Sufism in the Contemporary Shii Seminary?

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Abstract: This paper investigates the intersection of Sufism and philosophy in the Shii context during the post-Mulla Sadra era. Specifically, it traces the scholars who emphasized Sadrian philosophical and mystical approaches on both theoretical and practical levels and identifies the roots of the Sufi order in the Shia seminary after 1850, namely the Sufi school of Najaf. I argue that these scholars were connected to Sufi orders such as the Dhahabyya and the Ni'matullahi order, contrary to the claim that they were not affiliated with any formal Sufi order. Furthermore, I highlight the reluctance of the masters and followers of the contemporary “Sufi School of Najaf” to reveal their Sufi connections in the anti-Sufi dominant environment of the seminary. Ultimately, this paper provides a comprehensive understanding of the connections between philosophy and Sufism in the post-Mulla Sadra era and speculates on the roots, origin, and development of such a school in the contemporary Shi'i seminary.

Keywords: philosophy; Sufism; Shii seminary; Sufi School of Najaf; post-Sadr

1. Introduction

The Shi'i seminary is generally known as a religious institution emphasizing instruction in the Islamic sciences, particularly Islamic law (fiqh). Within these parameters, the seminary aims to prepare jurists (mujtahids). The official mission of the al-Hawzat al-ilmiya (communities of learning/seminaries) is to educate and cultivate students in the religious sciences, preparing them for the role of “Mujtahids,” thereby fortifying them with the capacity for Ijtihad or independent reasoning.

In some respects, the official curriculum of those seminaries is comparable to a modern study of law to become an expert in civil or criminal law. Yet, this is the exact point that Mullâ Sadra (1572–1641) and his followers stressed when they criticized and opposed what they deemed the reduction of the definition of fiqh merely to law. In their understanding, fiqh should not be limited and restricted to exercising independent reasoning in extracting Islamic law or legal reasoning. It should rather be extended far beyond these narrow parameters. Rather than restricting law to its outward dimensions, real or exalted forms of fiqh should display an in-depth involvement with the reality of things or present an in-depth understanding of the revelation and transforming souls to purity and proximity to God, thereby encompassing both the internal as well as the external layers of revelation is the real meaning of fiqh. According to this understanding, the outer fiqh consists of a mere introduction to the law that should not be mistaken for its ultimate telos. The ultimate aim of religion consists in the gnosis of the Real. One cannot reach the inner realities of revelation without recognizing that this “lesser” fiqh (fiqh asghar) constitutes an introduction and not an ultimate purpose.

In the contemporary Shia seminary, a trace of a Sufi and philosophical approach to the study and practice of religion is visible. This paper undertakes a historical investigation to contextualize the emergence of Sufism within the contemporary Shi'i seminary. It seeks to trace the evolution of Sufism in the context of Shia Islam, drawing insights from an analysis of primary sources to elucidate and offer informed speculation regarding the origins of this transformative movement (See Figures 1 and 2). The tendency that this research is pointing to is often referred to by various designations and is perhaps most renowned as...
the “Maktab-i Najaf” (the School of Najaf) or Maktab-i akhlāqiyyān-i Najaf (School of Ethicists of Najaf) (See Figure 3 for a chronological view of the masters of this school). Masters of the school of Najaf, in the Shia seminary, were promoting practical Sufism along with the study of religious sciences. They believed that practical Sufism is necessary for cultivating the self in the path to return to God. Probably the most known figure among them in Western scholarship is Muhammad Husayn Tabātabā’ī (1321/1904–1402/1981). This research is not studying the School of Najaf. It instead speculates on the roots, origin, and development of such a school in the contemporary Shia seminary. Hence, our examination will delve into the resurgence and progression of the two main Sufi orders within the Shia tradition: the Ni’matullāhī Order and the Dhaḥābiyya Sūfī Order, encompassing both the pre-modern and modern eras. By immersing ourselves in this historical context, we aim to gain an understanding that will facilitate the potential origins, emergence, and evolutions of the Sufi movement within the Shia seminary.

A scholarly lacuna exists regarding this Sufi tendency within the seminary. Our knowledge about it is, therefore, in a state of flux. Kamīl Muṣṭafā al-Shaybānī, in his al-Sīla bayn al-tasawwuf wa-al-tashayyūr, provides us with some historical and conceptual background information. Seyed Hossein Nasr, in his chapter entitled Shī‘ism and Sūfism and their Relationship in Essence and in History within Sufi Essays, expands on the notion that Shī‘ism and Sūfism comprise integral dimensions of Islamic revelation. Henry Corbin, on the other hand, represented Shī‘ī figures such as Sayyid Haydar Ṭāhir (1719/1319 or 720/1320—after 787/1385) to Western scholarly audiences as an instantiation of historical Shī‘ī-Ṣūfī conversations and interrelations. Reza Tabandeh and Leonard Lewisohn, in their edited volume, Sūfis and their Opponents in the Persianate World, touch on some of the modern features of the Ni’matullāhī order. ‘Ātā Anzalī, in his Mysticism in Iran, depicts some of those opponents to Sūfism both during and after the Safavid era. Furthermore, Anzalī, in his The Emergence of the Dhaḥābiyya in Safavid Iran, presents the development of this order in the Safavid and post-Safavid era based on studies of specific manuscripts. Philosophy in Qajar Iran, edited by Reza Pourjavadi, elaborates on some of the prominent philosophers/mystics, such as Mullā Ḥādī Sabzavārī, Mullā ‘Alī Nūrī, and others that are understudied in the Western scholarship. None of the mentioned works have paid attention to the emergence and the development of the Sūfī schools in the Shī‘a seminary. Tabandeh and Anzalī solely study either the Ni’matullāhī or the Dhaḥābiyya order. Only Sajjād Ṭāhirī, in his article on Mullā ‘Alī Nūrī, who was a disciple of Bīdābādī, very briefly mentions Ṣadr al-Dīn Kāshīf al-Dīzfulī (1174/1760–1258/1842) and states that he was “a renowned mystic associated with Dhaḥābī order who also did much to spread ‘irfān in the shrine cities of Iraq.” Ṭāhirī, however, does not provide more detail on how Sayyid Kāshīf caused the spread of ‘irfān (Sufism) in the shrine cities of Iraq, in which the leading Shī‘ī seminaries were located.

Several figures in the post-Mullā Ṣādrā era emphasized expanding and promoting his teachings or following his footsteps in the mystical and philosophical approach both on the theoretical (naẓārī) and practical (‘amalī) levels. Sadūqī Suḥān in his Tahrīr-i šānt-i tārīkh-i ḥukmā wa ‘urafā-yi mūta’ akhkhīr (The Second Compilation of the History of Philosophers and Mystics) mentions multiple chains of those who taught or followed Ṣādrā’s philosophical methodology and approach, or rather his philosophical mysticism up to the present day. To clearly understand the ground upon which the later Shī‘ī-Sūfī school in the seminary was founded, it is necessary to study those figures. Among these scholars, some are better-known members or masters of the Dhaḥābiyya Sūfī order, such as Shāh Muhammad Dārābī (d. ca. 1717), Ḥuǧr al-Dīn ‘Abbās Nāyrjavālī (1689–1760), Mullā ‘Alī Nūrī (d. 1246/1831), Bīdābādī (d.1197/1783), Mullā Ḥādī Sabzavārī, Bahr al-‘Ulūm, and others. There are also some other scholars connected to the Ni’matullāhī order, such as Mullā ‘Abd al-Ṣamad Hamadānī (d. 1216/1802). In addition to Saduqī Suḥā’s chronology, Purjavādī, in his introduction to Philosophy in Qajar Iran, describes that Gobineau, the French ambassador to Iran, under the influence of ‘Āqa ‘Alī Ţahrānī, points to Mullā Ṣādrā (d. 1045/1635–36) as the person who revived the philosophical tradition in Safavid Iran (De Gobineau 1923). Additionally,
following Mullâ Sadrâ, Gobineau named and gave short biographical accounts of forty-nine other philosophers (Pourjavady 2018). These reports confirm the existence of a tradition in which philosophy and Sûfism continued to pass from one generation to another.

In an attempt to describe the group of Shi‘i-Sûfî scholars, Murtaḍâ Muṭahharî (1919–1979) denies their connection to any Sûfî order, instead calling them “scholars who were not members of any formal Sûfî order” and who “began to show profound learning in the theoretical ‘irfân of Ibn ‘Arabî, such that none from amongst the Sûﬁ orders could match them.” (Muṭahharî 1999). According to Muṭahharî, these “individuals” first had high expertise in philosophy and the theoretical Sûfism of Ibn Arabî, but they were also detached from Sûfî orders. It is understandable if some of these individuals had no Sûfî affiliations, but the question is whether this claim is all-inclusive regarding these figures.

It is important to note that almost all the masters and followers of the Sûfî School of Najaf have been careful not to reveal their Sûfî connection, background, and roots. For those familiar with the history of Sûfism, the reason for such performance within the anti-Sûfî dominant environment of the seminary is understandable. Subsequently, I delve into an investigation of the school’s origins, foundations, and interconnections.

2. Research Method

This study conducts a comprehensive analysis of Sufism within the Shia context, employing a historical methodology to discern the origins and foundational sources of subsequent Sûfî developments within the Shia seminary. Our research encompasses a thorough examination of a wide array of source materials, including Sûfî monographs, travelogues, manuscripts, diaries, and other relevant literature, predominantly in the Persian language. Through this multifaceted investigation, we aim to shed light on the emergence and evolution of Sûfî traditions within the contemporary Shia seminary, offering valuable insights into this intricate aspect of Shia scholarship and spirituality.

3. Revival of the Ni’matullâhî Order

It was during the time of Shah Sultan Hussain 1694–1722 that the anti-Sûfî polemics were dominated by the presence of the three grand jurists in Isfahan, Mashhad, and Qom. Historians of the pre-modern and modern Shi‘i Sûfism have discussed the revival of the Ni’matullâhî order after such late Safavid anti-Sûfî tendencies. A general description of this era is narrated by Mast ‘Alî Shâh (b. 1780), a Ni’matullâhî Sûfî, in the following terms:

From the middle of Shah Sultan Husayn’s era to the end of Karîm Khân’s, the tradition of Sûfism was abolished in Iran. …For approximately sixty years, Iran was devoid of Sûfî doctrines and the subtleties of certitude and no one’s ear heard the name of the spiritual path (târîqat) and no one’s eye saw a person of the spiritual path (ahl-i târîqat) (Tabandeh 2022, p. 63).

This, however, does not describe the whole story of the continuation of Sûfism and mystical philosophy in post-Safavid Iran or within the larger Shi‘i communities in the Middle East and Indian subcontinent. It also neglects what was happening in closely connected Shi‘i seminaries in Iran and Iraq.

Mathieu Terrier, in his The Defense of Sûfism among Twelver Shi‘i Scholars of Early Modern and Modern Times (Terrier 2020) attributes the reinstatement of Sûfism in 18th-century Iran as “actually established by an outside decision.” In this statement, he is referring to the decision of the then head of the Ni’matullâhî order, i.e., Riḍâ Alishah Dakkânî in 1770, to send Maṣûm ‘Alî Shâh (1147/1734) to Iran to revive the order. It is established that the leaders of this order departed from Iran due to the persecution they faced in the latter stages of the Safavid era.

4. Maṣûm ‘Alî Shâh Dakkânî and Aqâ Muḥammad ‘Alî Kirmânhâhî

Maṣûm ‘Alî Shâh Dakkânî’s (b. c. 1147/1734–5, d. end twelfth/eighteenth century) mission was successful in attracting followers in different Iranian and Iraqi religious cities. Nevertheless, he faced strong opposition from Aqâ Muḥammad ‘Alî Kirmânhâhî
5. Nūr ʿAlī Shāh Īsfahānī

Nūr ʿAlī Shāh Īsfahānī (d. 1212/1797), a close disciple and successor of Maʿṣūm ʿAlī Shāh, expanded the Niʿmatullāhī order, in particular among some Shiʿī clerics. As Tabandeh puts it, Sufism in Persia was primarily understood through the practices of wandering dervishes. The Niʿmatullāhī masters recognized this perception, which was unfavorable, and sought to reinvigorate their order by educating people about the unique intellectual and practical aspects of Niʿmatullāhī Sufism. Majdūb ʿAlī Shāh aimed to promote Niʿmatullāhī philosophy within Shiʿī clerical circles, initiating notable figures like Mullā ʿAbd al-Ṣamad Hamadānī, Mullā Muhammad Naṣīr Ḍarabī, and Shaykh Zāhid Gīlānī into the order. (Tabandeh 2022)

Among the mentioned religious scholars, Mullā ʿAbd al-Ṣamad Hamadānī (d. 1216/1801) (Mangol 2020) was a disciple of the above-mentioned Muhammad Bāqīr Bihbihānī. This historical moment occurred when the Niʿmatullāhī order developed a more elite or scholarly side, even among the scholars in the seminary where some of the Fuqahāʾ constituted opponents of Sufism. Hamadānī authored several works on fiqh and islāmī and other books, chief among them being the Bahīr al-maʿārif (Ocean of Knowledge), dealing with ethics and spiritual wayfaring. He was a Shiʿī Muṣṭahīd (jurist) based in Karbala and was eventually killed in the Wahhābī attack on the Shiʿī shrine city of Karbala in Iraq that attempted to destroy the shrine of al-Ḥusayn, the third Shiʿī Imam.

6. Bahīr al-ʿUlūm and his Risālah fī Sayr wa al-Sulūk (Treatise on Journey and Spiritual Path)

According to Niʿmatullāhī sources, Mullā ʿAbd al-Ṣamad Hamadānī facilitated several visits between Nūr ʿAlī Shāh Īsfahānī (the Niʿmatullāhī Shaykh,) and Sayyid Mahdī Ṭāḥābāʾī (d. 1212/1797), known as Bahīr al-ʿUlūm (Sea of Knowledge/Science). Maṣūm ʿAlī Shāh 1970) The latter was a well-known and respected Shiʿī authority. We know that Bahīr al-ʿUlūm did not support an anti-Ṣūfī fatwa that was promoted by a group of anti-Ṣūfī clerics in Karbala. As Litvak puts it,

The ʿulāmaʿ of Karbalaʿ appealed to Bahīr al-ʿUlūm to lend his signature to the takfīr, to give it greater authority. But, according to Ṣūfī sources, Bahīr al-ʿUlūm was sympathetic toward the Ṣūfī activists, and arranged for them to leave the shrine cities unharmed (Litvak 1998, p. 48).

The significance of this gathering resides in the realization that the favorability towards Bahīr al-ʿUlūm subsequently serves as a rationale for subsequent Shiʿī clerics inclined towards Ṣūfism. On the other hand, as much as pro-Ṣūfī clerics tended to affiliate Bahīr al-ʿUlūm with Sufism, opponents of Sufism made every effort to deny this affiliation. The Risālah fī Sayr wa al-Sulūk (Treatise on Spiritual Journeying and Wayfaring) attributed to Bahīr al-ʿUlūm is obviously in the Ṣūfī style and primarily discusses practical Sufism. This book was commented on by two later prolific Shiʿī scholars, philosophers, and followers of the Ṣūfī school of Najaf, namely, Muhammad Ḥusayn Ṭāḥābāʾī (1904–1981) and his disciple Muhammad Ḥusayn Ḥusaynī Ṭāhrānī.1 As Ṭāhrānī, in his introduction to Risālah fī Sayr wa al-Sulūk, indicates, Muḥammad Ḥusayn Ṭāḥābāʾī transcribed his copy from the author’s (Bahīr al-ʿUlūm) own copy.2 As Ṭāhrānī narrates, Ṭāḥābāʾī explained to him, “I have a copy of the treatise based on a very correct version of the manuscript that I have transcribed with my own hands.” Ṭāḥābāʾī then acknowledges that,
I came across a copy of the treatise when I was studying in Tabriz, from which I made my own transcription, although that version had many mistakes. When I had the grace to go to Najaf, I found that my master, the late Ayatullah Sayyid 'Ali Qadiri, had a copy of the treatise that was very similar to mine... Later on, I found a very correct version of the treatise, which was written in beautiful handwriting... it was the copy of my astronomy and mathematics teacher, the late Sayyid Abü al-Qasim Khunsarī. Thus, I borrowed his copy and transcribed it in 1354 AH (1936 CE). His copy was transcribed ninety years before that time (Bahar al-'Ulūm 2013).

In addition to Tahirani’s discussion on the matter in his introduction, this quotation informs us that Bahar al-'Ulūm’s Risalah fi Sayr wa al-Sulāk was circulated and copied by scholars during and after his life. Tabatabai transcribed his copy in 1936 from a copy that was transcribed ninety years before that in 1846. This is about forty-nine years after its author died in 1797.

Both Muhammad Husayn Tabatabai (1904–1981) and Husayni Tahirani attributed significance to this treatise, leading them to produce commentaries on it. Risalah fi Sayr wa al-Sulāk provides both guidance and an overview of the spiritual journey. Shahram Pazouki contends that Bahar al-'Ulūm composed this treatise after his encounter with Ni'matullahi Shaykh, Nur 'Ali Shah Isfahaniu. Historical records do not substantiate whether Bahar al-'Ulūm underwent initiation into the Ni'matullahi order. However, the treatise’s content exhibits a noticeable affinity with the teachings of the order. The author’s treatise highlights the essential role of a spiritual guide for a wayfarer, indicating that if the author himself was a “Sālik,” he likely had a guiding master on his spiritual journey. As he puts it,

A wayfarer is never without the need of the particular (Khās) master, even if he achieves his desired destination. That is because even the destination that he has reached has certain rites and manners that should be observed, and these rites and manners are taught by none other than the particular master. No matter how high is the realm that the wayfarer achieves, it is still under the guardianship of the particular master. Thus, the companionship of the particular master is a universal requirement for every stage of the journey. Even at the last stage of the journey, where the manifestation of the Divine Names and Essence occurs, the particular master is present (Bahar al-'Ulūm 2013).

While Bahar al-'Ulūm’s Risalah Fi Sayr wa al-Sulāk serves as a guidebook for spiritual seekers, critics of Sufism, along with certain pro-Sufi clerics, cast doubt on the authenticity of the treatise’s final section. This section relates a description of Sufi practice in the request for a blessing from the spirituality of Mercury. Its author mentions that he used to resort to the spirituality of Mercury, and he adds that,

indeed, those initiated into esoteric knowledge draw assistance from the ethereal essence of Mercury. It is prudent for neophytes to observe Mercury’s celestial presence, ideally after sunset and before sunrise when its luminance graces the horizon. Initiating this observation, the practitioner is advised to offer a greeting of “Salaam” to the celestial body, followed by a step back, wherein the recitation continues:

Oh, Mercury! Long have I yearned and sighed,
Through days and nights, for your presence to abide.
Now, here I stand, seeking your guiding light,
Grant me aid in my quest from dark to sight.
Stepping back once more, a whispered appeal,
By heavenly decree, unravel the key.
Bestow upon me blessings, rich and clean,
Lord of earth and heaven, let abundance assured (Bahar al-'Ulūm 1388).
Opponents state that this practice does not follow the taste of religion, and even if the treatise is attributed to Bahār al-ʿUlām, this section is not from him. In fact, the transcriber added his own experience right at the end of the treatise. This confused some readers. The transcriber did not identify himself except by saying that he was the father of Sayyid Muṣṭafā Khawansārī. Yet, another hint may help us to identify the transcriber. When Maṣūm ʿAlī Shāh, in his Tarātīq al-Ḥaḡāt, mentions the life and works of a Niamatullāhī Ṣūfī, Rahmat Alī Shāh, who composed a short treatise in response to a question about the unity of being (Wahdat al-Wujūd) written in 1247/1831, he adds that “and I saw his transcription of Bahār al-ʿUlām’s Risālah Fī Sayr wa al-Sulāk in Ṣūfīsm (ʿIrāf) where he also added a description of his Arbāʾīnqayvat (Forty Days of Spiritual Retreat)” (Maṣūm ʿAlī Shāh 1970). This narration sheds light on the ambiguity of the Mercury prayer in Bahār al-ʿUlām’s Risālah Fī Sayr wa al-Sulāk and who might be the possible author of it.

7. Mullā ʿAbd Al-Ṣamad Hamadānī and the Question of the Origin of the Ṣūfī School in the Shiʿī Seminary

Shahram Pazouki, in his entry on Mullā ʿAbd al-Ṣamad Hamadānī, tried to identify ʿAbd al-Ṣamad Hamadānī and Bahār al-ʿUlām as the originators of this Ṣūfī movement in the seminary. He refers to the visits mentioned between Bahār al-ʿUlām and Nūr ʿAlī Shāh ʿIsfahānī, using Bahār al-ʿUlām’s Risālah Fī Sayr wa al-Sulāk to make this connection. Pazouki states that,

Through Hamadhāntī, a particular type of Ṣūfīsm developed among certain Shiʿī ulamāʾ, although, due to the opposition which grew to Ṣūfīsm from the middle of Safavid rule among most of Shiʿī ulamāʾ, they chose to speak of ʿirfān (gnosis) rather than of taṣawwuf (Ṣūfīsm). One of the main figures of this type of Ṣūfīsm was Mullā Husayn Qulī Ḥamādānī (d. 1311/1893). ʿAllāmah Ṭabāṭabāʾī (d. 1402/1982), [the] author of the famous al-Mīzān commentary of the Qurʾān, was a contemporary follower of this way (Pazouki 2012).

Pazouki accurately acknowledges the presence of a Ṣūfī movement within the seminary. However, his assertion that Mullā ʿAbd al-Ṣamad Hamadānī initiated the formation of this “specific” movement, denoted as the “Ṣūfī school of Najaf,” is not in alignment with historical accuracy. It is imperative to acknowledge that the scholarly works of both Mullā ʿAbd al-Ṣamad Hamadānī and Bahār al-ʿUlām found mention within the writings of scholars associated with the Ṣūfī school of Najaf. Despite this, there is no direct link between Mullā ʿAbd al-Ṣamad Hamadānī and them. While Mullā ʿAbd al-Ṣamad died in 1216/1801, Sayyid Ali Shūštārī, as the great master of the Najaf order, died in 1281/1864 (Figure 3). Apart from the absence of any historical evidence or record of relationships between these two, it is hard to imagine a meeting based on the dates mentioned. First, Shūštārī was very young at the time. Secondly, he entered the Najaf Seminary while already known as a well-versed scholar in his city of origin, Shūštār in Iran.

Based on what has been discussed, it is evident that the Nī ṭulūhā order had contacts and members amongst clerics in the Shiʿī seminary and that the Nī ṭulūhā works were valuable for those pro-Ṣūfī religious scholars. Yet there is no historical evidence that this order was the root of the Ṣūfī order in the Shia seminary, namely the Ṣūfī school of Najaf.
Figure 1. The pre-modern Ni‘matullāhī order revival in Iran.

8. Post-Sadra Dhaḥabīyya Šūfī Order and Šī‘ī-Šūfī Convergence

We already mentioned the existence of post-Sadrian Šūf-philosophers who promoted Sadra’s interpretation of religion, presenting an interrelated version of Šī‘ism and Šūfism. We also discussed the revival of the Ni‘matullāhī Šūfī order to investigate the aforementioned tradition and to uncover its possible relationship to the Šūfī School of Najaf in the Šī‘ī seminary.

9. The Kubrawīyya Order, Kubrā, and Ismā‘īl Qaṣrī

In what follows, we shall study the continuation and developments of the Dhaḥabīyya order in Iran. In fact, the Dhaḥabīyya was a continuation of the Kubrawīyya order. Yet, before entering into our Dhaḥabīyya discussion, it is worth mentioning some recent scholarship on the Kubrawīyya order. Despite some scholars connecting Najm al-Dīn Kubrā (d. ca. 618/1221) to the Suhrawardīyya order, thereby regarding Kubrawīyya as a branch of the Suhrawardian genealogy, Aydogan Kars, in his Ismā‘īl al-Qaṣrī, Kubrawīyya and Šūfī Genealogies, draws attention to a potentially overlooked correlation and critiques prior scholarly discourse as a “misidentification of Kubrawīyya as an offshoot of Suhrawardiyya” (Kars...
Furthermore, he articulates that “the authentic spiritual genealogy of the Kubrawiya is yet to be identified” (Kars 2021). What is essential in our discussion is that in his identification of the spiritual chain of Najm al-Dīn Kubrā, he reminds us about the neglected mark of Khuzestan in the Western scholarship on the Kubrawiya order. Khuzistan is a province located in the southwest of Iran. It is not only, as Kars states, critical in the identification of Kubrā’s Sufi connection, but it is also significant in the study of the Şafi School of Najaf, as we will see in the coming pages. Ismā’īl Qasrī is the central figure that Kars focuses on as Kubrā’s master and the one who passed him “the foremost robe of discipleship” (Khirqayi Asl). Today, Qasrī’s graveyard has been restored and is now located in the old bazaar of Dezful, a historic city in Khuzistan province. As Kars relates,

In his Shajaranāma, AZKānt [690–778/1291–1376] states that Kubrā had three masters, all of whom were pupils of Abū al-Najīb. He notes that al-Qasrī had a different chain of transmission through Kumayl, and quickly moves to introduce the names in al-Bidliş’s Abū al-Najīb-based genealogy (Kars 2021).

Kars argues that Hūsain Khwārazmī (d. ca. 839/1436) is the one who ignored Qasrī’s role in Kubrā’s Sufi chain or silsila. Kubrā and his disciple had mentioned the Qasrī lineage in their silsila. An essential aspect of the Qasrī lineage is the presence of Kumayl, b. Ziyād Nakha’ī, killed in 81/701. Kumayl was a significant figure in Shi’ī Islam and a loyal companion to Ali. There is a conversation attributed to him and Ali, known as hadith al-haqīqa (the Truth), and a long supplication, known as “Du’a’ al-Kumayl” that Ali taught to him. It is well established that the hadith al-haqīqa (the tradition of reality) has garnered commentary from a multitude of scholars who share a common affinity for both philosophy and Sufism. Moreover, Kumayl plays an essential role in connecting many Sufi orders to Ali and thus to the Prophet, among them Kumayliyya and Kubrawiya or Dhabīyyah. I posit that the inclusion of Kumayl adds heightened significance to the lineage of this order, particularly when viewed from a Shi’ī perspective. Therefore, we can interpret the continuation of the Kubrawiya order in Iran, known as Zahabiyya/Dhahabīyya, as occurring within a more general Shi’ī superstructure. Yet, we do not intend to discuss the emergence and early developments of the Kubrawiya order here. Instead, we try to identify any connection between the Dhahabīyya order in its later period and the Şufi School of Najaf.

10. Revival of The Dhahabīyya Order in Iran after the Safavid Era

We shall focus here on the development of the revival of the Dhahabīyya order in Iran after the Safavid era. We know that Barāzishābādī (d. 872/1467-68) and his disciple Sayyid Aḥmad Lālā are a starting point for turning the Kubrawiya into the Dhahabīyya order and changing its geographic focus from Central Asia to Iran. Yet, DeWeese, in his Studies on Şī‘īsm in Central Asia, states that a significant ambiguity exists regarding the time it became Shi‘ī (DeWeese 2012). Lewisohn, in his An Introduction to the History of Modern Persian Şī‘īsm, states that the Dhahabīyya order’s revival in Iran took place several decades earlier than the Ni‘matullāhī order. He indicates that this revival happened, through the person of Quṭb al-Dīn Nayarīzī (d. 1173/1759), the thirty-second in line from the Prophet. Nayarīzī was well versed in all of the various Islamic sciences of his day, and among his followers are counted a number of notable Shi‘ī clerics, such as Shaykh Ja‘far Najafī, Mulla Mihrāb Gilānt, Shaykh Ahmad Aḥsā‘ī and Sayyid Mahdi Ṭabāṭabā‘ī (Bahr al-‘Ulūm) (Lewisohn 1999).

We already discussed Bahr al-‘Ulūm (d. 1212/1797) and the Risalah Fī Sayr wa al-Sulūk attributed to him. Lewisohn, in his footnote, adds that Khāvārī, in his Dhahabīyya, casts doubt on whether the last two had met him (Lewisohn 1999). On the other hand, Anzali, in his The Emergence of the Zahabiyya in Safavid Iran, based on his manuscript studies, informs us that,
the official spiritual lineage of the order (the mashākh) is likewise a late eleventh/seventeenth-century construction, a product of the joint efforts of the Zahabi master Mu’āzZin Khurāsānī (d. 1078/1668) and his disciple, Najīb al-Dīn Zargar Isfahānī (d. ca. 1108/1696–7) (Anzali 2013).

Both of the previously mentioned masters from Anzali had established their presence prior to the era of Qutb al-Dīn Muhammad Nayrizī (d. 1173/1795). At any rate, for the purpose of this research, it is significant that all historians of the Dhahabīyya order agree that Nayrizī, with his powerful and charismatic personality, played an essential role in the revival of the order in Iran in the late Safavid period. There is a lineage in the tradition of Islamic philosophy that connects Nayrizī to Mulla Sadra (Pourjavady 2018).

11. Nayrizī and Bīdābādī

Qutb al-Dīn Muhammad Nayrizī’s (d. 1173/1795) works represent without a doubt another instance of his fused Shi‘ī-Sūfī understanding. He was not solely a Sūfī master; rather, he encompassed the roles of a scholar and educator (i.e., among his disciples was Āqā Muhammad Bīdābādī (d. 1197/1783)). Both Shīrāzī in his Ṭarā‘īq and Khāverī in Dhahabīyya confirm Bīdābādī’s connection to Nayrizī. His contemporary, Mirzā Muhammad Akhībārī Nisābūrī, refers to him as a philosopher, mystical sage (‘ārif), and trustworthy narrator of hadiths. Bīdābādī’s intriguing aspect lies in the prevalent motif across most of his writings, which portrays him as a spiritual mentor. He pursued his studies within the seminary and exhibited remarkable proficiency in religious sciences. Habībābādī, in his Makārim al-athār (Noble Traits), calls Mulla Ali Nūrī a philosopher concerned with theology (luhumāt-i ilḥāyiyyān). The same source informs us that Nūrī studied in the city of Isfahan with Āqā Muhammad Bīdābādī (d. 1197/1783). It is important to mention that Nūrī, as one of the most prominent revivers of Sadrian philosophy, was the teacher of Mulla Hādī Sabzavārī (d. 1289/1873), whose school of philosophy and Sūfism in Sabzavār remained a formative force in shaping an important era of intellectual activity in the history of philosophy and Sūfism. This relationship places Mulla Hādī among those who can be considered at least followers of the Dhahabīyya order.

As mentioned earlier, an important dimension of Bīdābādī’s oeuvre was his mystical philosophy and theology. A number of his treatises correspond with other scholars who asked him for Dastūr al-amal (Letters to Followers Indicating the Path to Spiritual Perfection). He was connected to the Dhahabīyya order through Nayrizī. His Adab al-sayr wa al-suluk and Du risalā dar sayr wa suluk (two treatises on journey and spiritual path) are of the nature of Dastūr al-amals. Āli Ṣadrā’ī, in his Taṣkīr al-salikīn: nāmah-hā-yi ‘irfānī-ī Āqā Muhammad Bīdābādī (Remembrance of the Seekers: Mystical Letters of Āqā Muhammad Bīdābādī), collected Bīdābādī’s letters with eighteen of his contemporaries. In some of those letters, he teaches them a number of Arba’amat. One of those letters was written in response to a request of Sayyid Ṣadr al-Dīn Kāshīf al-Dīzfūli (1760–1842) for a mystical invocation (Dhīk) (Bidābādī 2011, Sadra’ī Khū’ī 1391). There also existed a collection of his manuscripts written to Ṣadr al-Dīn Kāshīf al-Dīzfūli. Unfortunately, we do not have any information about their whereabouts now.

12. Ṣadr al-Dīn Kāshīf al-Dīzfūli

Ṣadr al-Dīn Kāshīf al-Dīzfūli (1174/1760–1258/1842) (Sayyid Kāshīf) played an essential role in the development of the Sūfī School in the Najaf Seminary. He explicitly asserts that he attained the level of Iḥtīād in Islamic studies and completed his education at age 21. (Kāshīf al-Dīzfūli 1385) This indicates his extraordinary intellectual ability, which prompted his father to invite him from the seminary in Najaf to Kermanshah in the west of Iran. His temporary residency in Kermanshah was troublesome for him. We already mentioned that Āqā Muhammad ‘Alī Kīrmānshāhī (d. 1216/1801), known as the Sūfī-killer (Sūfī-kush), established a solid anti-Sūf movement that cost the life of the Ni’matullāh master Ma’sūm ‘Alī Shāh. It appears that Sayyid Kāshīf’s treatise, namely, Misbah al-‘ārifin (Kāshīf al-Dīzfūli 1385), presented his allegiances in a Sūfī light. This was enough for Kīrmānshāhī and his
followers to accuse Sayyid Kāshīf of an affinity to Ṣūfīsm, which constituted, in their eyes, a deviation from the teaching of Islam. We do not have details of this incident. Yet, we know that Sayyid Kāshīf wrote his Risālah Qāsim al-Jabbārīn in response to those accusations.

As previously indicated, the sanctuary of Ismā’īl Qāsīrī is situated in Dezful. Sayyid Kāshīf also resided in the same city, guiding disciples and adherents along the spiritual journey. A descendent of his, namely Sayyid Ali Kamālī Dizfūlī (1329/1911–1426/2005), in his Irfān va sulūkī Islāmī, provides a history of Sayyid Kāshīf’s family. In his account, we learn that the family was replete with religious scholars and Sayyids descending from the seventh Shi’ī Imam, Musā al-Kāzīm and possessed a proclivity towards Ṣūfīsm. (Kamālī Dizfūlī 1368) Furthermore, it is noteworthy that Sayyid Kāshīf’s family is recognized in Iran by the title “Ṣādāti Gāshīh.”

Notes about him acknowledge his simple and contented life, avoiding all luxury. Sayyid Kāshīf was held in high regard among the people, and the Iranian king of the time, Fath-ālī Shāh Qajar (1772–1834), visited him. Some court members respected Sayyid Kāshīf, but simultaneously, he had opponents among scholars and local governing officials.

Most of the over sixty treatises attributed to (Bidābādī 2011) Sayyid Kāshīf remain unpublished and are preserved in multiple libraries and collections in Iran. His Mīshāb al-‘arifīn is an exploration of the Ṣūfī path and practices. The subject of his other work, namely Haqq al-ḥaqqatī li-arbāb al-ṭarīqah (The Truth of the Truth for the Masters of the Path), once again centers on the importance of the spiritual wayfaring with emphasis on Shi’ī doctrines and explanations of Ṣūfī terminology.

Rizvi, in his chapter on Mullā ‘Alī Nūrī, a disciple of Bidābādī, very briefly mentions Sayyid Kāshīf and states that he was “a renowned mystic associated with Dhahabī order who also did much to spread ‘Irfa in the shrine cities of Iraq” (Rizvi 2018). Rizvi, however, does not provide more details on how Sayyid Kāshīf caused the spread of ‘Irfa in the shrine cities of Iraq, in which the main Shi’ī seminaries were located. To explain some key points, we must emphasize Sayyid Kāshīf’s numerous visits to those cities and, consequently, the seminaries and scholars there. Secondly and more importantly, we should emphasize his particular relationships with two significant individuals who later reached the highest rank in their fields and are widely revered until today in the Shi’ī communities and beyond.

These two figures are Sayyid ‘Alī Shūštārī (d. 1281/1866–67) and Shaykh Murtadā Ansārī (1214/1799–1281/1864). Both individuals were born in Dizfūl, the same city where Sayyid Kāshīf was living and where he attended seminary for the introductory levels. At that time, Sayyid Kāshīf was a known Ṣūfī master and religious scholar. Their relationship with Sayyid Kāshīf is one of the main impetuses for the founding of the Ṣūfī/Irfī school in Najaf Seminary. The emergence and expansion of the Ṣūfī School of Najaf as reflected by its diverse array of masters and their explication of complex Ṣūfī and philosophical ideas.

13. Conclusions

It can be broadly inferred that throughout their historical trajectory, Ṣūfī orders typically established their distinct institutional frameworks. On the other hand, scholars of religion (or those deemed to be ‘Ulema’/experts of religious sciences) also had their own communities of learning termed the al-Ḥawzat al-‘Ilmiyyah (seminaries). However, both groups dealt with the same Qur’ānic revelation and its attendant religious sciences; their distinct approaches to interpreting those resources rendered them unequivocally distinct. While the ‘Ulema’ accused Ṣūfīs of merely tolerating the religious Law or having deviated from the righteous path, Ṣūfīs in return, accused ‘Ulema of holding onto the outer dimensions of Islam. Yet, there have also been attempts to reconcile the two currents in history, such as in the thought of Sayyid Ḥaydar Āmulī (b. 720/1320). Āmulī stressed the notion of convergence between Shi’īsm and Ṣūfīsm. His application of common concepts such as wilayah and reference to the inner meanings of revelation in both schools, at least for some scholars, demonstrates the proximity of the two currents of thought and the need to rethink their unity.
This paper has studied the roots, history and emergence of Sufi trends within the contemporary Shia seminaries by examining post-Ṣadr figures and movements. It does appear, however, that these seminarians and mystics were inclined to conceal their Sufi affiliation. The reasoning behind this is relatively straightforward, namely the existence of powerful opposition to the Sufis along with philosophical methods in the interpretation of revelation and hadith amongst the Ulama. The Shah and his court had occasionally backed that opposition. Therefore, the Sufis had no choice but to conceal their identities within the Shi'i seminary to protect both the continuity of their Ṭarīqa (order) and their mystical approaches to revelation and law. Therefore, when contemporary historians refer to the Sufi School of Najaf, they provide the following lineage, with no extra affiliations and information:


By examining the revival of the Ni'matullâhi and Dhahabîyya Sufi orders, we traced back the connections between Sufis and jurists. We learned that Sayyid Kâshif, disciple of Aqa Muhammad Badabdi, was a significant figure in promoting the Sufi thought and practice in the seminary. He inspired both Sayyid 'Ali Shusharti (d. 1281/1866–67) and Shaykh Murtada Ansârî (1214–1281/1800–1865). We can speculate that Sayyid 'Ali Shushtari must have been one of the khâlifas of Sayyid Kâshif. There are indications of this claim in the stories narrated by some of the followers of Sayyid Kâshif. Shaykh Murtadâ Ansârî was the most eminent figure in the Shi'i seminary and Shi'ite Islam as a whole in the 13/19th century. Hairi's description of Ansârî's position in the Shi'i seminary can help us to better understand and place the following account of the relationship between Ansârî and Sayyid Kâshif. “Despite being rather unknown in the West, he is considered to have been a Shi'i muddahid whose widely-recognized religious leadership in the Shi'i world has not yet been surpassed.” (Hairi 2012). The account of the meeting between Ansârî and Sayyid Kâshif is narrated in different sources. Sayyid Husayn zâhir al-Islâm (1274/1858–1337/1919) in his Rashahat nûriyya and Sayyid 'Ali Sayyid in his introduction to Sayyid Kâshif's Haqq al-ḥaqiqah li-arbaal al-ṭarîqah narrate this visit. This indicates a connection between Sayyid Kâshif as a Dhahabîyya Shaykh (who also was a religious scholar) with the eminent figure of the seminary.

“When Shaykh Murtada Ansârî decided to move to Najaf from Dezful to pursue his advanced studies in the seminary, he thought that it would be better to get mystical advice and dhikr from Sha'rod al-Dîn Kâshif al-Dizfuli and ask for his blessing and commands for dhikr and fikr [meditation]... Kâshif prays for him and adds that, “because your intention from travel is the gaining knowledge, an endowment in knowledge is a worship per se. Nevertheless, be sure that you will advance this [dhikr and fikr] through Sayyid 'Ali Shusharti in Najaf, who is from us.”

This story reveals Sayyid Kâshif as a known and respected spiritual man and, more importantly, names Sayyid 'Ali Shusharti as a mediator and spiritual master for Ansârî. There are many narrations of how Shusharti and Ansârî, who later moved to Najaf, were connected. This was indeed the beginning of the creation of the Sufi School of Najaf.

The historical background and developments discussed in this paper expand our knowledge regarding those individuals and schools by insisting on the coeval nature of Shiism and Sufism.

Finally, moving from the historical roots of this fissure and little-known thinkers prefiguring more recent debates, we examined the origins and history of the Şüfi and philosophical school of Najaf in addition to the late and post-Safavid eras in Iran. This investigation led our research into the following three areas pertaining to (A) the dominance
of the *fiqh*-centered and anti-Ṣūfī environment in the Shīʿī seminary on the one hand and (B) the re-emergence of the Niʿmatullāhī and (C) Dhahabīyya Ṣūfī orders in Iran on the other. Furthermore, our exploration has underscored the substantial role played by the three aforementioned regions in the formation of both Ṣūfī and anti-Ṣūfī schools within the context of the Shīʿī seminary. The Ṣūfī facet within this school tends to remain predominantly inconspicuous, primarily in response to the accusations and hostilities of opposing factions. On certain occasions, mentors and followers were compelled to disavow their affiliations publicly.

Figure 2. Post-Sadra Dhahabīyya Order.
Figure 3. The Sufi School of Najaf.

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Notes

1. Tīrānī explains how he arrived at different copies of the original manuscript. For more, see (Bahr al-ʿUlūm 1388). See also (Bahr al-ʿUlūm 2013).

2. In his written works, Muhammad Husayn Hikmatfar elucidates his dedicated efforts spanning three decades towards the restoration and revitalization of Qaṣrī’s khanqāḥ and cemetery in Dezful. For references pertinent to our discourse, see (Hikmatfar 2015). See also (ṣahīr al-ʿIslām Dīzfūlī 2016).

3. Our present intention does not encompass delving into the origins of the Kubrawīyya order. Nevertheless, certain Shīʿī scholars endeavor to suggest the existence of an obscure Shīʿī facet within the Kubrawīyya order.

4. For more on Nūrī, see (Muʿallim Habībʿabādī 1958). Additionally, Sajjad Rizvi, in his chapter on Mullāʿ Ali Nūrī narrates that the Nī matullāhī Šūfī Muḥammad Jaʿfar Kābūdarāhānī, known as Majdūh ʿAlī-Shāh (d. 1238/1823), indicates that “the Bīdābādī circle was renowned for their mystical and spiritual practices (riṣādat u mijāhada-yi nafsānī) alongside their ʿirfān (mystical) orientation in their study of metaphysics.” See (Rizvi 2018).

5. Forty days of prayer and seclusion are a particular demand on those committed to Sufism. The Qurʾān is indicated in the story of Moḥammad and his forty nights of seclusion. It is sometimes called “Arbaʾ in Kalim” to refer to its prophetic tradition.

6. Refering to Gūshah village in north Dīzfūl in Iran where their first great grandfather Sayyid Kamāl al-Dīn Walī (b. 975/1568), who migrated from Medina, is buried. Several of his descendants who were religious scholars were affiliated to the D̲hahābīyya order. For more on this family, see (Muḥammad ʿAlī Imāmāhāwāzī (1413)).

7. Sadr al-Dīn Kāshīf al-Dīzfūlī (1335). Ḥaqq al-ḥaqqāq li-arbāb al-tārīqāh. The account of this meeting also narrated by ẓahr al-ʿIslām Dīzfūlī, in his Rashbahāt-i nāṭiyā. It should be noted that ẓahr al-ʿIslām (1274/1858–1337/1919) himself was a Dhaḥābī Shaykh in Dīzfūl as well as a mujtahid in Shīʿī religious studies.

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