

## Uncompromising accommodation

Remarks on modern Iranian Shi'i Sufism's attitude to resistance

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Starting from the report of an incident occurred in Tehran in 2018, which triggered a wave of repression and resistance involving members of a popular Iranian Sufi order, the Ne'matollāhī-Gonābādī, this article explores the ways and forms in which modern Shi'i Sufism articulates its identity at the social and political level and vis-à-vis the authorities of the Islamic Republic of Iran. In doing so, this essay tackles the ways in which this identity is voiced and how individual members of the mystical order manifest their proximity to some areas of the reformist camp. This political vitality and outspokenness, along with forms of resistance adopted by the members of the brotherhood in the face of the increasingly pronounced aggressiveness of the Islamic Republic towards Sufism, testifies the complexity of the nature of the order's relationship with the political sphere. The analysis of the texts and the praxis of the order's notables and their disciples shows that the oft-repeated declaration of distance from politics are genuine but far from simplistic, a far cry from unconditional political quietism Sufism is often accused of. By addressing this complexity, in this article the author sets out to address the many paradoxes inherent in this clash and the battle for the appropriation of the legacy of mysticism in contemporary Iranian Twelver Shi'ism, which is grafted onto a broader discourse on political authority in Shi'ism and revolutionary Iran.

**Keywords:** Ne'matollāhiyya, Gonābādī Sufism, Shi'i Sufism, Twelver Shi'ism, Islam and religion, authority in Islam, resistance, Iran.

### 1. Introduction

On the night of 19 February 2018, hundreds of people took to the street in a residential neighbourhood in north Tehran. Demonstrators of all ages, including women and teenagers, had gathered on Golestān-e Haftom with a very specific aim: defending, at any cost, the residence of Nūr 'Alī Tābandeh (d. 2019), the then 90-year-old master of a Sufi order, the Ne'matollāhī-Gonābādī. Tābandeh, whose *tariqat* (lit. "way," generally used to indicate an organised brotherhood) name was Majdhūb 'Alī Shāh, was the *qoṭb* (lit. "pole," meaning the supreme master) of the brotherhood and, as long as he was alive, the most

important personality of Shi‘i Sufism. He passed away in December 2019. Possibly the most influential mystical order in contemporary Iran, the Gonābādīs have been the preferred target, over the last two decades, of hostile initiatives by some sectors within the authorities of the Islamic Republic. The attention, it goes without saying, was neither called for, nor appreciated by the Sufis.

In the preceding days, the Gonābādī dervishes had gathered in front of the police station on Pasdaran Avenue to protest against the arrest of a member of the community, Nematollah Riahi, a few days earlier. The demonstrations soon turned into clashes with the police and *basij* forces (the volunteer paramilitary militia), as a result of which some police officers and demonstrators lost their lives.<sup>1</sup> Over the following days, more than three hundred dervishes were arrested (Radio Free Europe 2018), many of whom are still detained in three of Tehran’s prisons. Nūr ‘Alī Tābandeh was put under strict surveillance, confined in his house, and cut off from his followers, with whom he kept communicating through public statements published on different media outlets connected with the Order until his demise on 24 December 2019.<sup>2</sup>

The events represented the culmination of a trend initiated in 2006, when the demolition of the *hoseyniyyeh* (the Iranian equivalent of a Sufi lodge) “Sharī‘at” in Qom inaugurated an escalation of intimidation and repression (Aftab News 2006), and triggered a pattern of increasingly brazen and open defiance of the Gonābādīs toward the Islamic Republic. A form of resistance, no doubt, that has specificities and peculiarities in the framework of both the history of the order and the recent history of Iran. In the following pages, I will try to put these events in their wider context with reference to both these respects.

## 2. Resistance, Shi‘i Islam and Sufism

In covering the theme of modern and contemporary Shi‘i Sufism and its elements of resistance one needs to address the question of what paradigm of resistance one should use. One might consider the Islamic Republic of Iran’s claims to some kind of moral leadership, or at least moral primacy, of the “Axis of resistance;” the ideological foundations of the State within the history of Shi‘ism, i.e. a religion whose history is marked by resistance and protest; and the trends of resistance to the *velāyat-e faqīh*

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<sup>1</sup> See the long and detailed report on the events contained in the report “Living Under Suppression: The Situation of the Gonabadi Dervishes in Iran” (IHRDC 2021). It is an activist group’s report, and as such it needs to be taken with a pinch of salt. However, judging from my knowledge of the events, it is overall fairly reliable.

<sup>2</sup> Nūr ‘Alī Tābandeh Majdhūb ‘Alī Shāh’s successor is Seyyed ‘Alī Reḏā Jadhbi. His *ṭarīqat* name is Thābet ‘Alī Shāh and he is currently the 40th “pole” (*qoṭb*) recognized by Gonābādī Sufis.

(the government/hieropolitical authority of the doctor of Islamic law) and its provisions within Iran. Thus, it is of crucial importance here to briefly assess the subject of resistance and the way I am using the term in this essay.

Despite recent proliferation of scholarship on resistance, consensus on its definition is far from achieved (Hollander and Einwohner 2004). Across disciplines, resistance has been extensively analysed from different points of view, from social control and structure to agency, resulting in a multitude of theoretical approaches. Some of these approaches occupy a middle ground between political science, jurisprudence and philosophy (Agamben 2003: 9–21; Zevnik 2009) sharing some elements with activist political agendas, as testified by influential and fashionable works such as *Empire* (Hardt and Negri 2000).<sup>3</sup> One of the issues that stands out from a perfunctory look at the literature is the lack of focus and of a consistent framework—an element that, as I will explain below, may even be an advantage.

In western political thought, the concept surfaces in early modern debates about dealing with tyrannical rules, to become in the 19th–20th centuries usually referred to by anarchists, up to its widespread use in relation to the fight against Fascism in Europe and colonial and neo-colonial forms of occupation and oppression (Scheuerman 2021).

A degree of ambiguity seems to be inherent to the term itself. “Resistance” is used with reference to both violent and nonviolent political action aimed to overturn the status quo, but it has also been used by conservative movements to highlight resistance to progressive and liberal change. There seems to be one common element, however, pertaining to taking passive or active initiative to establish or reinstall a legitimate moral order (Scheuerman 2021). This last element resonates with medieval Twelver Shi‘i debates on the legitimacy of collaborating with a tyrannical ruler (Madelung 1980; Rasekh 2016).

In light of this, to best assess the framework in which I am setting the following discourse, one needs to take into due consideration a number of factors, because the debate on resistance and its legitimacy, if not obligation, needs cultural, political and juridical context. If one considers the differences between Muslim and Western classical theories on the very nature of legislative authority (Hallaq 2014), It becomes apparent that theorisation primarily based on Western political history as a reference cannot be applied to the Muslim world without necessary adjustments.

In this regard, because I am here analysing intra-Shi‘i dynamics, two factors seem pertinent. The first is the absence of the legitimate ruler, the Imam. For Twelver Shi‘is, the current Imam, the only legitimate political ruler, has been in occultation, or concealment (*ghayba*) since the year 940, and will

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<sup>3</sup> On the intellectual thread linking Giorgio Agamben and Tony Negri, see Attell (2009).

only return “at the end of times” (*ākhir al-zamān*) to restore justice on earth. Until then, no rule is fully legitimate (Arjomand 1979). The issue is obviously heatedly debated, for there is a trend in Shi‘i political theory that considers the authority of the doctors of the religious law as fully subsidiary to that of the hidden Imam (for a history, see Sachedina 1998; Madelung 1982). However, that the fact that the religious and political authority ultimately belongs to the Imam only is hardly questionable. The second factor is that at the root of Twelver Shi‘ism lies the sense of having suffered from the most hideous possible injustice, because the divinely ordained leadership of the first Imam, ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib (d. 661), has been usurped (Madelung 1997). Since then, the history of his followers (the Shi‘a, meaning “the party” of ‘Alī) is a long one of exclusion, marginalisation, persecution and oppression, from which derives as a logical conclusion the need to resist.

Therefore, and given these caveats, while there is no consensus on a univocal use of resistance as an analytical tool, for the sake of this article I will use it with the flexible meaning of civil resistance to an authoritarian state rule. While I second the need for analytical rigour, and the necessity of taking into consideration the nuances highlighted above, I am equally convinced that an obsession for rigidly categorising everything would impede any possible kind of understanding of sociological concepts, leading to the paradoxical result of the deconstruction of *all* categories.

### 3. Modern Iranian Sufism and resistance

Before rising to the leadership of the possibly most influential Sufi order of Iran (Cancian 2013), the Gonābādī branch of the Ni‘matullāhiyya,<sup>4</sup> Nūr ‘Alī Tābandeh Majdhūb ‘Alī Shāh<sup>5</sup> was a lawyer and jurist (educated both in the secular and the religious systems), and held positions in the judiciary, the Foreign Ministry and the Ministry of Justice in pre-revolutionary Iran (Sufism.ir 2007). In 1953, he moved to Paris to continue his higher education, obtaining a degree in French literature and a doctorate in law. Tābandeh maintained a connection with the francophone world through successive research and study trips in Paris. Among the results of this connection was an intellectual relationship with the celebrated French Iranologist and philosopher Henry Corbin and the publication in Iran of two translations: Roger Lacombe’s *La crise de la démocratie* (Lacombe 2004) and Frantz Fanon’s *L’An Cinq de la Révolution Algérienne* (Fanon 2006). The latter translation in particular, published by Haghghat Publishing (*Enteshārāt-e Haqīqat*), which can be considered the order’s semi-official publishing house, is a testimony

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<sup>4</sup> On which see Lewisohn (1998), Pourjavady and Lamborn Wilson (1978).

<sup>5</sup> The following information on the life of Nūr ‘Alī Tābandeh are mainly based on his biography: Khebreh-Farshjī (2007).

to an unflinching orientation toward an ethos of resistance by the order, which in its traditional outlook, does not flirt with universalist, post-Islamic postures as, for example, the Munawwar<sup>ʿ</sup>alishāhī branch does. An apparent paradox here emerges of a mystical movement that, while preserving elements of anti-colonial thought, stands up with staunch determination against a polity that claims to represent the voice of the oppressed and the wretched of the world.<sup>6</sup>

#### 4. Gonābādī sufism and the issue of authority

The relationship of the Gonābādīs, and of other Sufi affiliations for that matter, with the powers that be and the various forms of rule, is obviously far more complex than a simple dynamic compromise/resistance would suggest. It has been suggested that Sufi approaches to domination and resistance have a particular tendency to ambiguity in Shiʿi spheres (Ortner 1995): legitimacy, in Shiʿi Islam, is subordinated to the Imamate (Van den Bos 2015). More than ambiguity, however, I would suggest that Sufism in Iran, and *a fortiori* within Shiʿism, had to negotiate its denominational positioning through changes of regimes, resisting assimilation, inculturation or outright suppression in different ways. Until the events of 2006, there were indeed Gonābādī dervishes in Iran who viewed their religiosity as a protest against the Islam promoted by the state. However, their influence was comparable to those who sought to align Sufism with the religious framework of the Islamic Republic (Van den Bos 2002: 3).

Negotiation, accommodation and resistance have been, however, elements inherent to the very birth of modern Shiʿi Sufism, as my long-running study of the *tafsīr Bayān al-saʿāda* tries to articulate (Cancian 2022; Cancian 2019). Shiʿi Sufism underwent different waves of persecution since its return to Iran from India in the late 18th century. After its first-generation masters were persecuted (and some even executed at the order of the religious jurists; see Cancian 2020b), the subsequent generation, in roughly the first half of the 19th century, accommodated to the exoteric religious authority, mingling with them almost undercover (Tabandeh 2021). The writing of the *Bayān al-saʿāda* by Solṭān ʿAlī Shāh Gonābādī, the eponymous master of the Gonābādī branch of the Niʿmatullāhiyya, represents a vocal performative act of writing, which had the power of a foundational act, claiming legitimacy for Sufism within Twelver Shiʿism, while at the same time negotiating those elements of charismatic authority

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<sup>6</sup>The works and the transcripts of the declarations and sermons of Nūr ʿAlī Tābandeh can be found here:

[http://www.sufism.ir/MysticalBooks\(6\).php](http://www.sufism.ir/MysticalBooks(6).php)

and uncompromising Sufi doctrine that earned the first generation of masters persecution and accusations of impiety.

This necessity of negotiation highlights a paradox. Sufi mysticism, in its varied manifestations, has been part of the social fabric of Iranian Shi‘ism since its dawn.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, however, Sufism lies at the core of a religiopolitical conundrum that surfaces in moments of political crisis or instability. This conundrum seems to have entered a new cycle of visibility over the last two decades.

It is appropriate at this point to return to Nūr ‘Alī Tābandeh. While one can find in the master’s numerous declarations the reiteration of the traditional apoliticism of his predecessors,<sup>8</sup> one cannot avoid noticing that this apoliticism is better articulated as equidistance from political parties, or the absence of a political line dictated by the order to the disciples. In fact, the life of Tābandeh is testimony to his concern for the social and political affairs of his country. In his youth, after supporting Mohammad Mossadegh’s<sup>9</sup> nationalisation of the oil industry, in the late 1950s he was a member of the Central Committee of the National Resistance Movement (*Naḥḍat-e Moqāvemat-e Mellī*, Khebreh-Farshjī 2007: 10), founded by Ayatollahs Maḥmūd Ṭāleqānī and Reḍā Zanjānī. Later he was defendant lawyer of several revolutionary and political figures before and after the revolution, notably among them the Ayatollah Mortaḍā Pasandideh, brother of Rūḥollāh Khomeini (IRNA 25 December 2019). Tābandeh’s activity as a judicial expert in state institutions has been highlighted above. In 1990, before becoming Great Master of the Gonābādī order, he was among the signatories of a petition to the then President Hashemi Rafsanjani, in which a reform of the *velāyat-e faqīh* was deemed necessary to avoid autocratic rule (BBC Persian 24 December 2019). As a result, he was sentenced to serve eight months in prison. More recently, before the 2009 presidential elections, even though no official statement was produced, Mehdi Karrubi’s vocal defence of the dervishes in the wake of several attacks on Sufi gathering places starting with the 2006 attack in Qom, resulted in the dervishes’ more or less open endorsement of the reformist candidate’s bid for presidency. As we will see below, the pressure placed on the order over the last decade forced it to resist in ways more open than in the past century.

Sufis in Iran have a solid social base across classes, and Gonābādī dervishes are represented in all strata of society, sometimes discretely even among government officials (Selsele-ye Ne‘matollāhī 2008). The trend appears to have undergone a period of consolidation under the guidance of Sāleḥ ‘Alī

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<sup>7</sup> For an overview, see Lewisohn (1999).

<sup>8</sup> On apoliticism in the Ni‘matullāhiyya, see Cancian (2020a).

<sup>9</sup> Moḥammad Moṣaddeq (d. 1967), was a nationalist politician who, under his term as prime minister (1951-1953), nationalized the Iranian oil industry. He was overthrown by a US-assisted monarchical coup in 1953 (Katouzian 1990; Abrahamian 2013).

Shāh (d. 1950; Gramlich 1965: 64), likely explaining the failure of the state and part of the religious establishment's endeavors to eradicate the order. This social weight, coupled with the sway that the masters hold over their disciples, is ample grounds for the state to harbour suspicions regarding the dervishes' allegiance to the principles of the Islamic Republic, viewing them as a potential threat.

In the next sections, I will analyse the sensitive elements of the Gonābādī Sufis' thought in matters pertaining to authority and political legitimacy. In this framework, I will refer to the struggle to reclaim the heritage of mysticism in contemporary Twelver Shi'ism, which is grounded in the wider context of the discourse on political authority in Shi'i Islam and in post-revolutionary Iran. By referring to this framework, I intend to assess if, and to what degree, the attrition between the Gonābādīs and the Islamic Republic is the result of an intrinsic political element existent within the Order, or if it is produced by general dynamics of resistance to the state, independent of the teachings of the order.

### 5. Gonābādī Sufism, society and politics in the 19th and 20th centuries

According to a report by an English missionary of the early 20th century, the then *qoṭb* of the Gonābādī Sufis, Nūr 'Alī Shāh II (d. 1918) authored a short treatise in which he invited the people of Iran to unite under the aegis of Sufism, to put an end to the chaos and disintegration of Iran in the aftermath of the Constitutional Revolution of 1906 (Miller 1923).<sup>10</sup> While Miller's note is vague and lacks information for locating the source for this treatise,<sup>11</sup> his reference highlights the ambiguity and epistemological instability of the articulation of authority among Twelver Shi'is in contemporary times. Nūr 'Alī Shāh's claim for authority virtually places the master in the same camp with that part of the Shi'i religious elite that expressed need for the members of the clergy to take direct control of the state. One needs to consider, however, both the exceptionality of the time in which the declaration appeared (if ever, in 1918), and the fact that Nūr 'Alī Shāh's successor was a staunch opposer of the Sufis' involvement in politics (Gramlich 1965: 54). Nūr 'Alī Shāh could be considered an exception to the Order's general trend in the 20th century, in some way attuned to the expansive attitude of Twelver Shi'i ulama of the time. This expansive tendency is an essential trait of the "rationalist" clergy (*uṣūlī*, lit. "principlist," from the

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<sup>10</sup> Miller arrived in Khorasan five years after the demise of Nūr 'Alī Shāh II. He did not have the opportunity to meet with his successor Ṣāleḥ 'Alī Shāh during his sojourn. The main source for his report was Mollā Ḥādī Sabzavārī's grandson Ḥājj 'Emād al-Dīn, who was one of Nūr 'Alī Shāh's authorised shaykhs.

<sup>11</sup> No evidence exists, to my knowledge, of this book having ever been written. Nūr 'Alī Shāh briefly touched upon the matter in a declaration published in the newspaper *Īrān* on 14 April 1918 (Hey'at-e Taḥrīriyye 2016–7: 155–157), so there is a chance Miller was referring to that.

expression *uṣūl al-fiqh* “principles of jurisprudence”) in the modern period (Heern 2015), and the Sufis’s main referent in their process of negotiation of their position within Shi‘ism.

Ni‘matullāhī Sufis consolidated their doctrinal foundations in the framework of Twelver Shi‘ism in the late 19th century. At the time, the dispute between “rationalist” and “traditionist” ulama (respectively, *uṣūlī* and *akhbārī*) had been long won by the former (Newman 1992). The victory established the rationalists as the main religious reference for Twelver Shi‘ism (today the term refers, in general, to Uṣūlism) but religious scholars in late Qajar Iran tended to include revered traditionists among their ranks, for an outright exclusion of characters whose rank and knowledge was universally recognised would have not been credible (Newman 2005). The Gonābādīs eventually occupied a position of compromise (Cancian 2021), resorting to the blurred doctrinal lines that existed between some of the most renown protagonists of the dispute (Gleave 1994; Gleave 2007: 56–58; Heern 2015: 52–53), and simultaneously trying to avoid division within the community. This position, tactical as it may be, interrogates the issue of the Gonābādīs’ allegiance to Uṣūlism, and therefore is relevant to our investigation of the Sufis’ resistance to the status quo. Although the Gonābādīs claim citizenship within *uṣūlī* Shi‘ism, their opinions on spiritual authority are peculiarly inspired by both classical Sufism and early Shi‘i esotericism and its idea of the transcendent nature of the Imam. This combination has a bearing on their adherence to the doctrine of the *marja‘iyya* (the primacy of the most learned of the doctors of the law; see Walbridge 2001).

A look to the work of Solṭān ‘Alī Shāh Gonābādī (d. 1909),<sup>12</sup> the eponym master and 34th *qoṭb* of the order, is particularly useful in this regard. Solṭān ‘Alī Shāh proposes a binary structure of religious authority in which the doctors of the law are the custodians of only one of the aspects of Shi‘ism’s spiritual authority (*walāya*, or *valāyat/velāyat* in Persian).<sup>13</sup> Their legitimacy derives from an uninterrupted chain of transmission, parallel to the one from which the Sufis derive their own authority (Solṭān ‘Alī Shāh, 2000–1: 129–130). The master proposes an alliance between the ulama and the mystics that would restore the unity broken under the Safavid dynasty (15th–19th centuries). Because in Qajar Iran the discourse on authority is intrinsically connected to that on involvement in politics and its legitimacy, the treatment of the theme of *walāya* by Ni‘matullāhī authors is essential.<sup>14</sup> To be sure, there is no systematic “political thought” of Gonābādī Sufism. Solṭān ‘Alī Shāh does hint, in

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<sup>12</sup> On Solṭān ‘Alī Shāh’s life, works and legacy see Reḡā ‘Alī Shāh (2004–5), Pazouki (n.d.: 69–83), Cancian (2014: 88–10).

<sup>13</sup> On this complex and articulated notion in Shi‘i Islam, see Amir-Moezzi (2002), Corbin (1971–2 :33–38). In Sufism see Chodkiewicz (1986), Palmer (2019).

<sup>14</sup> See Van den Bos (2015: 190–207) and Scharbordt (2010).



some of his works and his private correspondence, at a general political pedagogy, referring to responsibility to the nation and offering some practical pieces of advice on how to deal with the social and political spheres, but nowhere does this come close to any kind of political theology, let alone ideology.

The presence of political discourse in the masters' works can be described as tenuous, existing but surfacing sporadically and without systematicity. It is possible, however, to connect the dispersed dots and try to produce a discourse on the matter, for silence itself can be telling. I have already mentioned Nūr 'Alī Shāh's declaration. The same master authored a treatise on the principles of jurisprudence (*uṣūl al-fiqh*, see above) that would place him in the Uṣūlī camp, and could be read as a performative act of speech. It must be noted, in this regard, that uṣūlī tendencies have always gone hand in hand with the ulama expanding their claims over politics (Amir-Moezzi 1993). However, one can regard Nūr 'Alī Shāh as an exception, also leading a life that was different and more adventurous than that of the other masters. Solṭān 'Alī Shāh never provided details of how a Sufi should put his or her responsibility as a member of the community in practice. The master's position seems to represent a synthesis of quietist currents flowing through classical Sufism and the traditional Shi'ī idea that, whereas no political regime has full legitimacy during the absence of the Imam, society needs law and a power able to enforce it to function. With these powers, one need to compromise. Solṭān 'Alī Shāh's thought here presents some obscure points (Van den Bos 2015: 203), and hence, more than a century since his assassination in 1909, there is still debate on his support for the Constitution, or lack thereof (although my own opinion on the matter is that there is no substantial reason to not take his equidistance at face value, as articulated in Cancian 2022; also Pazouki n.d.: 78–9). In one passage of the *Valāyat-nāmeḥ*, Solṭān 'Alī Shāh refers to the “administration of the country” (Solṭān 'Alī Shāh 1984–5: 158–63), alluding to the wrongdoings committed by Qajar provincial authorities as forerunning the fall of the monarchical order. However, the whole discourse on the administration of the country occurs in the wider context of the master's continuous reference to the correspondence between macrocosm and microcosm. According to Solṭān 'Alī Shāh, as much as each believer is enjoined to keep his or her inner microcosmic realm/country (*mamlakat-e ṣaghīr*) in functioning order, he or she has also responsibility for the macrocosmic country/realm (*mamlakat-e kabīr*; Solṭān 'Alī Shāh 1984–5: 158). This seems hardly an indication of factional politics. Yet, on the other hand, biographical sources have Solṭān 'Alī Shāh publicly denouncing Qajar autocracy and praying for the premature demise of the ruler Nāṣer al-Dīn Shāh (Reḍā 'Alī Shāh 2004–5: 138).

In the absence of an open, religiously motivated and state-supported attempt at containing or eradicating Sufism, therefore, there are no structural elements in the work of Solṭān 'Alī Shāh that

allow a reconstruction of his political stance. Resistance to oppression (*zōlm*), which is a constituent element of Twelver Shi‘ism and would later become one of the Islamic Republic’s leitmotifs, seems to leave space to other, more pressing concerns and to the master’s project of integrating mature Gonābādī Shi‘i Sufism into the doctrinal categories of Uṣūlīs (Cancian 2022). The form of government, for Solṭān ‘Alī Shāh, is not essential but, rather, instrumental and disposable. The value of the political and juridical or normative framework is relative; what really matters is the spiritual and material prosperity of the community. The master explains this in several passages of different works, in which he connects this relativity to the complementary duality of *islām* and *īmān*, that is, respectively the submission to an exoteric order and the realisation of the real faith through initiation. *Islam* is what provides the legal framework for the tidy deployment of social life, having the function of “preserving the blood and the property of people”. *Īmān*, on the other hand, attainable through the initiation, is the means through which the faithful is granted access to the *walāya* of the Imams (Solṭān ‘Alī Shāh 1964–5, I: 50–51; Solṭān ‘Alī Shāh 1984–5: 43–7; Solṭān ‘Alī Shāh 2008–9: 187).

## 6. Conclusion: compromising resistance, uncompromising accommodation

During a meeting I had with the Nūr ‘Alī Tābandeh over the Nouruz holidays of 2004 (March 2004) I briefly broached the subject of the order’s stance towards political and social issues (*Goftogū-hā* 2004). To the question of whether or not he thought there was a hope of containing mounting injustice, the master stated that “when the flood is coming, all you can do is protect what you can protect of your house, so you can reconstruct from that once the flood has receded.” While it did not sound like a manifesto for political action, the statement pointed at the necessity of resisting injustice. After all, Nūr ‘Alī Tābandeh was the master of a mystical order that has endured persecution and attempts of eradication since the late 19th century, in waves of different intensity. When I met the master again in 2009, a few days before the contested presidential elections that marked the second mandate of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Nūr ‘Alī Shāh made a clear reference to how his movement would meet the increasingly brazen attacks that it had been targeted with in the last few years. His words “we do not turn the other cheek” seem uncannily foresighted from the vantage point of the events of Golestān-e Haftom. Shi‘ism is characterised by a distinctive tendency to protest in particular in its interface with its gnostic elements, to the point that it has been suggested that the interface between it and Sufism should be located as much in the insularity of its mystical theology as in the revolutionary practice of such rebellious movements as the Sarbedārān or the Ḥurūfīs: its philosophical tradition was “as much theorized in secluded royal libraries as practiced on militant battlefields of history, poised precisely against those monarchies” (Dabashi 2011: 142-143).

The rhetoric of resistance imbues every corner of the Islamic Republic of Iran's discursive practices (Kramer *et al.* 1987), and even reform attempts from within are looked at and talked about as reactionary initiatives aimed to crush the front of revolutionary resistance (Milani 2001). In this context, Sufism needs to negotiate its way to represent its resistance, which is a matter of survival, even before being a matter of principle, as genuine and not prejudicially poised to join any effort to overturn the order of the State. At the same time, there is the need to preserve Sufism's, and Gonābādī's in particular, emphasis on equidistance.

In a conversation published on one of the semi-official websites of the order (Selsele-ye Ne'matollāhī 2008), Nūr 'Alī Tābandeh commented extensively on the recent wave of anti-Sufism that hit the dervishes in Iran. It is a very informative and outspoken piece, in which the master does not spare vehement criticism of the Iranian system. The crux of the issue is identified in the preoccupation of the ulama (and of the political system dominated by the ulama in the Islamic Republic) with the growing popularity of Sufism, and of the Ni'matullāhiyya in particular. The master touches upon different matters, from the history of the relationship between the order and the state in the latest two centuries, to issues of familial succession of the leadership and the construction of the shrine of the masters of the order in Beidokht, near Gonābād. However, the government's preoccupation with the "development of organised Sufism" seems to be one of underlying themes. While admitting that the Gonābādīs have expanded their influence in the social sphere in the last century (he uses the word *towṣe'eh*, used in modern Persian for "development"), Nūr 'Alī Tābandeh stresses that this development is just a manifestation of the inner states of the dervishes, and that the State's political outlook on it is entirely misplaced. This reactive pressure, which the master affirms to have hit the Sufis with different intensity from the late Safavid times onwards, reached a tipping point in the last two decades, in parallel with the increasing growth of Sufism and other alternative spiritualities (also potentially offering the opportunity for expressing forms of resistance; Doostdar 2018), and determined the elements of resistance to intertwine with the uncompromising tendency to accommodation inherent to the order.

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