme Leader is not considered to be a dictator, because, in theory, he has neither has all the instruments of the state under his wing, nor can he lead in an absolutist way (by definition at least), because he rules by defending and using strictly Islamic values and traditions, therefore it is not labeled as being contradictory to the Shī'ah values.

The personal and social background of Khamenei comes from a very traditional pre-modern clerical family. Very early on, he embraced the violent extremist path of Navab Safavi<sup>49</sup> and all his adult life he has been a fundamentalist. The current Supreme Leader of Iran is a true believer who has openly defended extreme views and who, at the same time, was and still is very patient in hiding his most radical perspectives and policies, when necessary, in order to achieve his personal objectives.<sup>50</sup> This does not mean that he is realist or pragmatic in the sense that goals and means are calculated after considering every possible risk and advantage. On the contrary, he considers that goals and means could be irrational, even leading to mass suicides or potential wars with the United States (along with Israel and the west).

Khamenei's foreign policy goals are mainly ideological, for the most part continuing what his good friend Khomeini started in 1979, by opposing the current international system as well as confronting the United States and Israel, even in contexts that do not include the two "fierce opponents of Iran". As I stated before, he insists on this willingness in the confrontation with the United States to pursue means on the model of Karbala - a clear mission of martyrdom - without considering the objective of the situation.

As a result of this predisposition of Khamenei, he allowed worshipers to follow a deceased *marja'*<sup>51</sup>, through his first *fatwa* as Supreme Leader. This was an unmistakable reference to Khomeini and his followers, and also a clear act of

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<sup>48</sup> Banafsheh Keynoush, "Iran after Ahmadinejad", *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy*, 2012, 54:3, pp. 127-146, DOI: 10.1080/00396338.2012.690988.

<sup>49</sup> An Iranian Shī'ah cleric and founder of the Fadā'iyān-e Islam group, that staged numerous successful high-profile assassinations of politicians and clerical figures and failed state coupes in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>50</sup> Mohsen M. Milani, "The Transformation of the Velayat-e Faqīh Institution: From Khomeini to Khamenei", *The Muslim World*, 82 (3-4), p. 178.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 175-190.

mysticism. He also lauded Imām 'Ali's mystical characteristic of "asceticism," while noting that his "absence of worldly attachment" had been accompanied by his active pursuit of "social justice", and that this was to be considered an attribute of 'Ali's participation in the (worldly) government. However, the mystical aspect of the decision is not surprising at all, considering both the close relation to Khomeini during his life and his affinity for the Hojjatie Society (a very important Iranian Sufi entity).<sup>52</sup>

If the nomination of Khamenei was a real issue for both political and clerical relevant actors, today's situation raises even more debates and worries of future uncertainty. Khamenei is 84 years old (in 2023) and currently, there is no relevant candidate to replace him after his death in the position of Supreme Leader<sup>53</sup>. This time is not due to the fact that nobody is qualified enough to occupy this position, but the popularity of any eligible candidate is so low that no person would represent a viable option.

There are three options discussed to compromise and solve the issue regarding the position, in case a true leader does not appear in the following years: to become an honorary one, to become part of the government, similar to a Ministry, or to be elected by the people (all of them being democratic, while the last one the least probable).<sup>54</sup>

Even so, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) could impose (using the army) the retention of the format regarding the Supreme Leader, as well as the appointment of a new one. They could even force the installation of Ahmadīnejād, even if he has no clerical training at all. Such regime would facilitate the persistence of international sanctions, allow extreme conservatives additional opportunities to dominate the Iranian economy, impose authoritarian measures of control upon the population and probably ban any sort of official religious mysticism different from the one promoted by the state.

We will see how President Raisi (Sayyid Ebrahim Raisolsadati) will tackle all of these issues and unknown variables that are currently present in Iranian affairs in the years to come. It is going to be interesting from two perspectives: first of all, he is a former student of Khamenei, so probably we will witness a mixture of nationalism and radical political Shī'ism, sprinkled

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<sup>52</sup> Masoud Kazemzadeh, "Ayatollah Khamenei's Foreign Policy Orientation", *Comparative Strategy*, 2013, 32:5, pp. 443-458, DOI: 10.1080/01495933.2013.840208.

<sup>53</sup> Clifton W. Sherrill, "After Khamenei: Who Will Succeed Iran's Supreme Leader?", *Orbis*, 2011, 55(4), p. 641.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 642.

with mysticism; and second, not only does he follow the traditions of the Qom-Mashhad seminary schools, but he also wears a black turban, indicating that he is a descendant of Prophet Muḥammad, which in clerical culture confers a large degree of seniority and a great deal of respect. By contrast, his most important rivals, Rouhani and Larijani, wear white turbans, therefore they are considered less legitimate compared to Raisi both policy-making and leadership-wise.

## CONCLUSIONS

From pre-Islamic times, the Persian region and culture used to maintain a strong (even indivisible) connection between religion and state leadership. Today's Iran does not deviate from this principle, making the eschatological and messianic idea of the Twelfth Imām the meaning of the Muslim community existence and putting the prophecy itself in the form of a common goal of the people, which comes with the hope of better and eternal life. Precisely, in order to facilitate the existence of this hope in life, people often tend to have a greater inclination towards different mystical traditions and customs. Although most of them are not found in the holy books or in the divine pronouncement, they address better the general population, giving them what legalism has failed to do for more than a millennium: to offer man the impression that he actually matters.

Therefore, it is not surprising that Sufism has been very successful in the Muslim community and especially in the Shī'i one after the beginning of the Major Occultation, in which people no longer knew who they should really follow. Sufism is a refuge, both for the common people and for the intellectuals who do not accept that their community can be stuck by principles made for another era.

Until the end of the 19th century, it coexisted deliberately and officially with Shī'ism, including in the highest strata of society, thus obviously influencing even the economic, social and political environment of the state. However, with the promotion of Shī'i extremism and later revolutionary ideas, Sufism was forced to fall into the shadows, especially around 1979 and throughout the Revolution.

Even though the context was unfavorable and hostile, the Sufis and their influence have never disappeared. On the contrary, they have adapted, hiding their religious identity and affinities, manipulating different people into key positions in the state, and promoting their values through intermediate and indirect mechanisms, so that they remain relevant but silent at the same time.

As a result, many of today's Iranian politicians and theologians have been voluntarily (directly) or involuntarily (indirectly) influenced by Sufi principles and ideas. Even the Supreme Leaders, Khomeini and Khamenei, along with all the presidents of the state from 1989 to the present have shown at least a passion for mysticism and/or Sufi values during their terms, through statements made or decisions taken.

Moreover, the spread of mystical and Sufi ideas through the media, and later intensively through social media, made Iran's youth and urban population to consider the Sufi values as legitimate when they appeared in the social, economic or political context, either individually or in a complementary way with the Shī'ī ideas. Basically, the political class (also influenced by the same means) is forced today to listen to the needs and desires of the people and consider the application of mystical ideas (Sufi or not) when it comes to the new legislation.

As a result, in the early 1990s, Rafsanjānī, through his Five-Year Developmental Plan, not only wanted to reduce embargoes on Iran and put the economy back on its feet, but also to lead the state to a *wilayat* similar to the Sufi one, in which political pluralism and democracy are promoted, religious freedom is at least tolerated, and the power of the Supreme Leader is diminished or even drastically reduced.

Later, Khatami not only sought to eradicate corruption and reform the system, but also facilitated access to Western quality products and education (giving up the correlation between Westerners and Satan, promoting ethnic and religious diversity), and invited back to the country the Sufi leaders and orders.

During Ahmadīnejād's time, the constant interplay between Shī'ism and political Sufism can be best seen. He tried to create his own eschatological cult by combining Shī'ī ideas with revolutionary and mystical ones, often resulting in "miracle" type projects and obvious theological or logical contradictions. In an attempt to redirect the eschatological perspective of the people from the goal of the state to that of the community (and of each individual) and thus legitimize himself as the right leader, "chosen by Allāh" (posing as a possible successor to the function of Supreme Leader), he managed to give eschatology a much more abstract and philosophical role and to transform the ultimate goal from focusing on addressing the entire Muslim community, to creating a holy place in their own small community (such as the construction of the Jamkaran

mosque and the road to Tehran to facilitate the return of the Imām from Occultation).

Rouhani's two terms have been spared from too many scandals or major changes from a theological or political point of view and were focused on economic recovery. Like Rafsanjānī, he has also dealt with the transcendence to a Sufi *wilayat*, easing social restrictions (especially religious) and trying to pursue a friendlier foreign policy.

However, when it comes to the political future of Sufism and the current interdependent relationship between political Shī'ism and political Sufism, things are quite vague, but there is some potential. To this day, there is no real successor to Khamenei as Iran's Supreme Leader, and both more likely future approaches to this issue support the current coexistence of the two political ideologies and the development of Sufi influence in the Iranian state policy. The relative favorites (because no one is strongly supported by the people) for the post are mostly moderates or reformists, including Rouhani (the nephew of Khomeini and other radicals are also on the list, but they have almost no chance<sup>55</sup>), which would mean a clear continuation or even accentuation of the transition to a more moderate and permissive system in Iran. The second option, the transformation of the position to an honorary one or a ministry, would mean, as in the case of the previous possibility, the beginning of a broad process of democratization of the state, which would obviously facilitate political Sufism in the future. Only the alternative of a nomination forced by the military could turn the situation upside down and send Sufism back into the shadows of Khomeini's period, but this scenario, although possible, is unlikely, given the unpopularity of any Revolutionary Guard leader or Ahmadīnejād. We will see what the Raisi presidency brings in the years to come.

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<sup>55</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 641.

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