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## **The Project on Middle East Political Science**

The Project on Middle East Political Science (POMEPS) is a collaborative network that aims to increase the impact of political scientists specializing in the study of the Middle East in the public sphere and in the academic community. POMEPS, directed by Marc Lynch, is based at the Institute for Middle East Studies at the George Washington University and is supported by Carnegie Corporation of New York and the Henry Luce Foundation. For more information, see <http://www.pomeps.org>.

## Shi'a Politics in the Middle East

The study of Islamist movements has often implicitly meant the study of *Sunni* Islamist movements. An enormous amount of political science scholarship has dissected the ideology, organization, and political strategy of Sunni Islamist movements. Prior to the Arab uprisings of 2011, this research had largely resolved itself into a coherent framework and set of analytical propositions tested across multiple countries and historical periods. The turbulence and dramatic changes in the years since 2011 have unsettled the literature on Islamist politics, generating another wave of innovative and rich scholarship.

The study of Shi'a Islamist politics has been relatively neglected within political science, however, and has often moved along very different methodological and analytical tracks. The academic communities that study Sunni Islamism often proceed without any interaction with the academic communities that study Iran or Shi'a politics in Arab countries. Studies of Iran and of Shi'a movements similarly often proceed in isolation from the literature on the Arab world or Sunni Islamist movements. This is unfortunate, because Sunni and Shi'a Islamist political dynamics engage many similar theoretical or intellectual issues and could offer each other critically important comparative perspective.

This divide came up repeatedly in the discussions among participants during the annual conference of the Islamist Politics project hosted by POMEPS in January 2017. Therefore, on October 13, 2017, POMEPS convened an interdisciplinary workshop of scholars of Shi'a politics to discuss these questions and to probe the similarities and differences between the two academic communities. We are delighted to publish this collection of essays resulting from that workshop. The essays range widely, both thematically and geographically, and together offer a deeply informed and often surprising portrait of political changes across very different contexts. They also reveal the profound methodological and intellectual divides between the academic communities studying Sunni and Shi'a Islamism.

The workshop identified numerous areas for potentially fruitful comparison. Shi'a communities in Lebanon, Iraq, and Gulf states such as Bahrain, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia have long been pivotal to domestic political outcomes in the Arab world. Shi'a militias, with widely varying ideological commitments and political relationships, have played critical roles in Syria's and Iraq's wars. The politics, ideology and practices of Shi'a political movements and organizations have been just as deeply affected by the region's seismic upheavals.

The study of Sunni Islamism has demonstrated conclusively how movements with similar ideologies have adapted to different local political environments. Context matters for Shi'a politics, just like for Sunni movements. Sunni and Shi'a Islamists are both mobilized around a religious ideology, raising similar questions about the relative significance of religious ideas as opposed to pragmatic strategic considerations. Sunni and Shi'a movements have both used social services and welfare provision for organizational goals. [Diana Zeidan's](#) analysis of how Hezbollah used social services over decades to build its domination of south Lebanon would fit easily into comparable studies of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. The study of Sunni Islamism has generated useful typologies that draw essential distinctions between different types of Islamist movements, from Muslim Brotherhood-style social movements to al-Qaeda style insurgencies and terrorist groups. Such careful differentiation among kinds of Shi'a movements and organizations would likely be similarly analytically useful.

Our workshop also flagged potential problems in such an exercise. As [Morten Valbjørn](#) points out, approaching Shi'a politics from a standpoint derived from an implicit or explicit comparison with a "normal" Sunni politics can lead to misleading assumptions about doctrine, organization, and practice. Shi'a politics may follow similar political or institutional logics under certain conditions, but they must be understood on their own terms. It is telling that studies of Shi'a Islamism and of Iran typically feature far more intricate intellectual histories and exegesis of religious texts than do most studies of Sunni Islamism. Shi'a Islamist movements have a profoundly different historical experience, ideological referents, organizational forms, relationships with states, and mobilizing strategies.

One critical difference between Sunni and Shi'a Islamism is the very different types of arguments about the appropriate role of the ulema, rooted in the institutional differences in the organization of religious authority. The Sunni world has nothing like the nearly forty years of experience with the Islamic Republic of Iran ruled by the Supreme Leader (*vilayet-e faqih*). Most Sunni Islamist movements evolved in opposition to authoritarian secularizing regimes. Shi'a Islamism, by contrast, evolved most dramatically following the 1979 Iranian revolution. Where Sunni Islamism had few, if any, meaningful models of an Islamic state in practice, Shi'a Islamism could not escape the shadow of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Sunni Islamist movements have regularly participated in elections, but rarely with the opportunity to actually win (except at the local level). Shi'a Islamist parties in Iraq, Lebanon and Iran by contrast do have meaningful prospects of victory. This means, in turn, that Shi'a Islamists have a longer track record of actual governance and a deeper experience of the troubled interaction between state power and religious movement.

Several papers in the workshop focused on the question of the historically novel institution of the Supreme Leader, in theory and practice. As [Elvire Corboz](#) shows, the doctrine and practice of the *vilayet-e faqih* unsettled centuries of Shi'a framework for clerical authority. This has led to a very distinctive type of power struggle within Shi'a religious institutions, involving a far greater role for the ulema in both government and in public intellectual discourse. Despite sitting at the pinnacle of the powerful Iranian state, the Supreme Leader has never been able to stop competing with other Iranian and non-Iranian *marja'iyya* for authority. [Ali Kadivar](#) shows how this relationship has changed since the death of Ruhollah Khomeini and the elevation of Ali Khamenei as Supreme Leader. While Qom and Najaf may have accepted Khomeini's clerical authority, Khamenei lacked the same religious credentials and thus had to establish his power through other means, such as patronage, media propaganda, and the security apparatus. The passing of Ali Khamenei could trigger dramatic change. As [Roozbeh Safshekan](#) and [Farzan Sabet](#) put it, "the key subtext of the raucous competition between the moderate and conservative political currents in the 2016 Assembly of Experts and 2017 presidential elections in the Islamic Republic of Iran was the question of who will be the next guardian jurist once the 78-year-old Ayatollah Ali Khamenei passes on... [J]ust who, precisely, gives legitimacy to the guardian jurist?" Is it derived from God, or from the will of the people as expressed by the Assembly?

Three political arenas seem to offer especially useful areas for comparative analysis of Shi'a Islamist politics today. First, *Iranian politics* offers many opportunities for comparative political analysis. Iran's regular elections, for all their limitations, offer a wealth of evidence relevant to core questions in the comparative politics field. The continuing fallout of the 2009 repression of the Green Movement following the fraudulent re-election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has lessons for studies of the frustrated Arab transitions. So do the ways in which the reform movement has continued to evolve and take new forms, despite constant pressure and repression by conservative state institutions. How Iran manages its rentier dependence on oil exports

offers yet another useful comparative lens. Political scientists from across the world should be interested by the unique survey research presented by Kevan Harris on the relationship between state services and political legitimacy. In short, Iranian politics offers many useful questions for comparative politics, including but not limited to its distinctive religious state institutions.

Second, *the wars in Syria and Iraq* raise important questions about Iranian foreign policy and its transnational connections. Those wars have dramatically empowered Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), a wide array of Iraqi Shi'a militias and movements, and new transnational networks. The long term implications are far from obvious. Higher levels of Shi'a mobilization and power projection have coincided with exceptionally high levels of sectarianism on both sides of the divide. These sectarian narratives have at time generated new identities and forced communities into unfamiliar boxes. Syria's Alawis, for instance, have been treated as Shi'ites in the sectarian logic of Syria's war, while the Zaidi religious identity of Yemen's Houthis has largely been effaced as that war has been framed regionally along sectarian lines. Hezbollah's active role in the Syrian war has cost it much of its long-cultivated popularity with anti-Israeli Sunnis, as it has been recast as a purely sectarian Shi'ite organization.

In Iraq, Marsin Alshamary argues that the seizure of the Sunni areas by ISIS in 2014 created the conditions for distinctively Shi'a state building. As Fanar Haddad has previously argued, this is a new kind of Shi'a state building, which creates new political identities and shapes institutions in distinctive ways. Prior to 2014, Shi'a parties dominated Iraqi politics through a joint electoral list that gave them overwhelming power over state institutions. However, this power masked the significant political and identity divisions among Shi'ites, which have become more salient in the post-ISIS period. Alshamary argues that Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi has opted to build "a Shia-dominant state that has Iraqi nationalist undertones," rather than the project preferred by militias such as Badr and Asaib Ahl al-Haq that "Shi'ifies the state with no real attempt at inclusion." The role of the Popular Mobilizational Forces in the emergent state has become a focal point for this contest, with Ayatollah Ali Sistani weighing in against PMF participation in the upcoming May elections.

Finally, *Shi'a communities beyond Iran and Iraq* continue to grapple with the repercussions of the Arab uprisings. As Laurence Louer demonstrates, Shi'a communities across the Gulf have come under varying degrees of pressure as the regional narrative has polarized. Bahraini Shi'a have been the most overwhelmingly repressed along sectarian lines since the forceful crushing of a popular uprising in March 2011. Kuwaiti Shi'a, long well-integrated, have faced unusual levels of sectarian pressure. Saudi Shi'a continue to face persecution and political marginalization, receiving few concessions in the reform process led by Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman, even as low-level insurgency in the Eastern Province rumbles along. Sustaining a discourse of non-sectarian citizenship, national rather than transnational loyalty, and non-violent resistance has rarely been more difficult for these communities.

The essays in this collection range broadly over these issues and represent a starting point for the development of a research community. In the coming years, we hope to see much more attention paid to the comparative study of Sunni and Shia Islamism across diverse contexts. Bridging these linguistic, analytical, methodological and political divides would be an important step forward in the broader understanding of Islamist politics.

Download the full collection here!

Marc Lynch  
POMEPS Director

# The Ayatollahs and the Republic:

## The religious establishment in Iran and its interaction with the Islamic Republic

*Mohammad Ali Kadivar, Brown University*

The Islamic Republic of Iran is usually referred to as a theocracy, and this is a correct description in different senses. According to the constitution, a Shi'a cleric must fill the office of the leader, the highest de facto and de jure position in the country; a Shi'a jurist should also fill the head of judiciary; and Islam should be the main source of law-making in the country. On the other hand, if calling Iran a theocracy means that the Shi'a clergy as an institution rules the country, then this is not an accurate description. The clerical establishment, even after the revolution, has been separate from the regime, even though the relationship between these two entities has changed drastically after the revolution. While the Shi'a establishment in Qom claims authority over interpretation of the sacred text, the formation of a Shi'a government in Tehran with similar claims about Islamic authority and legitimacy in Tehran has created tensions and sometimes conflicts between these two. In this essay, I will look at patterns of conflict and cooperation between the Islamic Republic mainly the institution of Velayat-e Faqih (guardianship of jurist)<sup>1</sup> and the clerical establishment in Qom, specifically grand ayatollahs<sup>2</sup> or sources of emulation at the highest levels of the Shi'a clerical hierarchy.

Ayatollah Khomeini and his clerical followers were only one faction within the clerical establishment before the revolution that, nonetheless, succeeded in mobilizing many other clerics and segments of Iranian society against the monarchy, then established the Islamic Republic of

Iran. Disagreements that existed before and during the revolution about forms of opposition to the monarchy continued after the revolution, this time about legitimate forms of rule in Islam. While Khomeini and his followers promoted the idea of Velayat-e Faqih, there were other prominent clergy such as Ayatollah Shariatmadari in Qom, or Ayatollah Mahallati in Shiraz who either believed in ideas of the Constitutional revolution, or believed in the clergy's quietism and lack of any interference in politics. Such disagreements and disputes resulted in the Islamic Republic's crackdown on the highest echelon of the clerical establishment to an extent unprecedented even during the monarchy. The Islamic Republic established the Special Court of Clergy outside the regular system of the Judiciary to deal with the clerical opposition. Dissident grand ayatollahs such as Shariatmadari, Qomi, and Rouhani were put under house arrest, and were denied medical care. In the case of Shariatmadari, the court even stripped his right to wear clerical clothes, and the most prominent revolutionary clerical organization in Qom denounced his rank as a source of emulation.

The remaining high ranking clergy in Qom, such as Ayatollah Golpayegani and Mar'ashi, supported the idea of a Shi'a government that would enforce rules of Shari'a, commemorate Shi'a rituals, and promote Shi'ism in the country. However, as the revolutionary regime started to implement policies, the regime's policies occasionally differed from orthodox interpretations of Shari'a. Such

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<sup>1</sup> According to this jurisprudential theory, the guardian jurist has the ultimate authority to make any decisions relating to the public affairs of the Islamic society, and his decisions would override any other sources of authority including the popular will. This theory has been subject of debate and juristic disagreement among Shi'a clergy in 19th and 20th century. Ayatollah Khomeini was among several jurists who promoted this theory in his juristic argumentations, and certainly the only jurist who put the theory in practice after the Islamic Revolution of 1979.

<sup>2</sup> For a Shi'a cleric to advance to the rank of grand ayatollah, three conditions should be at least met. First, he needs to write two treatises, one a religious guidebook or "Resale-ye amaliye" that gives devote Muslims instruction for living a pious life, and second a book in argumentative jurisprudence, which presents the grand ayatollah's rationale for giving his different religious rulings. Second, the ayatollah needs to make a reputation in the seminary and among other clerics as an erudite cleric, demonstrated by the number of clerics attending his classes in the seminary. Sometimes, other grand ayatollahs also endorse their peers as a source of emulation. Third, the grand ayatollah needs to acquire the trust of ordinary people to receive their religious taxes [Khums & Zakat], which in turn would enable the ayatollah to pay a stipend to his students and also to expand his office and related religious activities.

violations of the orthodox interpretation were not endorsed by the grand ayatollahs in Qom at the time. Policies regarding land reform or the new labor code were occasions for such disagreements. To address these issues, Ayatollah Khomeini took at least two measures to appease his clerical allies in Qom. First, he appointed clerics in line with grand ayatollahs to the Guardian Council. The Guardian Council is the institution that supervises the elections and legislating by the parliament, and has the power to veto laws when the Council deems them un-Islamic. With this measure, Khomeini provided an institutional venue for conservative clergy, such as Ayatollah Golpayegani, to press for his concerns over policy-making within the regime. Second, Khomeini mostly left the administration of the Qom seminary to Golpayegani. Khomeini recognized Golpayegani's authority over the clerical establishment in Qom, and Golpayegani also recognized Khomeini's political authority. Khomeini also left the announcement of religious holidays to Golpayegani. Nonetheless, this relationship was still not without tension. For example, once the parliament passed a law about land reform, Golpayegani raised concerns about violation of sacred laws of Shari'a. When Ayatollah Shari'atmadari died, Golpayegani expressed his dissatisfaction with the disrespectful way the funeral was conducted in 1986.

The death of Ayatollah Khomeini was a turning point in the relationship between the Islamic Republic and the clerical establishment. While Khomeini himself was a source of emulation and so had the highest religious credentials, his successor Ali Khamenei was just a middle rank cleric that before his ascension to leadership was not even called ayatollah, let alone grand ayatollah. This situation was indeed a source of insecurity for Khamenei, because the main ideology of the regime, Velayat-e Faqih, stated that religious authority should be the base for political authority, while there were people in the country at the time with higher religious credentials than Khamenei. As also detailed in the essay by [Elvire Corboz](#), Khamenei then mobilized different resources at his disposal such as state media, patronage networks,

and the security apparatus to position himself as a grand ayatollah and source of emulation. The state security apparatus was used to intimidate and pressure other grand ayatollahs to recognize Khamenei's new clerical rank, and state propaganda in national TV and radio was used to call Khamenei with new titles and promote him as a source of emulation. This was indeed the first time that state institutions were deployed to promote a cleric as a source of emulation.

Khamenei's campaign was met with some resistance in Qom. Ayatollah Montazeri, at the time the highest grand ayatollah in Qom, denounced Khamenei's effort to become a grand ayatollah, and called such efforts the trivialization of Shi'a clergy. Montazeri also questioned Khamenei's legitimacy in taking the office of leader and Vali-ye Faqih. In reaction to Montazeri's speech, government thugs and militias in plain clothes attacked his house and he was put under house arrest for five years.

Khamenei also tried to assert his dominance over the Qom seminary. After Ayatollah Golpayegani passed away, Khamenei appointed the managing council of the Qom Seminary directly, without consultation with other Grand Ayatollahs in Qom. This new move was accompanied by directing much government money into the Qom seminary, especially the institutions of ally clerics such as Ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi's Imam Khomeini Institute. With such attempts, Khamenei was trying to make Qom seminary a more modernized yet state dependent institution, and also to bolster more loyal clergy within the Qom establishment. Even though these attempts did not lead to any overt confrontations, at different occasions some grand ayatollahs emphasized the importance of the seminary's autonomy and its history as an institution independent from the state.

As factional politics were consolidated and even intensified through the 1990s and onward, different factions also tried to mobilize and benefit from the grand ayatollahs' legitimacy and support in factional rivalries. While both conservative and reformist factions benefitted from the



ayatollahs' support, some of the ayatollahs also profited from the popularity gained from factional alignments. Such relationships to an extent were conditional on the ayatollahs' religious credentials. For instance, most prominent ayatollahs were less in need of these political exchanges, and could stay silent in moments of political controversy. This has been, for example, the case for ayatollahs Vahid, Shobeiri Zanjani, and Mirza Javad Aqa Tabrizi, who because of their religious prominence and popularity among the seminary and constituency have stayed completely out of factional politics of the regime. On the other hand, less prominent ayatollahs could gain popularity from exchanging support with factions. For instance, Ayatollah Noori Hamedani has been a usual supporter of the hardline faction and has indeed received more attention and airtime on the national TV and conservative papers. Similarly, Ayatollah Bayat has been a supporter of the reformist faction, and has in turn received more attention from reformists in newspapers and over social media.

The fraudulent election of 2009 and the subsequent uprising known as the Green Movement demonstrated this contestation over grand ayatollahs' political position. Ayatollah Khamenei made two trips to Qom, during which he organized a number of private and public visits with various ayatollahs. The Green Movement's challenge to Khamenei's authority was so great that he personally led the campaign to rally grand ayatollahs behind him. However, leaders of the Green Movement such as Mir Hosein Musavi called on ulama not to stay silent over the crackdown on protestors and also about the fraud in the election. Families of prisoners also went to Qom to ask for ayatollahs' support and mediation for release of the prisoners. In their demonstrations, Green protestors hailed ayatollahs such as Montazeri and Sane'i who had supported the movement. Green activists also organized online campaigns to mobilize telephone calls to the office of ayatollahs, asking them to take a position against the fraudulent election and subsequent crackdown.

The Ayatollahs' reaction to the election outcome was, to an extent, disappointing for the Islamic Republic. Usually after the president's election, ayatollahs congratulate him on the election, informally providing religious approval for the election process. In the wake of Ahmadinejad's 2009 fraudulent reelection, almost all ayatollahs but one stayed silent. Beyond congratulating Ahmadinejad, four sorts of responses might be distinguished between grand ayatollahs. First, as mentioned above, only ayatollah Noori Hamedani publicly denounced Green protestors, despite all efforts by Ayatollah Khamenei and hardliners. Second, a group of ayatollahs such as Ayatollahs Montazeri, Sanei, and Bayat Zanjani openly sided with the Green Movement and condemned the suppression of peaceful protestors. Among them, Ayatollah Montazeri was again a pioneer. In a historic statement he questioned the legitimacy of the government and called it unjust. A few months after the start of the Green Movement, Ayatollah Montazeri passed away, and his funeral became one of the main events of the movement, as thousands of protestors showed up for the funeral in Qom. A third group did not take a public position, but used private channels to express their dissatisfaction with the government's heavy hand in repressing protestors. Opposition websites, for instance, revealed that Ayatollah Vahid Khorasani, an often politically silent ayatollah reproached his son-in-law Sadeq Larijani, the appointed head of judiciary for brutal treatment of prisoners and activists. Ayatollah Musavi Ardebili also privately met with Khamenei to demand the release of reformist political prisoners and ask for more leniency on the side of the regime and its treatment of the opposition. Also, when Khamenei visited Qom, these Ayatollahs declined to meet him, which in itself was a sign in the symbolic politics between Qom and Tehran. Finally, another group stayed completely silent and did not take any position to the favor of the regime and the opposition in private or public.

Even though the interactions and interdependence between the regime and the clerical establishment has intensified after the revolution, the ayatollahs and the

republic still stand as separate entities.<sup>3</sup> The presence of two institutions, both with rival claims over Islamic authority, has been a potential source of tension between these two entities and has shaped different episodes of conflict as well as cooperation. As different political actors in Iran contemplate Ali Khamene'i's succession because of his old age and alleged illness, another important episode may emerge in the series of interactions between the grand ayatollahs and the republic. It is less likely that the grand ayatollahs will play a significant role in choosing the next leader, but the ascendance of the new leader would again highlight questions about his religious authority and relationship with Qom.

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<sup>3</sup> As these different episodes demonstrate, the Islamic Republic has not completely merged and subdued grand ayatollahs, in contrast to for instance Naser's success in controlling and coopting Al-Azhar. However, even though grand ayatollahs have retained their autonomy to an important degree, they have suffered both campaigns of repression and parallel institution building by the Islamic Republic. The Shi'a clergy in Iran has suffered repression before the revolution as well. Similarly, grand ayatollahs in Iraq were also violently suppressed under Saddam Hussein's Ba'thist regime. However, it seems that Islamic Republic's repression has been most damaging to the Shi'a clergy so far. This is partially because the post-revolutionary government, with its theocratic claims, has enjoyed more legitimacy to crackdown on grand ayatollahs. Indeed, the Islamic republic has suppressed the clergy in the name of Islam rather than values such as modernization, progress, and nationalism. Additionally, in contrast to monarchies and the Ba'thist regime, the Islamic Republic has engaged in parallel institution buildings in tandem with its measures of surveillance and repression over the clergy. The institution of "Guardianship of the Jurist" and its claim over the political and religious leadership over all Muslims with reliance on state resources has been a serious source of rivalry for Iran's grand ayatollahs.

# The Najafi *Marja'iyya* in the Age of Iran's *Vali-ye Faqih* (Guardian Jurist): Can it Resist?

Elvire Corboz, Aarhus University

The establishment of Iran's Islamic Republic unsettled the traditional framework for clerical authority in Shi'ism. For the previous 150 years, the *marja'iyya* had been the most influential yet informal clerical institution. Based on the principle of emulation (*taqlid*) according to which believers need to follow the legal opinions of a qualified religious scholar, the clerics recognized as such – the *maraji'* (sing. *marja'*; source of emulation) – provided the most authoritative religious and sometimes political guidance for the Shi'i community. In 1979, the creation of the position of guardian-jurist (*vali-ye faqih*) at the head of the Iranian state instituted a new and competitive model of clerical leadership. A *marja'* or, after the constitutional amendments of 1989, simply a religious scholar aware of the circumstances of his time was given the right to rule. This guardianship was aimed at not only the Iranian nation but also the *umma* (Muslim community) at large. Accordingly, Ayatollah Khomeini and 'Ali Khamene'i after him have made a bid to the leadership of the Shi'a in competition with other *maraji'*.

Today, the worldwide popularity and influence enjoyed by Ayatollah 'Ali Sistani of Najaf in Iraq seem to indicate that the *marja'iyya* has fared well enough in the age of Iran's *vali-ye faqih*. Yet some believe that Shi'ism is about to enter, as soon as the ageing Sistani dies, a post-*marja'iyya* age. At the heart of this prognosis is the success of Iran's Supreme Leader 'Ali Khamene'i in putting the traditionally autonomous seminaries of Qom under his control, through both a policy of statization and the use of coercive power. Most of the clerical establishment has

consequently become an arm of the Iranian state. If there are still independent scholars in Iran and abroad, they find it difficult to develop strong networks and are bound to remain marginal authorities with little more to do than provide religious guidance about Shi'i rituals.<sup>1</sup> Also symptomatic is what some perceive as the weakness of Najaf's clerical establishment. It does not have in its ranks a scholar capable of achieving comparable authority to Sistani's. Intra-clerical divisions and competition can only be exacerbated in the future, leaving the door open for Iran's *vali-ye faqih* to further consolidate his leadership.<sup>2</sup> Without dismissing the validity of some of these arguments, this memo aims to take another look at the crisis of the *marja'iyya*. I argue that, in spite of undeniable challenges, the *marja'iyya* has structural capacities that help it maintain itself in the face of the power exerted by the Iranian guardian-jurist.<sup>3</sup>

My argument about the resisting potential of the *marja'iyya* is based on two premises. First, competing claims to Shi'i clerical leadership do not necessarily result in a zero-sum game outcome. Rather, the competition between the *vali-ye faqih* and the traditional *marja'iyya* is dynamic and unlikely to follow a linear course. As Eickelman and Piscatori usefully remind us, sacred authority in contemporary Muslim societies is fragmented among various groups, such as heads of state, traditional religious authorities, or new educated elites, who compete for it. Yet "several or all may exercise authority simultaneously – one individual's sacred authority is not exclusive of another's."<sup>4</sup> Moreover, this fragmentation can

<sup>1</sup> Mehdi Khalaji, *The Last Marja: Sistani and the End of Traditional Religious Authority in Shiism*, Policy Focus 59 (Washington, DC: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> Harith Hasan al-Qarawee, *Sistani, Iran, and the Future of Shii Clerical Authority in Iraq*, Middle East Brief 105 (Waltham, MA: Crown Center for Middle East Studies, 2017), pp. 5–7.

<sup>3</sup> For another contribution on the resilience of the clerical establishment of Najaf, see Hayder al-Khoei, 'Post-Sistani Iraq, Iran, and the Future of Shia Islam', *War on the Rocks*, 8 September 2016.

<sup>4</sup> Dale F. Eickelman and James Piscatori, *Muslim Politics*, 2nd edn (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), p. 68.

have various outcomes, ranging from intensified conflict to accommodation.<sup>5</sup>

The second premise of my argument is that, to understand the dynamics of the competition, it is worth considering the competing potential of all the competitors. Unlike analyses that focus on the power exercised by Iran's *vali-ye faqih*, I propose to shift perspective to explore the *marja'iyya*'s own capacities. I identify three of its intrinsic features which, I argue, allow it to maintain itself: its "poly-cephalic"<sup>6</sup> nature and both its broad temporal and geographical scopes. These features not only contribute to the *marja'iyya*'s potential to resist, but they can also shape the nature and outcome of the competition with the *vali-ye faqih*, including the need for the latter to accommodate with it. This argument is based on a consideration of the *marja'iyya* as a structure of authority, regardless of the variety of ideological or theological trends to which different *maraji'* belong. However, this memo examines these features in reference to the *marja'iyya* of the Najafi tradition, which does not necessarily shun involvement in political affairs but does not accept the model of a guardian-jurist entrusted with the right to rule. I draw from the insights I have gained into the internal working of the *marja'iyya* through research conducted in Najaf, Qom, and the larger geography of Shi'ism among the main offices, associated institutions, and networks of several *maraji'*.

### **Many sources of emulation can balance the *marja'iyya*'s power**

A first feature of the *marja'iyya* is its poly-cephalic nature. The existence of a sole, supreme, *marja'* is an ideal that was never really fulfilled in the history of the *marja'iyya*. From the 1990s, moreover, the scholars laying claim to the position proliferated for at least two reasons. In 1992, the death of Abu al-Qasim Khu'i, the most widely followed *marja'* and the archetypical representative of the

Najafi tradition for the previous couple of decades, left a leadership vacuum. The claim to the *marja'iyya* of 'Ali Sistani and several other of Khu'i's former students dates from that time. The way the Islamic Republic dealt with the loss of Ayatollah Khomeini (d. 1989) also exacerbated the fragmentation of the *marja'iyya* among many contenders. Unlike Khomeini in whose persona the dual functions of *vali-ye faqih* and source of emulation had been merged, 'Ali Khamene'i lacked the scholarly credentials to be recognized as a *marja'*.

After the Islamic Republic's initial experiment of recommending the emulation of two other *maraji'*, the more assertive bid to the *marja'iyya* made by Khamene'i in the mid-1990s required a new approach. This approach was encapsulated in the list of several suitable *maraji'* issued by the pro-governmental Society of Qom Seminary Teachers.<sup>7</sup> The significance of this list lies beyond the inclusion of Khamene'i's name. It also institutionalized the fragmentation of the *marja'iyya* in order to accommodate his contested pretensions to the position. In other words, if Khamene'i could not claim to be the supreme *marja'*, neither were the other contenders: they were all one of the many. 'Ali Sistani is currently the most widely followed *marja'* and 'Ali Khamene'i's own following is now far from negligible. In addition, dozens of other scholars of more or less well-established statures and representing a variety of ideological trends claim the position of *marja'*. The main representatives of the Najafi tradition include Ishaq al-Fayyad, Sa'id al-Hakim, and Bashir al-Najafi in Najaf, Husayn Vahid Kurasani in Qom, as well as several scholars who announced their *marja'iyya* in more recent years.

Fragmentation can weaken the Najafi *marja'iyya*, especially if none of the *maraji'* becomes the most widely followed. At a minimum, however, each of them contribute independently to the total sum of the *marja'iyya*'s authority. They help defuse, with whatever amount of authority they have, 'Ali Khamene'i's own

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, pp. 131–135.

<sup>6</sup> I borrow this term from Constance Arminjon Hachem, *Chiisme et État: Les Clercs à l'Épreuve de la Modernité* (Paris: CNRS, 2013), p. 188.

<sup>7</sup> Saskia Gieling, "The "Marja'ia" in Iran and the Nomination of Khamenei in December 1994," *Middle Eastern Studies*, 33(4), 1997, pp. 777-787.

authority. Furthermore, although these many *marja'iyat* also compete with one another, they should not be viewed as completely separate entities. The quadrumvirate of Najaf has often co-signed religious edicts, for instance on issues related to Iraqi political affairs.<sup>8</sup> The clerical and lay networks associated with the different *maraji'* have also far looser boundaries than generally assumed. The *wukala'* (representatives) are a case in point. Some of them, generally the main ones, assume their function for just one *marja'*, to whom they often have familial relations. However, many other representatives answer the religious questions, collect the *khums* (religious taxes), and cater for the needs of the followers of several if not a myriad of *maraji'* in the locality where they are based. Similarly, the lay emulators of the *maraji'* can overlap. They increasingly tend to pick-and-choose from the legal opinions of different qualified jurists, an option allowed by Sistani himself.<sup>9</sup> The fluidity across different *marja'iyat* and their networks might ensure some stability when Sistani dies.

### **The gradual development and long lasting influence of *maraji'* authority**

A second feature of the *marja'iyat* is the broad temporal scope of the authority exercised by the *maraji'*. To clarify how this can sustain the competing potential of the *marja'iyat*, one needs to deconstruct common assumptions about both the “beginning” and the “end” of a *marja'*'s leadership.

The emergence of a source of emulation and the consolidation of his *marja'iyat* is a gradual process. His recognition might be limited at first but later expand, for instance though not only if he is able to attract the support networks, associated institutions, and popular following of a former *marja'*. 'Ali Sistani himself did not develop at once the wide aura that we know him today. He was eventually able to do so in spite of pressure and meddling by the Iraqi Ba'th regime and the Islamic Republic of Iran which both

sought to promote alternative sources of emulation. As for what will happen next, skepticism that no current *marja'* or future claimant to the position can achieve Sistani's stature right after him is probably well-founded. Yet the variables at play in the consolidation of one's *marja'iyat* are too complex to exclude the possibility at some point.

This notion of the gradual consolidation of the *marja'iyat* has implications for how the Iranian state will deal with the *maraji'*. In the mid-1990s the Society of Qom Seminary Teachers could get away with ignoring 'Ali Sistani and not include his name in its list of suitable *maraji'*. This stance was however not sustainable after Sistani's authority became so widespread, and the Najaf-based *marja'* eventually made it to the list.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, the *modus vivendi* reached by Sistani's *marja'iyat* with the Iranian state in order to operate in the seminaries of Qom was far from a given in the early days. Sa'id al-Hakim and Ishaq al-Fayyad, have also been able, in spite of their lesser status, to establish some sort of a foothold in the Iranian *hawza* with the small offices operated by their sons.

Common assumptions about the “end” of a *marja'*'s leadership should also be refined. His authority can reach well beyond his lifetime as it also entails the legacies he leaves behind. In addition to his scholarship, his students constitute one such legacy. Students trained in the Najafi tradition help ensure the maintenance and dissemination of this school of thought. Among them, the most eminent *mujtahids* (scholar capable to derive laws through independent reasoning) are also likely to form the next generation of *maraji'*. That 'Ali Sistani has not taught for many years could be detrimental for the future of the *marja'iyat*. However, the *mujtahids* potentially able to replace the older generation of *maraji'* in Najaf still include former students of the late Abu al-Qasim Khu'i. This is the case of Shaykh Hasan al-Jawahiri and Shaykh Muhammad Baqir al-Irawani who are both 68 years old. Others, such as Muhammad Sanad (b. 1961), have been trained by senior

<sup>8</sup> Roy Parviz Mottahedeh, 'The Quandaries of Emulation: The Theory and Politics of Shi'i Manuals of Practice', *The Ninth Farhat J. Ziadeh Distinguished Lecture in Arab and Islamic Studies* (Seattle: University of Washington, 2011), p. 14.

<sup>9</sup> On this development from a jurisprudential perspective, see *ibid*, pp. 13–14. On the adoption of this practice, see Moojan Momen, *Shi'i Islam: A Beginner's Guide* (London: Oneworld, 2016), p. 222.

<sup>10</sup> See the Society's website (<http://www.jameehmodarresin.org/>).



*maraji*, who represent the Najafi tradition in both the Iraqi and Iranian seminaries.

Recent developments in both jurisprudence and practice also contribute to keeping alive and well the influence of the *maraji*, even after their demise. The principle of *taqlid al-mayyit* (emulation of the deceased), which allows the emulators of a deceased *marja'* to continue following his rulings, is increasingly accepted by Shi'i jurists and practised by the laity.<sup>11</sup> Perhaps related to this development, a recent practice that is becoming commonplace is for the offspring of a deceased *marja'* and the former networks associated with him to keep his office open and projects running, as well as to find ways to continue collecting the much needed *khums*. The institutionalization of Abu al-Qasim al-Khu'i's *marja'iyya* in the transnational Al-Khoei Foundation and that of Lebanon's Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah are not unique cases.<sup>12</sup> Muhammad Javad Tabrizi (d. 2006) was one of Qom's *maraji* of the Najafi tradition whose office and affiliated website are actively sustaining his legacy.<sup>13</sup>

The maintenance of the *marja'iyya* of a deceased *marja'* will probably not survive the passing of time in the long-term. The practice can have a double impact in the short and medium-term, however. First, it adds the enduring authority of deceased *maraji* to the total amount of authority associated with the *marja'iyya* in the Najafi tradition. Illustrative of the need for Iran's *vali-ye faqih* to accommodate with this is the governmental National Center for Answers to Religious Questions in Iran. It offers the users of its websites the option to obtain answers in accordance with not only 'Ali Sistani's and Vahid Khorasani's legal opinions – this is in line with the inclusion of these *maraji* among the six suitable sources of emulation identified by the Society of Qom Seminary Teachers. The name of 'Khu'i' is also on offer on this

website.<sup>14</sup> Second, the possibility for the authority of a deceased *marja'* to be maintained after his death can smoothen the impact of his loss and the succession crisis it might engender.

### **The *marja'iyya*'s potential to resist is transnational**

The third feature of the *marja'iyya* is its geographical scope, which is transnational. This multiplies the sites of competition with the *vali-ye faqih*, leaving the possibility open for the competition to have different outcomes in different locations. The situation in the Iraqi and Iranian seminaries is of paramount importance. If one should be cautious not to oversimplify the so-called Qom-Najaf rivalry – neither seminaries are homogeneous entities – each seminary remains a particularly strong sphere of influence for the *vali-ye faqih* and the Najafi *marja'iyya* respectively. Qom hosts by far the largest community of learning of the Shi'i world. 'Ali Khamane'i's success to put it under his control is a clear asset, even if, as also discussed by Ali Kadivar's paper in this volume, more independent networks remain.

The case of Najaf needs more elaboration. Decades of Ba'hist rule had put it in a debilitating state. It has spent the past fifteen years to start recovering. Although the size of its community of learning is still no match to Qom's, it has steadily increased from a few hundred scholars and students in 2003 to an estimated 20,000 today. Religious institutions that had been closed or destroyed were also restored and new ones built. The potential of Najaf to flourish again has not been lost on the Iranian leadership. Efforts to spread its influence in the Iraqi *hawza* have ranged from pro-Khamane'i propaganda campaigns,<sup>15</sup> the establishment of religious and educational institutions, and attempts to prepare the ground in the *hawza* for the pro-*vali-ye faqih* Ayatollah Mahmud Hashimi Shahrudi to compete over the succession of Sistani.

<sup>11</sup> Mottahedeh, 'The Quandaries of Emulation', pp. 11–13, 17; Morgan Clarke, 'After the Ayatollah: Institutionalisation and Succession in the *marja'iyya* of Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Fadl Allāh', *Die Welt des Islams*, 56(2), 2016, pp. 164–168.

<sup>12</sup> Elvire Corboz, *Guardians of Shi'ism: Sacred Authority and Transnational Family Networks* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), ch. 3; Clarke, 'After the Ayatollah'.

<sup>13</sup> See <http://tabrizi.org/>.

<sup>14</sup> See <http://www.pasokhgoo.ir/>.

<sup>15</sup> On this, see the anecdote on the publication in Najaf of *My Leader Khamenei* with a forged endorsement by Sistani in Al-Khoei, 'Post-Sistani Iraq'.

However, Najaf's leadership and larger clerical community have been able to limit this influence.<sup>16</sup> Preserving the autonomy of Najaf, especially in the context of the leadership vacuum that 'Ali Sistani's death will engender, also seems to be their priority. The Iraqi law on Shi'i endowments is instructive in this regard. Article 4 gives the prerogative to the *marja' a'la* (supreme *marja'*) – currently Sistani – to approve the appointment of Iraq's holy shrines' administrators. This article is particularly illuminating for the information it provides about how this *marja' a'la* is recognized: “and he is the jurist whom the majority of the Shi'a of Iraq from among the jurists of Najaf al-Ashraf refer to in emulation” (emphasis mine).<sup>17</sup> To clarify, this article confirms the traditional role of the *ahl al-khibra* (or people of experience, i.e. the more senior scholars capable to assess the knowledge of other scholars) in the identification of the *marja'*. And in this case, Najaf's senior scholars are entrusted with the role to back the candidate who will control the shrines after Sistani. The *mujtahids* and students I have met in Najaf are perhaps too confident that the matter will be solved “quickly.” Yet their optimism indicates that they are aware that time will be of the essence and that consensus would be preferable.

Finally, any consideration of the *marja'iyya's* authority and the nature of the competition with Iran's *vali-ye faqih* should not be limited to the Shi'i centers of scholarship in Iran and Iraq. *Maraji'* and *vali-ye faqih* alike exert influence transnationally through their support networks, distribution of patronage, and establishment of educational institutions. 'Ali Khamane'i's resources and infrastructure to do so are massive, as those are also derived from the state. The Mustafa International University is one example of the Islamic Republic's endeavors to train an

international community of scholars.<sup>18</sup> The transnational capacity of the Najafi *marja'iyya* is best captured by the reach exercised by truly global *maraji'* of 'Ali Sistani's kind, or for a case of a deceased *marja'*, by the Al-Khoei Foundation's maintenance of Abu al-Qasim Khu'i's worldwide institutional legacy. In addition, *maraji'* with less financial and networking capacities can still develop a presence in select countries. In recent years, the Afghan Ishaq al-Fayyad of Najaf has made more concrete efforts to build his *marja'iyya* in his home country. Focus countries are not necessarily bound to the nationality or ethnic origin of the *maraji'*. For the past decade, the Iraqi Sa'id al-Hakim has paid particular attention to Pakistan. Similarly, national or local *maraji'* based in countries away from the centers of learning in Iraq and Iran also contribute to the transnational presence of the *marja'iyya*. All in all, the transnational networks of the *marja'iyya* and the *vali-ye faqih* often exist side by side in the many sites that make up the geography of Shi'ism. Conditions on the ground regulate the capacity of their respective networks, as well as the interactions between them.<sup>19</sup>

The purpose of this memo is not to predict what the future holds for the Najafi *marja'iyya*. Rather, this excursion into the internal working of the *marja'iyya*, conducted not only from a present-day but also a recent historical perspective – history might matter – has highlighted the complexity of the dynamics that shape the nature and potential outcome of the competition between the *marja'iyya* and *vali-ye faqih* models of authority.

<sup>16</sup> See for example how Mahmud Hashimi Shahrudi's plans to move to Najaf were curbed in Al-Qarawee, *Sistani, Iran, and the Future of Shii Clerical Authority in Iraq*, p. 6.

<sup>17</sup> Al-'Atabat al-'Alawiyat al-Muqaddasa, *Dalil al-'Atabat al-'Alawiyat al-Muqaddasa: Tarikh wa I'mar...*, vol. 42 (Beirut: Dar al-Rafidayn, 2011), p. 320.

<sup>18</sup> Keiko Sakurai, 'Making Qom a Centre of Shi'i Scholarship: Al-Mustafa International University', in Masooda Bano and Keiko Sakurai (eds), *Shaping Global Islamic Discourses: The Role of al-Azhar, al-Medina, and al-Mustafa* (Edinburg: Edinburgh University Press in association with The Aga Khan University, 2015).

<sup>19</sup> For an ethnographic study of the institutions associated with the Najafi *marja'iyya* and with Iran's *vali-ye faqih* in a micro-locale, see Radhika Gupta, 'Experiments with Khomeini's Revolution in Kargil: Contemporary Shi'a Networks between India and West Asia', *Modern Asian Studies*, 48(2), 2014, pp. 370–98.

# The Source of Legitimacy in the Guardianship of the Jurist: Historical Genealogy & Political Implications

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## Introduction

The key subtext of the raucous competition between the moderate and conservative political currents in the 2016 Assembly of Experts (herein Assembly) and 2017 presidential elections in the Islamic Republic of Iran was the question of who will be the next guardian jurist once the 78-year-old Ayatollah Ali Khamenei passes on. Under the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's conceptualization of the Guardianship of the Jurist, the political-religious theory at the heart of the Iranian political system, the guardian jurist is the single most important center of power. One debate that has gained increased prominence in the course of these elections is just who, precisely, gives legitimacy to the guardian jurist. One side of the debate, known as the election school, contends that the guardian jurist derives its legitimacy from the popular will, channeled through the Assembly. This body of Shia jurists, which is elected by general ballot for an eight-year term, is in theory empowered to choose, supervise, and remove the guardian jurist. Yet it has only chosen a guardian jurist once (after the passing Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989) and has seldom performed its supervisory and removal functions. This is in part because the Islamic Republic has been dominated since its foundation by the other side of this debate, known as the installation school, which maintains that the guardian jurist's legitimacy is derived from God, who guides the Assembly.

This theological debate may have very real political implications for Iran today. The empowerment of one school *vis-a-vis* the other may shape whether the Assembly – and by extension the next guardian jurist – places greater emphasis on the popular will or not. The question of the source of legitimacy of the guardianship of the jurist is

discussed in this paper in three parts. Part one explores three key reference points in the historical genealogy of this debate by highlighting its origins in the Shia political jurisprudence of Sheikh Morteza Ansari, the Tobacco Revolt (1891), and Constitutional Revolution (1905-1911). Part two traces how this genealogy found its way into Ayatollah Khomeini's conceptualization of guardianship of the jurist. There is a degree of contradiction in the latter in terms of the source of legitimacy of the guardian jurist, contradiction which manifests itself in the debate between the election and installation schools today. Part three examines how this debate has reemerged during the 2016 and 2017 election cycles around the broader question of who becomes the next guardian jurist.

## I. Shia Political Jurisprudence: From the Sheikh to the Constitutional Revolution

Ayatollah Khomeini's conceptualization of the guardianship of the jurist and the debate between the election and installation schools are grounded in Shia political jurisprudence, itself a subset of Shia jurisprudence. The latter is a problem solving system, which receives inputs (questions) and creates outputs (answers). The four components of this system are the *Qur'an*, the *Sunnat* (Tradition, or the words and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad and the Twelve Imams), *Aql* (Reason), and *Ijma* (Consensus). This means that when a jurist is confronted with a question, he uses his reason to interpret the Quran and Sunnat and answer the question. A jurist will compare his answer with past and present jurists to reach a consensus on the best answer if possible. Political jurisprudence, then, is the application of this problem solving system to political questions.<sup>1</sup> Sheikh Morteza Ansari, generally referred to as the "Sheikh," was among the key figures who paved the way

<sup>1</sup> Feirahi, Davood. "Introduction to Political Jurisprudence [Daramad-i Bar Fiqh-e Siasi]." *Political Quarterly: Journal of the Faculty of Law and Political Science, University of Tehran* 40.1 (2010): 217-38.



for Shia jurists to enter politics through his novel application of Shia jurisprudence to the question of the proper role of jurists in politics.

The historical role of Shia jurists in Iran until the modern era was twofold: *Qaza* (judicial) and *Ifta* (issuing religious commandments or *fatwa*). This means that the jurist was tasked with acting as a judge in legal disputes using *Shari'a* (Islamic law) and issuing *fatwa* based on questions asked of them. They were thus limited to these roles and stayed out of politics. This was for two main reasons. First, there could be no legitimate political system after the *Qeybat* (occultation), or the miraculous disappearance of the Mahdi, Shia Islam's messianic savior and the last legitimate political leader of the Shia community. This forced Shia jurists into a position of quietism, because all political systems were illegitimate and participation in them was prohibited.<sup>2</sup> Second, as the Shia often found themselves, with rare exceptions, living as minorities in Sunni polities, it became both religiously necessary and politically prudent to stay aloof from politics.

The Sheikh revisited the question of the role of Shia jurists in society and specifically politics in his seminal work *al-Makaseb*.<sup>3</sup> Although other jurists throughout history have addressed the issue of the Shia clergy's social role, the Sheikh is the most important religious figure to have done so and has had a profound influence which continues to this day. He viewed fighting injustice as central to a jurist's mandate. Up to this point, fatwas had been issued on an ad-hoc basis and generally at a local-level. The Sheikh theorized and systematized the use of fatwas in fighting injustice. Furthermore, he pioneered political jurisprudence through the use of fatwas to fight injustice in politics by placing a religious straightjacket on and pressuring political authorities. Thus, while formally rejecting a political role for Shia jurists, he revolutionized

Shia jurisprudence by opening the path for their intervention in politics through fatwas.

The Sheikh's political jurisprudence was put into practice by his disciples, the first well-known case being the Ayatollah Mirza Hassan Shirazi's (1814-1896) fatwa banning the use of tobacco in 1891 to undermine a 50-year tobacco concession given to the British by Qajar ruler Naser al-Din Shah in 1890. By issuing a fatwa that declared the use of tobacco *haram* (prohibited according to Sharia), Shirazi mobilized Iranian Shia against the use of tobacco, exerting pressure on the Shah to withdraw the concession.<sup>4</sup> The path paved by the Sheikh's formulation of political jurisprudence and Shirazi's application of it during the Tobacco Revolt began to normalize the notion that jurists had a role to play in politics. In the Constitutional Revolution of 1905-1911, the creation of a parliament to restrain the power of the monarch forced jurists to mobilize on both sides of the revolution, creating one of the earliest incarnations of political Islam.

One group of jurists, led by Ayatollah Mohammad-Hossein Naeni, continued the Sheikh's analysis, stating that while in the absence of the Mahdi there could be no legitimate political system, *Mashrutiat* (constitutionality) was the least worst option. In his famous treatise *Tanbih al-Umma wa Tanzih al-Milla*, Naeni maintained that when choosing between an unaccountable tyrannical system and an accountable constitutional one, the latter was the lesser of two evils.<sup>5</sup> From Naeni's point of view, a system based on the whims of an individual had the potential to do more harm to the Shia than one based on the popular will.<sup>6</sup> However, should the popular will contradict Islam, Naeni went one step further than the Sheikh by asserting that jurists had to be present in parliament to prevent this through participation in its deliberations. Another group, led by Sheikh Fazlollah Noori, opposed constitutionality

<sup>2</sup> Algar, Hamid. "The Qajar Era." *Expectation of the Millennium: Shi'ism in History*. Ed. Seyyed Hossein. Nasr, Hamid Dabashi, and Seyyed Vali Reza Nasr. Albany: State University of New York, 1989. 211-16.

<sup>3</sup> Gharavian, Mohsen. *Translation and Explanation of Makaseb [Tarjomeh va Sharh-e Makaseb]*. Qom: Dar-alfekr, 2010.

<sup>4</sup> Keddie, Nikki R. *Religion and Rebellion in Iran: the Tobacco Protest of 1891-1892*. London: Frank Cass, 1966.

<sup>5</sup> Naeni, Mohammad-Hossein. *Exhortation of the Faithful and Purification of the Nation [Tanbih Al-Umma Wa Tanzih Al-Milla]*. Tehran: Amirkabir, 2000.

<sup>6</sup> Davood, Feirahi. *Political Regime and Government in Islam [Nezam-e Siasi Va Dolat Dar Islam]*. Tehran: SAMT, 2007. Print. P.215

because they believed the popular will could be more dangerous to Islam than a despotic government. Constitutionality could only be less harmful to the Shia if its laws and policies adhered to Shari'a as interpreted by jurists. In contrast to Naeini, Noori argued in his infamous treatise *Hormat-e Mashruteh* that the only way this could be prevented was for jurists to actually lead parliament and have a veto over its decisions.<sup>7</sup> This anti-constitutionality is called *Mashrutiat-e Mashrue* (Sharia constitutionality).

## II. The Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and the Guardianship of the Jurist

The evolution of Shia political jurisprudence from the Sheikh to Naeini and Noori opened the door for jurists to preside over their historical domain of the judiciary, influence politics through fatwas, and take executive and legislative authority through control of parliament. The Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini took this process to its logical conclusion. He had entered political life in reaction to Mohammad-Reza Shah Pahlavi's White Revolution, a series of socio-economic reforms that weakened the power of the Shia clergy. In exile for his leadership of the opposition, Khomeini reflected on the relationship between Shia jurists and the political system by posing a simple but consequential question: Why would God abandon the Shia and leave them without the means of establishing a just and legitimate government during the Mahdi's occultation?<sup>8</sup>

Khomeini's answer radically diverged from the juridical consensus that had existed for nearly the entirety of Shia history. He concluded that God would not leave the Shia without the means to establish a just and legitimate government, but that throughout history circumstances had not allowed it. He saw this as in part being the failure of Shia jurists themselves. But if a just and legitimate

government was possible, what should it look like? This would be his most radical answer, contradicting the Sheikh and Naeini's quietism and going beyond even Noori. For Khomeini it was not sufficient for Shia jurists to control the judiciary and oversee the legislative and executive branches. A just and legitimate government was one which adhered to Shari'a in every respect and served as a placeholder for the Mahdi during his occultation. The only group qualified to establish a just and legitimate government based on Shari'a were jurists. He formulated this insight in his 1970 treatise *Islamic Government: Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist*, in which he envisioned jurists overseeing the entire political system. It should be noted that Khomeini and his followers represented only one faction among the Shia clerical establishment before and during the Iranian Revolution of 1979. As Ali Kadivar points out in his contribution to this series, there were other prominent figures "who either believed in ideas of the Constitutional Revolution, or believed in the clergy's quietism and lack of any interference in politics."<sup>9</sup>

Khomeini's pre-revolution notion of Islamic government, in line with Noori, emphasized the authority of jurists, but did not see a place for the popular will, as Naeini had envisioned. The guardian jurist, who had to be an expert in Shari'a and possess a sterling reputation among jurists, would wield immense power over the political system. Confronted by the realities of leading a revolutionary movement after 1978, however, Khomeini the jurist was forced to become Khomeini the revolutionary. In having to incorporate one of the main demands of the revolution, democracy, Khomeini appealed to the only other source within Shia Islam he could: Naeini's concept of constitutionality, and declared that: "The goals are those which I have alluded to in my speeches and declarations: a) Destruction of the Pahlavi regime and the evil institution of the monarchy and b) Establishment of an Islamic

<sup>7</sup> Nouri, Sheikh Fazlollah. "The Roscription of Constitutionality Treatise [Resaleh-ye Hormat-e Mashruteh]." *Treatises of Constitutionality [Rasael Mashrutiat]*. Ed. Gholam-hossein Zargarinejad. Tehran: Kavir, 2005.

<sup>8</sup> Dabashi, Hamid. *Theology of Discontent: the Ideological Foundations of the Islamic Revolution in Iran*. New York: New York UP, 1993. Print. p.441

<sup>9</sup> Kadivar, Mohammad Ali. "The Ayatollahs and the Republic: The religious establishment in Iran and its interaction with the Islamic Republic." *POMEPS Studies 28, New Analysis of Shia Politics*. Dec. 2017.

Republic based on Shari'a law and founded on the nation's votes."<sup>10</sup>

After the referendum of April 1979, which created the Islamic Republic, this contradiction within Khomeinism manifested itself in the new state. While the guardian jurist is appointed by the Assembly of Experts, an elected body of jurists who, in theory, can supervise and remove him, the office is supreme over the state. The constitution empowers the guardian jurist with broad authority. He can set the general guidelines for the political system, supervise policy implementation, and exert profound influence over the three branches of government. As commander-in-chief, he can declare war and peace, mobilize the armed forces, and appoint their commanders. Neither the Sheikh, Naeni, or even Noori had ever conceived of jurists wielding such immense power in the manner articulated by Khomeini.

The contradiction in Khomeinism between the immense power of the guardian jurist and the popular will manifests in the Islamic Republic today in the debate between the Grand Ayatollah Hussein-Ali Montazeri (1922-2009) and the concept of *mashru'iat-e mardomi* or *nazariy-e entekhab* (popular legitimacy or election school), and Ayatollah Mohammad Taqi Mesbah Yazdi and the concept of *mashru'iat-e elahi* or *nazariy-e nasb* (divine legitimacy or installation school).<sup>11 12</sup> The election school maintains that the legitimacy of the guardian jurist comes from the popular will through elections. Acting through the jurists of the Assembly, the people can elect, supervise, and remove the guardian jurist. In contrast, the installation school "argues that the Guardian Jurist is solely designated by the Mahdi (the Hidden Imam) rather than by the people and that his command (*hukm*) is obligatory for all. The people's only prerogative is to "discover" (*kashf*) the

guardian from among qualified jurists but they have no say in accepting or rejecting his decisions and have no right to participate in decision-making for the affairs of state."<sup>13</sup>

In attempting to resolve the dispute over the source of the guardian jurist's legitimacy, Khomeini's statements serve as a major source of interpretation and can often be taken to support both sides. For example, in appointing Mehdi Bazargan as prime minister of the Islamic Republic, and subsequently with presidents Abol-Hassan Bani-Sadr, Mohammad-Ali Rajai, and Ali Khamenei, Khomeini declared: "I who have appointed him, am a person who on the guardianship that I have derived from the *Share-e Moqadas* (holy creator of divine law)...The nation must obey him. This is not a normal regime, it is a divine regime and must be obeyed, opposition to this regime is opposition against the divine, is rebellion against the divine."<sup>14</sup> This raises the question: Can the guardian jurist reject the popular will? The election and installation schools give diverging answers. The election school argues that he cannot, because the guardian jurist derives his legitimacy from the popular will and is bound to obey it. In this context, the Iranian constitution is said to represent the ceiling of the guardian jurist's powers. The installation school, in stark contrast, asserts that the guardian jurist can reject the popular will, and that this will is just one possible source of guidance. The source of legitimacy of the guardian jurist comes from God above all else. The constitution, as a contract between the people and state, represents the floor of the guardian jurist's powers and cannot limit him. He can dismantle all state institutions should he choose, including the Assembly, which can convene to discover and install the guardian jurist, but cannot supervise him and can be dissolved by him.

<sup>10</sup> Khomeini, Rouhollah. *Sahifeh Imam Khomeini*. Vol. 4. Tehran: Institute for Compilation and Publication of Imam Khomeini's Works, 1375. p.349.

<sup>11</sup> Montazeri, Hossein-ali. *Religious Government and Human Rights [Hokumat-e Dini Va Hoghugh-e Ensaan]*. Qom: Office of Grand Ayatollah Montazeri, 2007; and Montazeri, Hossein-ali. *Juristic Fundamentals of Islamic Government [Mabani-e Feqhi-e Hokumat Eslami]*. Tehran: Sarayi, 2000.

<sup>12</sup> Mesbah Yazdi, Mohammad Taghi. *A Quick Look at the Theory of Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist [Naghi Gozara Be Nazarieh Velayat Faqih]*. Qom: Imam Khomeini Educational and Research Institute, 2007.

<sup>13</sup> Amanat, Abbas. *Apocalyptic Islam and Iranian Shi'ism*. London: I. B. Tauris, 2009. Print. P.196

<sup>14</sup> Khomeini, Rouhollah. *Sahifeh Imam Khomeini*. Vol. 6. Tehran: Institute for Compilation and Publication of Imam Khomeini's Works, 1375. p.59.

### III. The Assembly of Experts and Guardian Jurist Succession: Election or Installation?

The debate over the source of legitimacy of the guardian jurist has profound implications for the Islamic Republic, which, as a system based on the theory of guardianship of the jurist, places Shia jurists at the center of politics. The anticipated transition to a new guardian jurist following Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who is 78 years old, has brought this debate into the spotlight. The triumph of either the election or installation school in the coming transition will determine the degree to which the popular will in Iran can express itself in the supervision of the guardian jurist through the Assembly. Historically, the installation school has held sway, and the Assembly has only exercised its selection function once and has never supervised or removed the guardian jurist. In the coming transition, the composition of the Assembly could shape whether the next guardian jurist is governed and governs according to the election or installation school. The dividing lines in the Assembly are blurry, and it is difficult to determine the precise strength of each school in this body. That said, it appears that in the 2016 Assembly elections, jurists subscribing to the installation school won nearly two-thirds of the seats, while those in the election school won nearly one-third.<sup>15</sup> Given that a guardian jurist candidate requires a two-thirds majority in the Assembly to win office, the election school may be able to form a veto bloc that could force the installation school to select a compromise candidate.

The anticipated transition to a new supreme leader has transposed the debate between the election and installation schools over mainstream Iranian politics, particularly around the 2017 Iranian presidential election. President Hassan Rouhani, representing moderates, has quoted Ali ibn Abi Taleb, the first imam of Shia Islam, as having said that he followed the will of the people, so much so that anyone who the people elected would also become his own leader whom he would obey. Drawing on this precedent, Rouhani declared: “The basis of the guardianship and government from the perspective of Ali is the vote and opinion of the people.”<sup>16</sup> Hamid Rasaei, a conservative cleric, has harshly criticized Rouhani for “illiteracy” and “superficiality,” and on social media highlighted the views of a dozen senior jurists to the effect that president’s views have no basis in Shia political jurisprudence.<sup>17</sup> Looking ahead, there has only been one succession in the history of the Islamic Republic, in 1989, and it is unclear if the Assembly will be the only deciding factor in choosing the next guardian jurist. The balance of power outside of the Assembly, for example, could very well shape the succession. How the succession plays out could determine whether the next guardian jurist is more constrained by the popular will or remains only answerable to God.

<sup>15</sup> Sabet, Farzan. “Iran’s 2016 Elections: Change or Continuity?” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 9 June 2016, [carnegieendowment.org/2016/06/09/iran-s-2016-elections-change-or-continuity/j1nm](https://www.carnegieendowment.org/2016/06/09/iran-s-2016-elections-change-or-continuity/j1nm).

<sup>16</sup> Rouhani, Hassan. *Official Website of the President of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, 14 June 2017, [www.president.ir/fa/99408](http://www.president.ir/fa/99408).

<sup>17</sup> Rasaei, Hamid. Telegram, 16 June 2017, [https://t.me/www\\_rasaei\\_ir/4809](https://t.me/www_rasaei_ir/4809), Rasaei, Hamid. Telegram, 20 June 2017, [https://t.me/www\\_rasaei\\_ir/4862](https://t.me/www_rasaei_ir/4862). and, Rasaei, Hamid. Telegram, 20 June 2017, [https://t.me/www\\_rasaei\\_ir/4863](https://t.me/www_rasaei_ir/4863).

# Becoming Hezbollahi: Religion and the Unintended Consequences of Propaganda in Post-2009 Iran

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## Iran's Hezbollah

Many people involved in the cultural production of Iran's conservative right describe themselves as "Hezbollahi." Although its origins can be traced back to the pre-revolutionary period, the *Ansar-e Hezbollah* (Partisans of Hezbollah) movement was formed in the years following the 1979 Iranian revolution. The term Hezbollah is Quranic, ambiguous, and at its root, utopian, making it a difficult concept to pin down. Iran's Hezbollah claims to embody the ideology that helped form the more widely known Lebanese Hezbollah movement, established in 1985. For instance, Shahid Mostafa Chamran, who helped train fighters in Lebanon and was later killed during the Iran-Iraq war (1980-88), is one of the ideologues of Iran's Hezbollah movement. Iran's senior Hezbollah cultural activists are in communication with their counterparts in Lebanon. They meet Lebanese Hezbollah affiliates regularly to exchange ideas and experiences, and are often fluent in Arabic and English. A steadfast opposition to the Israeli state, a dedication to Iran's Supreme Leader, and an individual commitment to pious behavior are central to the framework of both movements.

The real time cultural activism of the official Hezbollah front in Iran is understudied, in part because it has been impenetrable for Western researchers and journalists. As a doctoral student, I met influential leaders of the Hezbollah movement during fieldwork in Iran, because they also happen to be experts on the Iran-Iraq war, the topic of my dissertation. When I returned to Tehran in 2012, I noticed that the small Hezbollah cultural institutes that had existed during my 2007 to 2008 doctoral fieldwork, were now significantly larger. Additionally, the middle-aged men interested in the history of the 1979 revolution and Iran-Iraq war were less visible. In their place, there were ambitious male and female students, sometimes in their late teens, often from Iran's top universities, who felt personally responsible to revive the ideals of the 1979

revolution. Intrigued by this change, I decided to study the transformation of Iran's Hezbollah movement. Admittedly, I was surprised when, as an American citizen, I was given access. Without extensive ethnographic research within these cultural institutes, the propaganda produced is difficult, if not impossible, to decipher.

Iran's Hezbollah does fall within the loose coalition of the "right" due to its conservative understandings of religion. Historically, the "left" in Iran has been associated with "social justice," and a critical stance towards the West – all political dispositions to which Iran's Hezbollah is also devoted. However, the Hezbollah faction is closer to the "right" in Iran today due to its commitment to the absolute rule of the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. It should be acknowledged that these categorizations are all inexact and fluid in Iran, like elsewhere. Nevertheless, Hezbollah cultural products are not intended for mass consumption by Iranian youth or even the conservative right. These products are not distributed haphazardly to international organizations. In other words, the cultural artefacts are for the use and reproduction of what the Lebanese Hezbollah has identified as the "society of resistance" (Lamloum, 2009). The society of resistance in the Iranian context is understood to be those who are committed to the notion of Islamic government, and in post-2009, it is led by individuals that stood with the Supreme Leader during the contested presidential election. Located in Tehran, but with offices and affiliates throughout the country, Hezbollah cultural institutes also manufacture and distribute media productions made specifically for a transnational audience.

The gap between factions in Iran should not be exaggerated. Hezbollah leaders and followers have a working relationship with official organizations throughout the country. For instance, it is common for activists to receive funds for their projects from Hozehe Honari (an official cultural organization within the conservative front), but to participate in Hezbollah film festivals and receive awards





The growth of conservative cultural production in contemporary Iran, however, has been well documented. For instance, Bajoghli (2017) argues that since 2007, pro-regime filmmakers began to recognize the need to create media productions that Iran's post-revolutionary youth would find entertaining. Nevertheless, the public records of cultural spending costs are limited. The state's non-governmental centres of power, which fund the Hezbollah cultural institutes I studied, do not make their financial contributions to cultural projects transparent. Furthermore, even when governmental funds for an organization are made public, such as the Islamic Republic of Iran's Broadcasting, the overall number alone does not reveal which channels, ideas, projects, and individuals are influential in the real-time distribution of that budget.

Hezbollah cultural institutes, then, are politically significant centres of power in post-2009 and part of the larger shift in Iran's cultural policy framework that has taken hold since the Ahmadinejad presidency (2005-2013). At times, cultural institutes that were understood to be Hezbollahi pre-2009 were replaced in post-2009. For instance, when some employees of an influential cultural institute were seen participating in post-election demonstrations in 2009, the institute - which had produced many acclaimed war documentaries and war studies experts - lost a significant amount of its financial support. In its place, over ten Hezbollah cultural institutes were established with extraordinary resources: incorporating pious students studying in Tehran who were either too young or apolitical before the transformations of 2009.

### **The different shades of Hezbollah**

This section and the following show how one unintended outcome of propaganda is that conservative depictions of the ideal Hezbollahi citizen are blatantly disrupted. This point can be illustrated through an example from a Hezbollah film festival which I attended regularly between 2012 to 2014. During one evening session, the showing of *Armita Mesle Pari* (*Armita like an Angel*) was accompanied by a discussion with the filmmaker and the martyr's family. Darioush Rezaeinejad was an electrical engineering student who had been connected with Iran's

nuclear energy program when he was assassinated in the summer of 2011; Mossad has allegedly accepted responsibility for his death. The documentary, however, focuses mostly on the relationship between Rezaeinejad's five-year-old daughter, Armita, and the Supreme Leader in the period following Rezaeinejad's death. During the question and answer session, a debate emerged among several participants. Some argued that the documentary should have focussed more on the martyr. Others stated that Armita is charismatic and that her mother should not apologize for that characteristic, which many lack. Moreover, it was reiterated that Armita witnessed Rezaeinejad's death, since she was in the car with her parents the day he became a martyr. Several viewers that evening insisted that most, if not all, martyrs' children have never endured such an experience. Therefore, at least a segment of the audience that evening, including Rezaeinejad's family, felt the extensive national attention the young child received was legitimate, although not necessarily healthy for a child of her age.

These explicit arguments depart from expressions of piety I have witnessed among other wives of martyrs, especially those from the Iran-Iraq War (Saeidi, 2010). Wives of war martyrs place emphasis on the grace that accompanies the loss of loved ones in the path of God. They take solace in sharing the same fate as other families of martyrs, including Shi'i martyrs more broadly. They rarely ask for national recognition, at least not as public celebrities and not through a language of loss. The argument that being the center of attention is an orphan's right lends support to a politics of self-care, where the loss of life, whether in the path of God, hardly relieves society of the responsibility *to care*.

In particular moments, the film contests the state's formal narrative of Shi'ism. The film spends a large amount of camera time trying to transform Shohreh, Rezaeinejad's widow, and Armita into ideal Hezbollahi citizens. The unedited and uninterrupted camera shots seem determined to "prove" Shohreh and Armita's Muslimness (at one point even following Armita into the restroom as she prepares for her prayers). The film thus unsettles the state's formal and reformist narratives of martyrdom, not only by eclipsing the martyr, but also by failing to

“fit” Shohreh and Armita into conventional categories of martyrs’ relatives. In an effort to convince us that Shohreh and Armita are sufficiently Muslim, and sufficiently familiar, to be part of the state’s elite core, the martyr, and values typically attributed to martyrdom, are not only neglected, but also problematized. This may indeed have been intentional on the part of the film crew. Given the rise of celebrity culture in Iran, drawing attention to two young women may have been a bid for mass appeal. Nevertheless, observation and interviews reveal that this approach is frowned upon by a faction of senior Hezbollah leaders, as well as those funding such projects.

The film also overturned the conventional depiction of an ideal Shi’i woman, for both reformists and conservatives. For decades, the optimistic figure of the martyr’s wife has told the Iranian public that she instigated her husband’s martyrdom – but such a figure is oddly missing here. Shohreh’s “political depression” and insistence on securing a bright future for her daughter in light of the state’s inability to protect her family resonates with an audience beyond the Hezbollah faction (Cvetkovich, 2012). She becomes every mother who has struggled to thrive with the odds stacked against her, and a woman who has risked vulnerability. In the process, she becomes a “Hezbollahi” for the women associated with the movement (or not) who share her ambition, resilience, and search for liberation or solidarity.

The director appears to depend on the visual integration of Ayatollah Khamenei, instead of the martyr himself, to reinsert the sacred into the screen. It is common for state elites to visit families of martyrs in Iran as a show of respect and solidarity. Khamenei had visited the family shortly after Rezaeinejad’s death. The filmmaker relies on this previously filmed material to borrow moral support from the Supreme Leader. Ayatollah Khamenei, then, represents the ideal Hezbollahi, and the climax of the film. Yet even the presence of Iran’s Supreme Leader cannot dispel the astonishment in Shohreh’s eyes, or the nervousness with which Armita fiddles with her hair. For instance, Shohreh tells us that Armita stops whatever she is doing when she hears the Supreme Leader’s voice coming from the television. Despite her mother’s insistence,

Armita appears uncomfortable with her objectification. She talks fast and makes sarcastic jokes. Importantly, during his visit to their home, which we see replayed in the documentary, Khamenei makes no effort to be a father figure. Viewers see that the Supreme Leader asks what the little girl’s name is, suggesting that he has been busy with other responsibilities prior to his arrival at their home. He asks if the photo on the table next to him is the martyr, to which Shohreh swiftly replies, “Yes.” Khamenei’s own behavior implies that he is visiting the family as part of his professional duties, with no intention of redefining what has happened to them. He lectures the family on the importance of science for national progress. He is then interrupted by Armita who moves closer to him with a child’s demand for love and attention – which he offers and examines Armita’s drawing of her father’s assassination. Rezaeinejad does not “count” as Hezbollahi enough from the perspective of the filmmakers, and in his place the Supreme Leader’s professionalism as a kind politician takes center stage. At times, we are forced to wonder if Armita’s capacity to speak truth to power at a young age makes her a member of God’s party too. Nevertheless, attempts to depict Khamenei as a Hezbollahi by showing him as a father figure to families of martyrs, and Armita as his disciple, fall short. Khamenei’s professionalism and Armita’s audacity introduce us to formal expressions of being a Hezbollahi that some state ideologues have sought to undermine since the establishment of an Islamic Republic in Iran.

The filmmaker’s decision to replay clips of Ayatollah Khamenei’s visit to Shohreh’s home deserves further consideration, because it disturbs the conservative faction’s gender ideology. Once Khamenei enters the family’s home, Armita, wearing a red dress and with her long hair perfectly brushed, plays around the beloved guest as a child would when her nightly routine is pleasantly disrupted by excitement and new faces. However, this playfulness contradicts the norms and obligations concerning piety that are attributed to female relatives of martyrs. Being a shrewd politician, Khamenei quickly states that, like a wife of the prophet, Armita’s hair is long “like a *pari*.” *Pari* translates as “angel” or “beautiful woman.” This clip was used by the filmmaker to support the Supreme Leader’s



intervention, which aligns Armita with Islam and the nation, despite her family's lack of association with the forms of religiosity encouraged by the Hezbollah faction.

When publicized on the screen, however, one interpretation of the scenario is that Islam is linked to the young girl's physical appearance, which is exploited to strengthen the Hezbollah movement. Another possible reading, which the filmmaker subscribes to, is that the title is a subtle response to those Hezbollahi citizens who oppose Armita's status as a martyr's child. A strong faction within Hezbollah argue that Armita's name, which does not come from the Quran or other religious texts, suggests that the family was not religious prior to the assassination. Therefore, they should not be given a sacred place within the nation. Whichever interpretation one finds convincing, we are introduced to becoming a Hezbollahi through the "conceptual intervention" of social flesh (Beasley and Bacchi, 2012, p. 107). The fleshy entanglement of different lives that are given unequal, and ultimately unconvincing, individual attributes disrupts the state's preferred forms of religiosity. The state's gender ideology is destabilized, as are its depictions of martyrdom.

### **The arrival of new heroes**

In other instances, Hezbollah cultural activists are unexpectedly pushed into physical performances of propaganda in real time. I learned about this theatrical use of propaganda during the 2013 Fajr Film Festival. The Fajr Film Festival is held annually on the anniversary of the 1979 Iranian revolution. It is a celebration of the artistic progress Iran has made since the establishment of an Islamic Republic in the country. A Hezbollah cultural institute, operated by youth mostly in their early twenties, was to hold a parallel film festival as a tactic for "promoting the ideals of the 1979 Islamic Revolution." Initially, then, the goal was to Islamize the Fajr Festival. However, given the Iranian artistic community's boycott of cinema following the 2009 crisis, the parallel festival had to be reworked. The revised plan, which was rather rushed, was to integrate Hezbollah cultural activists into the Fajr Festival in an attempt to "save face" for the state with a celebration of Iranian cinema. Some in the Islamic

Republic feared that the crisis of the state would become nationally and internationally visible through the silence of an industry that serves as a source of national pride for many Iranians both in the country and abroad. While still carrying out a separate and parallel festival, the cultural activists associated with this institute were encouraged to support filmmakers who continued to work and engage with the state after 2009.

One evening, the film *Hush! Girls Don't Scream*, directed by Pouran Derakhshandeh, was shown by this cultural institute in a cinema complex in Northern Tehran. The film addresses the gender biases of the legal system in Iran and the lack of national conversation regarding the sexual abuse of children. Interestingly, the film includes highly Islamophobic scenes, the likes of which have rarely been displayed by even the harshest internal critics of the state. Nevertheless, it was artistically celebrated by a faction of the state, simply because Derakhshandeh did not boycott the festival or filmmaking during that sensitive period.

Some Hezbollah activists from the cultural institute were invited to the question and answer session with the filmmaker herself. There had been no coaching before the event, and activists were not told how to behave. Some of the older activists simply argued that praising the film constituted a defence of Islam because so many critics had stopped engaging with the state. However, there were indications of a complete breakdown of communication between those funding the event, senior activists, and junior activists. Several young female activists, for instance, shocked everyone by standing up, not only to praise the film, but also to point out how it accurately addressed a nationally taboo topic, the pervasive sexual abuse of children in Iran. Activists were to celebrate the film, but they were not supposed to do so with a language that supported the substance of Derakhshandeh's work, especially since the film holds a critical stance towards efforts at preserving an Islamic state. According to the norms I witnessed in similar contexts, activists should have drawn attention to Derakhshandeh's solidarity with *Iran-Islami* (Islamic Iran) in recent years. Within this context of ambiguity and confusion, Derakhshandeh became a symbol of "Islamic resistance." Derakhshandeh was given

a hero's welcome at the session, by which she appeared to be as perplexed as many in the audience. Several activists argued that Derakhshandeh would soon marginalize Tahmineh Milani from Iranian cinema. When I asked what the difference between the two women's work was, one activist stated that it lay in timing. Milani, it was argued, makes films at exactly the right moment to lend her support to the reformist movement, and "Derakhshandeh just proved that she will do that for us." This interlocutor believed that Derakhshandeh's decision to work with the Islamic Republic after 2009, made her an ally of the Hezbollah faction. At the same time, my conversations with activists revealed that Derakhshandeh's daring selection of a topic resonated with female and male viewers regardless of how institutional elites framed her work.

### Concluding remarks

The diversity that has emerged in Hezbollah cultural activism largely seems to support the state's efforts at reproducing itself in innovative ways. However, the leaders of this movement had not anticipated the innovations this activism would generate in the remaking of previously established forms of religiosity. The description of the film *Armita Mesle Pari* illustrates that the filmmaker either intentionally or unintentionally departed from a depiction of martyrdom as a life-long project that one strives towards. Instead, in the process of depicting the transformation of Shohreh and Armita into "true" Hezbollahis, the documentary draws our attention to the possibility that God's selection of a martyr may at times be incomprehensible. The film expands the subjectivity of a Hezbollahi and suggests that he or she can come in many different forms. Crucially, this is done by borrowing prestige from the Supreme Leader himself. A micro level view of a young widow and an orphan's body re-entering the nation through the state's Islamization project also unearths national sentiments about the exploitation of vulnerable women. In other instances, the national boundaries are more vividly marked, but also fail to clarify who qualifies as a real Hezbollahi. The second case study demonstrates that the theatrical and performative spectacles in support of Iranian cinema coincide with the state's shifting policies and the sense of pleasure and

passion among young people who seek to infuse new conversations into national debates. In sum, the state's propaganda efforts may have engendered a creative approach for reproduction of the state's most sympathetic followers. In moments, though, the project also remakes state-sanctioned religiosity, and, subsequently, further mystified who qualifies as an official Hezbollahi.

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# Unpacking the Welfare-Politics Nexus in the Islamic Republic of Iran

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In scholarly and think-tank accounts of Iranian politics, welfare linkages to the state are alleged to function as a crucial source of regime legitimation among poorer and conservative-leaning citizens. Analysts often assume that conservative factions of the political elite collectively mobilize the votes of individuals who receive aid or welfare from the government, engendering a dependent class of beneficiaries in the process. More specifically, scholars have touted the organizational prowess and popular reach of semi-governmental welfare foundations in the post-1979 era (usually referred to in Persian as *bonyad-ha* but here Anglicized as *bonyads*). To quote one of many such assertions: “the *bonyads* simultaneously provide essential social services and strengthen the regime. In short, *bonyads* are the means for patronage as well as social control.”<sup>1</sup>

How accurate is this portrayal of social welfare linkages between individuals and the government in the Islamic Republic? In late 2016, my colleague and I produced the Iran Social Survey, a nationally representative survey fielded via landline phone to 5005 randomly selected respondents throughout the country.<sup>2</sup> Our main goal was to empirically assess prevailing accounts of social and political dynamics in Iran.

One of the most comprehensive survey segments measures household linkages to social welfare services. To gauge the degree and range of state-society linkages through social welfare policy, we asked respondents whether “anyone in their household receives insurance, aid, or income” from

a list of public, semi-public, and private organizations. Included in the list were several post-revolutionary *bonyads*.

The four largest social welfare programs in Iran, as reported by survey respondents, are as follows:

- *Imam Khomeini Relief Committee* (IKRC): Founded in 1979, this is the largest self-identified revolutionary welfare institution in Iran. Funded through government sources, income-generating investments, as well as private donations, benefits include monthly income transfers, in-kind aid, and subsidies for health care costs. By population reach, this is the biggest *bonyad* in Iran.<sup>3</sup>
- *Social Security Organization* (SSO): Founded before the 1979 revolution by the Pahlavi monarchy (1925-79), the SSO provides social insurance for formal employees in large firms in the public and private sector. Since the late 1990s, enrollment among employees in small firms and informal self-employed has been encouraged. Social insurance includes health, pension, and disability benefits. The SSO is administered under the Ministry of Cooperatives, Labor, and Social Welfare.
- *Civil Service Pension Fund* (CSPF): One of the oldest social welfare institutions of the Pahlavi monarchy, the CSPF continues to provide social insurance for government employees. It is currently managed by the Ministry of Cooperatives, Labor, and Social Welfare, and does not cover employees in the military, law

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<sup>1</sup> Manochehr Dorraj and Michael Dodson, “Neo-Populism in Comparative Perspective: Iran and Venezuela,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 29, no. 1 (2009): 145. See similar remarks in Kenneth Katzman, “Iran’s Bonyads: Economic Strengths and Weaknesses,” Memo for Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research, 6 August 2006.

<sup>2</sup> Kevan Harris and Daniel Tavana, *Iran Social Survey* (2016). The sample was stratified by all 31 Iranian provinces and then by settlement size, with distributions based on the 2011 census. According to the Statistical Center of Iran, 99 percent of urban households and 90 percent of rural households have a fixed telephone line. Calls were made from inside Iran. The ISS contact rate was 75 percent and the response rate was 64 percent.

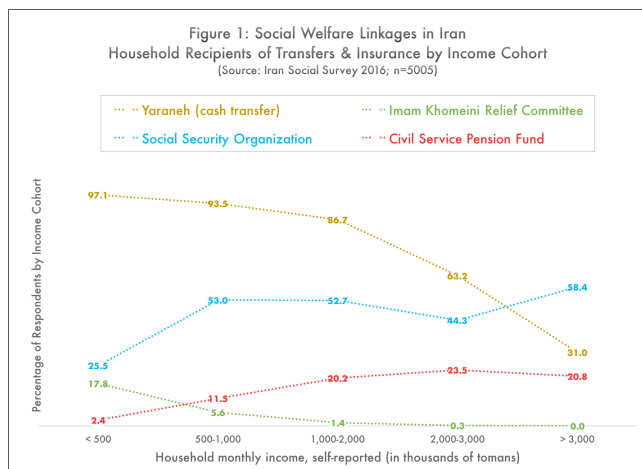
<sup>3</sup> See Kevan Harris, “The Politics of Welfare After Revolution and War: The Imam Khomeini Relief Committee in the Islamic Republic of Iran,” in *The Cup, the Gun and the Crescent: Social Welfare and Civil Unrest in Muslim Societies*, edited by Sara Crabtree, Jonathan Parker, and Azlinda Azman (London: Whiting and Birch, 2012), 134–50.

enforcement, or Islamic Revolutionary Guards, each of which has their own social insurance organization.

- *Yaraneh*/cash transfer: Enacted in 2011 by the Ahmadinejad administration as a partial replacement for liberalization of price subsidies on fuel and electricity, this is a direct cash transfer to a specified bank or credit institution account held by eligible individuals under a given income line. After 2013, the Rouhani administration continued the *yaraneh*/cash transfer program, although the real amount has declined due to inflation.

### Measuring social welfare linkages

Below, in Figure 1, is the percentage of Iran Social Survey respondents by household income bracket that reported a *household linkage* to each social welfare institution:



Overall, most households reported the receipt of unconditional cash transfers in Iran, a relatively new policy innovation, amounting to roughly \$11-12 USD/month per person.<sup>4</sup> It should be noted that 85 percent of survey respondents fall into the lowest three income categories in Figure 1, with 23.4 percent of respondents self-reporting

household incomes under 500,000 tomans (approximately \$130 USD) a month. As the figure shows, nearly all of the respondents in the poorest household category (N=1169) reported receiving cash transfers.

Moreover, within this poorest income category, more respondent households are linked to the Social Security Organization than the Imam Khomeini Relief Committee. In other words, among poorer Iranians, more beneficiaries are linked to the main governmental social insurance organization than the largest semi-governmental *bonyad*.

This might be a surprising finding for Middle East analysts, given popular accounts of semi-governmental *bonyads* as the key Iranian institutions of aid and insurance for low-income households. Yet the limited reach of the IKRC can be seen in claims by the organization itself. In 2008, only three years into the Ahmadinejad administration and well before the implementation of cash transfers, the IKRC reported that 1.9 million households (around 10 percent of total households) were covered by its services.<sup>5</sup> The SSO, on the other hand, covered more than 40 percent of the population in 2008, and continued to expand coverage over the next decade.<sup>6</sup>

As is clear from Figure 1, households can be linked to *multiple* social welfare institutions in Iran. As an Iranian health-policy analyst told me in a 2011 interview:

There is no one insurance fund that pools the health costs in Iran. For instance, with a population of 75 million, there are almost 85, or some figures say, 90 million insurance booklets, which means that there are some people with two or even three insurance schemes, which is absolutely a waste of resources. If your dad is a public servant, you are entitled to insurance from the [CSPF]; if your mom is a factory laborer, you are also entitled to insurance from

<sup>4</sup> Often misunderstood as party patronage or misreported as “handouts” by journalists on the Iran beat, universal cash transfers are elsewhere widely praised as good policy in oil-producing states. See the reasoning from World Bank economist Shanta Devarajan, “Two reasons why rentier states would adopt universal basic income,” *Brookings Future Development Blog*, 12 September 2017, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/future-development/2017/09/12/two-reasons-why-rentier-states-would-adopt-universal-basic-income/>

<sup>5</sup> *1387 [2008] Statistical Report* [in Persian], Imam Khomeini Relief Committee (Tehran: IKRC, 2008), 21.

<sup>6</sup> *The Social Security Organization from a Statistical View, 1340-90* [in Persian] (Tehran: SSO, 2015), 9.

the SSO; if your brother is in the military, you can have insurance from the Armed Forces Insurance; and if your sister works in the mayor's office, you are entitled to a type of private insurance for some special services. This is the story, more or less, across the country.<sup>7</sup>

Contrary to popular accounts of social welfare in Iran as a vehicle to specifically target poor citizens, the main linkages to Iran's social welfare system, as with most middle-income countries, are clustered among households in the middle and upper-income strata of the population. Amidst the poorest stratum of survey respondents, this sort of cross-organizational linkage is less apparent: only 2 percent of survey respondents reported linkages to *both* the IKRC and the SSO.

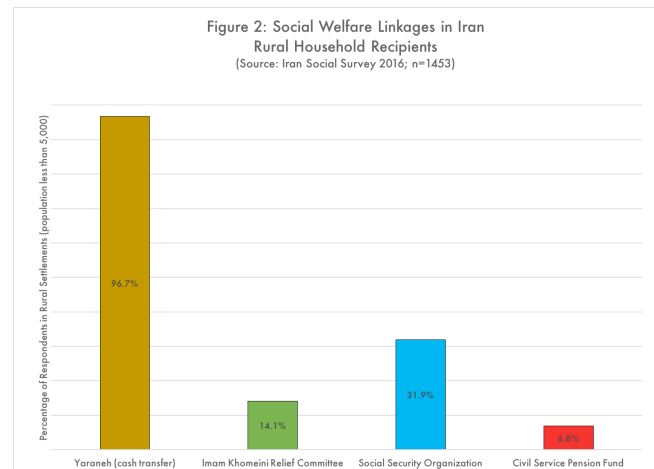
Among middle and upper income strata, the reach of the SSO expands while linkages to the IKRC are absent. This is to be expected, as the IKRC uses means-testing to deliver aid to low-income households. The reach of the SSO to lower income strata is consistent with the expansion of benefits to a range of occupations in the informal, self-employed sector of Iran's economy over the past decade, where poorer Iranians tend to earn a living. In reality, however, it is higher-income households which are more likely to be linked to pensions and health insurance across multiple organizations: 14 percent of respondents in the survey reported that their household was linked to *both* the SSO and the CSPF.

With regards to other well-known *bonyads* in Iran also purported to be organizations of mass patronage and party mobilization, we asked respondents about these as well. In the case of *Bonyad Mostazafan* (Foundation for the Dispossessed), only 36 respondents out of 5005 (0.7 percent) reported a household linkage. In the case of the *Bonyad Shahid* (Martyrs Foundation), only 95 respondents (1.9 percent) reported a household linkage. These shares are also consistent with the counts of beneficiaries officially reported by these organizations.

Moreover, even if there is underreporting in the survey for smaller *bonyad* organizations due to perceived stigma (though this is arguably not the case for cash transfers, a policy equally associated with conservative Iranian politicians), this underreporting would have to be extremely widespread to raise the importance of these *bonyads* to the level of linkages from other social welfare organizations. On the whole, the survey data illustrates the reach of core welfare organizations under the control of the central Iranian government, not semi-governmental *bonyads*, into the poorer strata of society.

### A rural exception?

What about rural households? It is regularly stated by journalists and scholars that the political base of the Iranian regime is strongest among rural citizens, who tend to be poorer and less educated than urban residents. In Figure 2, household linkages to the above social welfare organizations are displayed among only rural respondents (living in a settlement size under 5,000 people).



As shown in Figure 2, even rural households are more likely to be connected to the government-run SSO than the *bonyad* IKRC. Overlap among rural household linkages to both organizations is minimal (3.2 percent).

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in Kevan Harris, *A Social Revolution: Politics and the Welfare State in Iran* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017), 169.



In addition, nearly all rural households receive a bimonthly cash transfer. The *yaraneh*/cash transfer program is often construed as a naked “handout” of cash in exchange for votes in Iran. Given the basic design of the policy, this is a misleading characterization. While the recipients of cash transfers might perceive particular politicians or factions more favorably due to the implementation and advocacy of this program, the distributional structure of a universal cash grant does not resemble a patron-client relationship. Every household receives one cash transfer per individual, regardless of occupation or voting behavior.

Given the mix of cash transfers, health subsidies, and social insurance reported in the survey, a narrowly targeted clientelist machine does not seem to be prevalent in rural Iran. Rather, rural household linkages to social welfare organizations resemble those under a modern welfare state with programmatic policies at its center.

#### **Do state linkages displace associational activities?**

Civil society, defined as *non-state* and *non-family* associational activities, is a concept often invoked in scholarship on Iran and the broader Middle East, usually by declaring the absence of associational activities. Some reports of Iran portray everyday life as routinely captured by state penetration, displacing the associational arenas where public social interaction could take place.<sup>8</sup> This assertion has rarely been empirically assessed outside of anecdotal or official accounts. To gauge the degree of participation in a variety of non-state associational activities, the Iran Social Survey asked respondents whether they currently participate or used to participate in a range of formal or informal groups, clubs, or other associations.<sup>9</sup>

The most commonly reported association participated in by respondents was the neighborhood religious association (*hey'at-e mazhabi*). These organizations often arrange holiday celebrations in Iran, endorse candidates for local offices, and sponsor commemorations of notable individuals. They are commonly funded by private means from local residents and do not require the participation of state-appointed clerics. Four decades ago, during the buildup to the 1979 Iranian revolution, the neighborhood religious association was arguably a more important institution than the local mosque for organizing collective behavior, sharing political information, and mobilizing individuals towards action.<sup>10</sup>

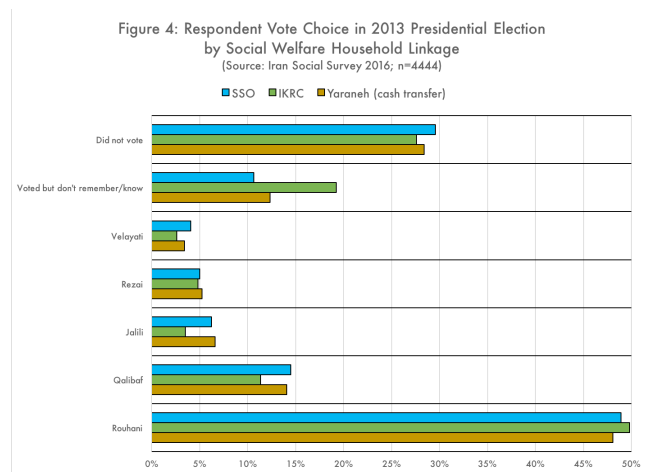
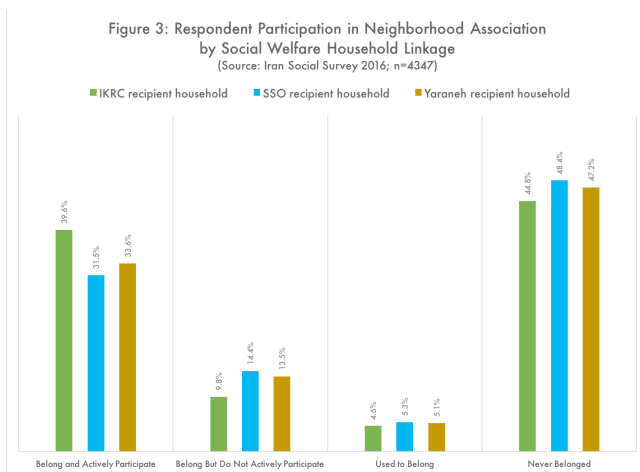
Little research has been conducted on the role of neighborhood associations in contemporary Iran. With the inclusion of this type of association in the Iran Social Survey, we can estimate participation and examine variation between different groupings of respondents.

In Figure 3, self-reported participation in a neighborhood religious association is compared across respondent households linked to three types of social welfare: the IKRC, the SSO, and cash transfers. There is no significant difference in neighborhood religious associational participation across the types of social welfare linkages. For the most common type of non-state, non-family associational activity in Iran, then, state-welfare linkages are not associated with lower rates of participation in civil society.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Saeid Golkar, *Captive Society: The Basij Militia and Social Control in Iran* (New York: Woodrow Wilson/Columbia University Press, 2015), which contains useful accounts of organizational membership but assumes that state linkages and civil society activities are mutually exclusive.

<sup>9</sup> These included trade and professional associations, mosque organizations, sports and cultural groups, charitable societies, and the basij organization.

<sup>10</sup> See the evidence marshalled against the notion of a coherent “mosque-bazaar alliance” in the mobilizational upsurge of the 1978-79 revolution in Charles Kurzman, *The Unthinkable Revolution in Iran* (Harvard University Press, 2005). Alternatively, over 12,000 neighborhood religious associations were estimated to exist in Tehran alone during the 1970s, often connected to trades, villages of origin, or religious shrines. See Mohammad Baqir Najafi, “A Short Study of Media, Centers and Religious Organizations” [in Persian], appendix in *The Role of the Media in Supporting Cultural Development*, edited by Ali Asadi and Hormoz Mehrdad (Tehran: Iran Communications and Development Institute, 1976).



### Vote choice and the Iranian welfare system

Do beneficiaries of different welfare organizations in Iran, *bonyad* or governmental, vote differently? If *bonyads* were consequential vehicles for turning out the vote for conservative politicians in Iran, this might be observed in the reported vote choice by individuals who live in households linked to the Imam Khomeini Relief Committee. After all, to become eligible for IKRC aid, a household usually has to receive a visit from a local IKRC officer in order to take a means test or have their home examined. This would be a prime site for clientelist mobilization to occur, especially if the IKRC made benefits contingent on vote choice.

We asked respondents to recall their vote choice, if any, for president in 2013. As a competitive race between the moderate candidate Hassan Rouhani and four conservative politicians, the vote choice of respondents might tell us about how welfare linkages affect political inclinations in a mobilized election with wide turnout.

However, as shown below in Figure 4, among all vote choices for the 2013 presidential election, including the choice not to vote at all, there is no significant difference among respondents linked to different welfare organizations. The higher share of respondents in IKRC-linked households who reported that they did not remember for whom they voted (19 percent) is likely due to the fact that poorer voters in general reported in higher numbers that they did not remember (17 percent).

These data suggest an important finding about electoral mobilization in Iran. Individuals linked to welfare programs currently or formerly associated with conservative politicians or factions (the IKRC with post-revolutionary conservatives; cash transfers with the Ahmadinejad administration) are not voting differently on average than people linked to welfare programs associated with technocratic or moderate politicians or factions (SSO).

Given that individuals' linkages to the largest Iranian social welfare organizations, including the largest *bonyad* in the IKRC, do not seem to correlate with associational and electoral behavior, it is worth asking: Is the model of a clientelist-welfare machine operational across the Islamic Republic of Iran?

If such a model was on display during the chaotic and violent post-revolutionary period after 1979, it has been subsumed and surpassed by a much different system of social welfare distribution. Even with numerous forms of electoral competition, high levels of intra-elite strife, and a marked degree of ideological friction, the clientelist model of welfare-based mobilization is not discernable in Iran at a systematic level. In a recent book, I have offered an alternative theory and account of the origins and development of social welfare organizations in Iran.<sup>11</sup> Given the new findings from the Iran Social Survey, it is perhaps time to reassess which models of politics and state-society relations are observable in Iran for other spheres as well.

<sup>11</sup> See pp. 14-15 and 217-225 in Kevan Harris, *A Social Revolution: Politics and the Welfare State in Iran* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017).

# Sectarian Unity as a Form of Governmentality:

## Assessing the dynamics of Development Policy Making in Lebanon's Shia Territories

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### Introduction

Hezbollah has been involved in an impressive range of construction and development programs in southern Lebanon. This economic activity has been expressed through an intriguing combination of sectarian rhetoric and neoliberal practice. How has Hezbollah mobilized sectarian rhetoric as a governing technology within a neoliberal Lebanese state? What, if anything, does this have to do with sect or sectarianism, concepts too often “used more often as explanatory concepts (independent variables) than phenomena themselves to be explained,” (Farsoun 1988: 101)?

This memo assesses use of sect-specific rhetoric by Hezbollah's development agencies. Such rhetoric mobilizes and socializes constituents and fosters their party's popular support. It reconfigures patronage networks as well, and is used as a means to exert pressure from the bottom-up, to negotiate demands with local patrons and international organizations. Hezbollah's affiliated social organizations create a representation of their party's Shia identity within tight networks of aid recipients. Development programs in general and reconstruction policies in particular represent an “opportunity to reconfigure the urban landscape... and reshape or consolidate political and power dynamics” (Berti 2017).

### Performativity of Hezbollah's Shia-specific social services narrative

In Lebanon, religious groups played a major role in reproducing and preserving “enlarged clientelist networks” (Trabulsi 2007: 23) that ultimately preserve the power of certain families and members of the political elite. In the south of the country, the occupation by Israel from

1982 to 2000 established an everyday reality that exerted a determining influence on the population's identity and political engagement. After the Israeli withdrawal, in May 2000, Hezbollah played a significant political role in making the borderland region a sanctuary from which it was able to organize the political and military infrastructure required for its objectives (Meier 2015: 101) and secure the political and territorial authority of the Party through the deployment of an array of social and charity services.

Hezbollah's position towards sectarianism has always been ambivalent. The party's integration into the Lebanese political system in the early nineties increased the representation of the Shi'i community and enhanced, in turn, the viability of the sectarian system. Since the Israeli withdrawal from Southern Lebanon, the organization reinforced the sectarian division of power. It developed a holistic policy network (Harb 2000) by operating an array of institutions active in specific sectors (education, health, research, development, and sports) in Beirut's suburbs, the Beqaa, and South Lebanon. These institutions are the most prominent service providers in Lebanese Shia regions. Since the 1998 municipal elections, they have acted as partners of local governments who rely on their expertise for developing and implementing local development strategies. Hezbollah's institutions “disseminate codes, norms and values that produce a particular type of social and cultural environment, structuring daily life practices, as well as subjective and collective identities” (Harb 2008). In this sense, they contribute to the (re)production of the Islamic Sphere, the social and cultural environment shaped the norms and values diffused by the party's affiliated organisations (ibid). This sphere allows Hezbollah to ground its social work in kinship and family networks around pious practices.



The social welfare institutions of Hezbollah developed in part thanks to generous funding from Iran (DeVore and Stähli 2014) but also as a result of donations from individuals, investments in private businesses, and revenue from religious taxes. In her study of distributional politics in Lebanon, Melani Cammett suggest that spacial locations of Hezbollah welfare institutions “tend to operate in more homogeneous areas with in-group members than other parties” (Cammett 2014:155), particularly in areas of residence of the party’s most fervent supporters, such as the southern suburbs of Beirut, where the party capitalizes on Shia constituents who vote in South Lebanon (ibid). These welfare services played an important role in reinforcing local dependencies by shaping a particular “language of stateness” (Hansen and Stepputat 2001: 7).

Since its involvement in the Syrian war, Hezbollah has capitalized on pro-Shiite allegiances, linking the survival of the Syrian regime and the eradication of the radical Sunni threat to the notion of resistance against Israel and Western imperialism. Drawing on the main argument of securitization theory that security is a speech act used to justify extraordinary measures in times of crisis, recent studies depict how “political elites use sectarian discourses as powerful sources of legitimation and persuasion” (Malmvig 2015). This “emergency” framing has been used by Hezbollah leadership and “shows how actors have created discourses that prompted their societies to believe that they were threatened by the mere existence of the ‘Other’ sect” (Darwich and Fakhoury 2016:713), thus positioning itself within the politics of sectarianism that Syria’s conflict has amplified. However, securitization theory’s primary concern lies in the narrative of securitizing actors, mainly political elites. Looking at the ways in which such narratives are played out in everyday politics and internalized by the audience is one way to avoid the “parochialism of security studies” (Gusterson 1999).

Erminia Chiara Calabrese (2016) shows how, in a context of ideological confusion around the party’s involvement in the Syrian war, Hezbollah’s militants internalized the religious narrative by drawing upon their Shia consciousness (see Shirin Saeidi’s memo) to redefine their

belonging to the party and their attachment to its values. Similarly, Hezbollah’s welfare institutions played a major role in forging a sense of belonging to the same community and a shared destiny. They operate as effective policy makers in the context of local development, disseminating policy norms that can be easily related to international development paradigms, namely economic growth, modernity and progress, and using policy tools rooted in participatory and community-based practices. At the same time, they strengthen the religious and political identity of the party’s constituents and therefore construct the physical landscape of its Islamic milieu.

### **The case of Jihād al-Binā’: Building Hezbollah’s identity through development**

Hezbollah founded Jihād al-Binā’ (Jihad for Reconstruction) in 1988 with the main objective of providing development services to neglected and impoverished Shii areas. It is “an interesting organization because it is chock-full of professionals – contractors, engineers, architects, demographic experts” (Allers 2006). As the reconstruction and development arm of Hezbollah, it mainly relies on financial assistance from its Iranian sister organization Jihad-e Sazandegi (Jihad of Construction). In Iran, Jihad-e Sazandegi was essential to the Islamic Republic’s state formation and consolidation. The organization used the development rhetoric to “challenge the status quo,” while it simultaneously “mitigated the risk of informal or non-routine contention, such as protests and demonstrations, erupting at the societal level, and confined or relegated contentious politics to developmental and socioeconomic issues rather than ones focused on political reform” (Lob 2017:19).

Jihād al-Binā’ plays a key role in shaping and reinforcing Hezbollah’s Islamic sphere by prioritizing faith based project that help religious and ideological dissemination. Between 1988 and 2008, the organization mainly built and renovated mosques, religious centers and private schools, most of them in South Lebanon (Daher 2016). At the same time, Jihād al-Binā’ “has developed ‘deep roots,’ to the extent that many Shiites expected it would provide

for them in a clientelistic manner” (Makarem 2014:95). In a previous POMEPS Studies publication, I demonstrated how Hezbollah experts from Jihād al-Binā' acted as both community leaders and “political brokers” by adopting a managerial discourse and claiming credit for successfully coordinating the reconstruction process after the 2006 war. Their narrative on social entrepreneurship reinforced local systems of patronage. International organizations played a major role in integrating Jihād al-Binā' into the post-war development community and were indirectly complicit in reinforcing patronage and dependency networks. In fact, when these international organizations “highlighted the secular aspect of Jihād al-Binā' development work in the South, Jihād al-Binā' officials accordingly foregrounded the purely technical aspect of their work. However, at the other end of the process, in their exchanges with members of the village community, the organization’s political ideology and the political community were consequently constituted as fundamentally Shia” (Zeidan, 2018).

### **Reconstruction as a governing technology to promote communal unity**

What emerged from the 2006 reconstruction in Lebanon is a complex political environment in which multiple actors are attempting to sway multiple audiences. In this sense, the reconstruction followed the key principles of neoliberalism in which “the state is not so much ‘rolled back’ but restructured and redeployed to reduce welfare expenditure and to expand the realm of market relations” (Baumann 2017: 642). The Lebanese state regarded itself as a reconstruction facilitator, allowing space for reconstruction actors to fill the vacuum. Donors could directly sponsor reconstruction projects, make in-kind donations, or lodge monies with the Central Bank. Jihād al-Binā' and the Lebanese government had very little contact with one another. The Iranian Contributory Organisation for Reconstructing Lebanon bypassed the Prime Minister’s office, which was considered corrupt and biased, and, instead, channelled the funds directly to ministries, municipalities, and the Council for of Development and reconstruction. Iran’s reconstruction activities concentrated on infrastructure repair, although it also

funded compensation schemes for damaged and destroyed housing, and adopted villages in the south.

Given the multiplicity of actors involved in the reconstruction process, it was “unsurprising that people made comparisons between the visibility and perceived usefulness of the various actors”. The symbolic battle shows how, through their involvement Lebanon’s post-2006 reconstruction, governments were sending messages across the region that they should be regarded as regional power brokers. In this context, it became clear that Iran sought to buttress the Shia community. The Iranian investment in large, expensive, and highly visible projects such as infrastructure and housing sent a powerful message in support of the “resistance” and a reminder to the Shia communities of Iran’s generosity. By emphasizing the community’s well-being, Hezbollah experts adopted the narrative of a neoliberal market of piety and charity and gave the impression that Iranian government and Hezbollah were “doing something” during the war.

My fieldwork shows that in several villages in south Lebanon, the Iranian Contributory Organisation for Reconstructing only approached local authorities for paperwork, while Hezbollah experts of Jihād al-Binā' often bypassed the municipalities by publishing parallel survey reports that undermined the work of municipalities. Ultimately, the reconstruction apparatus allowed these non-state organizations to “become the *de facto* statehood of the targeted territories in terms of political and technical decision-making” (Carpi 2017:120), a statehood in which “emergency-driven programmes become a modality of governance and a proliferating professional sector” (ibid). Indeed, as “social entrepreneurs,” Jihād al-Binā' experts developed close ties with professionals from other institutions working on local development, which in return were helpful in securing projects for the population. Moreover, the interweaving of the urgent, technical, and administrative temporalities created a narrative of closeness to the Shia community similar to the one advocated by international donor. The “strategy of extraversion” with regards to participation (Bayart and Ellis 2000) provided Jihād al-Binā' the means to supervise very

closely the consultation with civil society, which facilitated its synchronization with the time constraints imposed by the other political and technical dispositifs.

## Conclusion

Most research affirms, more than it questions, the sectarian and authoritative dimension of Hezbollah. Such relatively Manichean readings present their development strategy as an “instrument” outside society, placed at the service of building the consensus by which the party perpetuates its hegemony. I have instead tried to show that the reconstruction process is not so much the instrument of consensus as it is its “object” and its “product.” At the same time, the analysis of state-society relations in Lebanon through a sectarian lens “has led to an undefined ‘sectarianism’ overshadowing more relevant factors such as geographic and class divisions and geopolitics in analyses of the socio-political issues facing the region” (Haddad 2017: 364). Within this framework, Rima Majed invites us to look at sectarianism as a manifestation of “interests-based politics,” through which social movements are co-opted by political and religious elite (Majed 2017).

Reconstruction dispositifs “highlight the strength of the interpenetration between the state and society and the many forms it takes, whether through the dependencies, the competition, the workarounds, or the ‘resistances’ that have led the players to shape it” (Hachimi Alaoui 2017). In the post-war context, the ability to “do something” became an important legitimation requirement shared by most actors in the field. However, “by capitalizing on their embeddedness in the community, Jihād al-Binā’ experts know they can offer long-term clientelistic relations to villagers who believe that informal relations with the political leadership facilitate access to resources and opportunities” (Zeidan 2018).

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# The Iranian Revolution and Sunni Political Islam

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This memo tries to reassess the impact of the Iranian Revolution of 1979 on Sunni Islamic movements outside of Iran.<sup>1</sup> The Iranian Revolution had, in some form or another, an impact on all movements across the globe that were using Islamic frames of reference for political activism.<sup>2</sup> Best-known is the case of transnational Shii networks that, after 1979, often became tied to some faction or another in Iran. One example of such a network is the Shirazi movement, initially at the forefront of the export of the Islamic revolution to Arab Shii communities around the region.<sup>3</sup> Others included the Hizbullah or Khatt al-Imam networks that were soon established in numerous countries.<sup>4</sup> But focusing on the relationship between the Islamic Republic of Iran and Shii communities and movements across the world, which has long been the dominant frame of reference for analysis of transnational Shii politics, obscures not just the complicated dynamics within Shii politics but also the impact of the revolution on Sunnis across the world. In

fact, most key proponents of Sunni political Islam initially embraced the revolution, something that is surprisingly little studied in the literature.<sup>5</sup>

## From Enthusiasm to gradual Disenchantment: The waning appeal of the Iranian Revolution amongst Sunni Islamists

Many Muslim Brothers saw the revolution in a positive light, oscillating between outright enthusiasm and tentative support. Abu'l-A'la Mawdudi, the founder of the Jamaat-i Islami in Pakistan, was initially thrilled by the Iranian revolution.<sup>6</sup> In the immediate aftermath of the revolution, Hizb ut-Tahrir was so hopeful that cooperation with Iran could lead to its ultimate goal, the establishment of a Caliphate, that its leaders seemed willing to accept Khomeini as de-facto head of state, in other words, as Shi'i caliph.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The questions of Sunni Muslims in Iran will not be addressed in this memo, although it has often been used as an argument by Sunni Islamic Movements abroad as to why they changed their position on Iran. See, for example, Muhammad Surur Zayn al-'Abidin, *ahwal ahl al-sunna fi Iran* (2006, first published in 1990), [http://www.surour.net/news\\_images/n774\\_.pdf](http://www.surour.net/news_images/n774_.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> As an at least partly Third Worldist revolution with initially strong involvement of Leftist forces, it of course also had an impact on many other secular political movements.

<sup>3</sup> But they soon were at odds with Iran's foreign policy establishment that tried to have more normal relations with its neighbors. The spiritual leader of the movement, Muhammad Mahdi al-Shirazi, also personally fell out with Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini. For their history see Laurence Louër, *Transnational Shiite Politics: Religious and Political Networks in the Gulf* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Toby Matthiesen, "Hizbullah al-Hijaz: A History of the Most Radical Saudi Shi'a Opposition Group," *The Middle East Journal* 64, no. 2 (Spring 2010), 179–97.

<sup>5</sup> While in the immediate aftermath of the revolution, a number of think tank reports and conferences explored the impact of the Iranian revolution on the Islamic world, and much ink has been spilled on polemical writings, little serious research has been devoted to this issue. The literature largely consists of shorter pieces written during the 1980s, or sporadic references to Sunni Islamic movements' relationships with Iran or views on Shiism in larger works on particular movements or country chapters. Two conference proceedings explore the issue: David Menashri (ed.), *The Iranian Revolution and the Muslim World*, (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1990); John L. Esposito, *The Iranian Revolution: Its Global Impact* (Miami: Florida International University Press, 1990). See also Mohammad Ataie, "Revolutionary Iran's 1979 Endeavor in Lebanon" *Middle East Policy* 20 (2/2013), 137–157; Olivier Roy, "The Impact of the Iranian Revolution on the Middle East", in Sabrina Mervin (ed.), *The Shia Worlds and Iran* (London: Saqi, 2010), 29-44.

<sup>6</sup> He would die in September 1979 and so we have no way of knowing how he would have seen later developments. Khomeini, on the other hand, criticized the Jamaat-i Islami for its gradualist, peaceful approach to Islamic revolution. Seyyed Vali Reza Nasr, *Mawdudi and the Making of Islamic Revivalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 165; Vali Nasr, *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future* (London: W. W. Norton, 2007), 138.

<sup>7</sup> Hizb ut-Tahrir changed its position when the Iranians started drafting a new constitution throughout 1979 but not from a particularly sectarian point of view, rather because it applied to one country, thereby accepting the notion of the nation state (something that Hizb ut-Tahrir opposes, as it stands in confrontation with the idea of the Caliphate). Hizb ut-Tahrir did, however, criticize Article 12 of the Iranian constitution, which stipulates the centrality of the Twelver Ja'fari school of jurisprudence, calling it a nationalist deviation, too. Fritz Steppat, "Islamisch-Fundamentalistische Kritik an der Staatskonzeption der Islamischen Revolution in Iran" in: Hans Roemer and Albrecht Noth (eds.), *Studien zur Geschichte und Kultur des Vorderen Orients: Festschrift für Bertold Spuler zum Siebzigsten Geburtstag* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1981), 443–52, 446 and 452.



So, given this affinity in the pre- and immediate post-1979 period between Sunni Islamists and the revolution in Iran, how can we explain their later estrangement? How can we explain that Yusuf al-Qaradawi, widely seen as the spiritual leader of the global Muslim Brotherhood, by 2013 viciously denounced Iran and Hizbullah, which literally means the “Party of God,” calling it Hizb al-Shaytan, the “Party of the Devil”, instead?<sup>8</sup> This paper is not trying to provide final answers, but rather spur discussions and encourage a rethinking of these questions, which are so crucially important to the politicization of Sunni-Shii relations.

For a start, the Muslim Brotherhood is not a monolithic group. National branches differ in their historical genealogies, their political experiences, and their ideology. Some national movements, such as the Syrian one, emerged as vicious critics of the Islamic Republic, its regional allies, and even Shiism in general, while others were inspired by, maintained relations with, and in the case of Hamas, even came to rely on Iran. Other Sunni Islamic movements, such as the Lebanese Tawheed Movement and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, remained staunch Iranian allies.<sup>9</sup> In time though, many key ideologues of Sunni political Islam started to criticize aspects of the government, the constitution, and religious and foreign policies of Iran, in particular the position of the Supreme

Leader and the importance ascribed to Shiism. However, it is only in connection with the inter-state rivalries between Iran and its neighbors, as well as with global powers opposed to Iran, that these major networks of Sunni political Islam turned away from Iran and that the doctrinal differences between Sunnis and Shiis became a source of serious division and a way to limit the appeal of the Iranian revolution. Syrian Muslim Brothers and clerics and polemicists in the Gulf states in particular tried to sway Sunni Islamists away from Iran by spreading anti-Iranian and anti-Shia discourse and reviving semi-dormant doctrinal debates.<sup>10</sup>

For, while Iran never abandoned its official rhetoric of trying to appeal to the whole Umma,<sup>11</sup> it locked itself, as Olivier Roy has put it, into the “Shi’ite ghetto.”<sup>12</sup> Crucially, and this is a factor that is at times understated, it was also locked in it by its adversaries, who were frightened by the pan-Islamic aspirations and appeal of the revolution.

### **Containing Iran: The United States’ and its Sunni Allies’ Reactions to the Iranian Revolution**

Sunni-dominated countries, namely Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and Egypt, in conjunction with the United States,<sup>13</sup> soon reacted to the revolution by trying to “contain” Iran.

<sup>8</sup> It is noteworthy, however, that al-Qaradawi had praised Hizbullah in 2006 during its war with Israel. “Leading Sunni Muslim cleric calls for ‘jihad’ in Syria”, Reuters, 1 June, 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-qaradawi-idUSBRE9500CQ20130601>. Many other such anti-Iranian statements can be found. In 2012, an Open letter to the rulers of Iran, from Hizb ut-Tahrir / Wilayah Pakistan’ criticizing Iran for helping the Syrian regime, included the following statement: ‘We know it is too late for you to repent and turn back from your black deeds. Heed well, the Khilafah “Caliphate” that is about to arise soon inshaaAllah will seize you and punish you along with the other traitor rulers in the Muslim World!’ <http://www.hizb-ut-tahrir.info/en/index.php/leaflet/pakistan/1446.html>.

<sup>9</sup> For recent accounts see Wissam Alhaj, Nicolas Dot-Pouillard, Eugénie Rébillard, *De la théologie à la libération? histoire du Jihad islamique palestinien* (Paris: La Découverte, 2014) and Raphaël Lefèvre, *The ‘Islamic Emirate’ of North Lebanon: the rise and fall of the Tawheed movement in Tripoli, 1982-1985* (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Cambridge, 2016).

<sup>10</sup> One of the earliest and most enduring polemics is the one published in 1981 under a pen name by the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood figure Muhammad Surur Zayn al-Abidin, who at that time lived in the Gulf states: “The Time of the Magian has come (wa ja’a dawr al-majus.)” He confirmed in a new edition (2008) that he had been the author of the book. [http://www.surour.net/news\\_images/n778.pdf](http://www.surour.net/news_images/n778.pdf). For more see Werner Ende, “Sunni Polemical Writings on the Shi’a and the Iranian Revolution,” in *The Iranian Revolution and the Muslim World*, ed. David Menashri (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1990), 219–32.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Wilfried Buchta, *Die iranische Schia und die islamische Einheit 1979-1996* (Hamburg: Deutsches Orient-Institut 1997).

<sup>12</sup> Olivier Roy, *The Failure of Political Islam* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1994/reprint 2007), 184.

<sup>13</sup> In the first year of the revolution, the U.S. tried to maintain relations with the Iranian regime, preferring the Shii clerics rather than the communists of the Tudeh party, and trying to maintain some influence in the country. But after the takeover of the U.S. embassy, U.S.-Iran relations soured dramatically, and Shiism, previously seen as a rather quietist form of Islam, started to be portrayed in U.S. government circles as inherently revolutionary. See Mattin Biglari, “‘Captive to the Demonology of the Iranian Mobs’: U.S. Foreign Policy and Perceptions of Shi’a Islam During the Iranian Revolution, 1978-79”, *Diplomatic History* 40, 4 (2016), 579-605.

Throughout the 1980s, the Middle East and Central Asia saw a combined anti-Iranian and anti-communist war, at times covert and at times overt. In this grand scheme, the Iran-Iraq War was the major anti-Iranian war, while the Afghan jihad was supposed to bleed the Soviet Union, while also containing the Iranian revolution on its Eastern flank. Crucially, however, both efforts relied on similar tactics and often on the same local partners, most of whom were Sunni Muslims. The key local allies leading the fight against Iran were either Arab chauvinists like Saddam Hussain, who stylized the war as one in which racial superiority and purity were at stake, or anti-Shia Sunni Islamist movements, whose intellectual home was Saudi Arabia but who found fertile ground for their ideas not just in the Arab world but also in Pakistan and Afghanistan. This turned the effort to contain Iran post-1979 into one that played on sectarian divisions. Anti-Shiism, which was often coupled with anti-Iranian racism, thus became a form of containment of Iran, with long-lasting consequences. The Gulf region was particularly important in this regard.

Iraq, Iran and Saudi Arabia have long been part of the same regional security complex.<sup>14</sup> They thus spend most of their time worrying about the actions of other states in that region, whom they see as most important for their security.<sup>15</sup> In the Middle East and the Gulf region in particular, the challenge of ideational threats and transnational political movements is seen as equally, if not more, important than classical military power by a neighboring rival. As such, the threat of the Iranian Revolution was as much imagined as it was real.<sup>16</sup> The prospect of pan-Islamic revolution, combined with unrest at home, spurred Sunni rulers to respond forcefully. It is in this context of inter-state rivalries that the major Sunni movements slowly changed course and turned away from the Islamic Republic. The causes are numerous and remain relatively little understood. But the fact that many leaders

of the Sunni movements lived in the Gulf states, where they gained importance in the religious, educational, media and financial sectors, as well as the importance of Gulf donors for Islamic finance and Islamic charities that formed the financial backbone of many of these movements, meant that many eventually pivoted away from Iran.

## Conclusion

The story of revolutionary Iran's relations with its neighbors, as well as with Sunni Islamic movements, is crucial for an understanding of the rise of sectarian politics in the region. The rivalry between Iran and countries such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Iraq (pre-2003), and the shift of many Sunni Islamic movements from an ecumenical vision of pan-Islamic revolution to one of anti-Shii polemics, has allowed the language of sectarianism and Sunni-Shii polarization to become a key feature of Middle Eastern politics post-1979. That many Sunni Islamic movements went from being supporters of the Iranian revolution to becoming critics of it, was a key, if as yet understudied, factor in this broader development. In other words, it was Iran's export of the revolution *and* the almost simultaneous deployment of anti-Shiism as containment that sowed the seeds for the sectarianization of politics in the Middle East and Central Asia.

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<sup>14</sup> This point has convincingly been made by F. Gregory III. Gause, *The International Relations of the Persian Gulf* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

<sup>15</sup> Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

<sup>16</sup> F. Gregory Gause III, "Revolution and threat perception: Iran and the Middle East" *International Politics*, Vol. 52, No. 5 (September 2015), 637-645.

# The Transformation of Shia Politics in the Gulf Monarchies

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Shias in the Gulf monarchies display sometimes very different types of relations with the ruling elites and the state. The discrimination that Shias suffer in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain are the exception rather than the rule. In order to explain these variations, I look at the context of Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and Kuwait. These cases are particularly helpful for determining the type of variables that influence Shias' relations with the state, because we can observe how the same transnational Shia political movements produce very different types of Shia politics. This shows that the local contexts are more important than the ideologies in shaping Shia politics. These local contexts are themselves shaped by two types of variables: the deep-seated structural variable of the long term state formation process and the circumstantial variables of the Iranian foreign policy (both objective and perceived) and of the local coalition politics.

## The state formation process as a structural variable

In the Gulf, two models of relations between the state and Shias can be distinguished. They result from two different patterns of incorporation of Shias in the long-term state formation process.

On the one hand, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia are examples of particularly strained relations between Shias and the rulers. Though varying in intensity and in rationale according to the domestic and regional political circumstances, state-sponsored discrimination against Shias is widespread.

These states do not have in common a religious ideology that could explain this situation. Bahraini rulers are liberal when it comes to religion, for example, Shias benefit from full religious freedom. The ninth and the tenth days of the month of Muharram, during which Shias commemorate the martyrdom of Imam Hussein, have even been official days off since independence in 1971. In Saudi Arabia, by

contrast, the strained relations between Shias and the state could be explained by the sole fact that the Wahhabi brand of Sunni Islam plays a foremost role in the regime's legitimation. Wahhabis, indeed, believe that Shias practice a deviant form of Islam and, in the most extreme cases, even consider them non-Muslims.

The common point between Bahrain and Saudi Arabia is that both states were created as the result of military conquests in which Shias fell on the side of the vanquished. This forced type of incorporation has resulted in a highly polarized social stratification in which the Sunni/Shia divide is overlapping with the conqueror/conquered and the alien/native divides. In both states, Shias have developed a nativist narrative, portraying themselves as the "original inhabitants" in contrast to the ruling Al Khalifa and Al Saud dynasties who are seen as alien invaders.

By contrast, the Kuwaiti case has been described as a "success story"<sup>1</sup> by some observers looking at how Shias were incorporated into the nation-state. There, Shias have historically enjoyed a particularly good relationship with the Al Sabah ruling family. They are organized as diasporic communities maintaining extensive cross-border family ties with their families' place of origin. The largest group, the Ajam, came from Iran at different historical periods in the framework of a traditional pattern of border migration, to trade or to escape economic hardship. The Hasawiyyin ethnic group came from Hasa, now in the Eastern part of the Saudi kingdom, to escape Wahhabi persecution. The Baharna settled in Kuwait to escape political instability and economic hardship in Bahrain.

All these Kuwaiti Shia groups have espoused the dominant narrative about Kuwaiti state formation, which describes the emirate as the result of the progressive gathering of tribes and families from different parts of the Middle East for the sake of a shared economic project. Kuwait is seen

<sup>1</sup> Graham Fuller and Rend Rahim Francke, *The Arab Shia. The Forgotten Muslims*, New York: Palgrave, 2001.



as a haven to develop commercial activities or to escape hardship at home. Kuwaiti Shias tend to see the state as a shelter. This is because of not only the circumstances of their establishment in the emirate but also the nature of Kuwaiti politics, marked by recurring conflicts between the ruling dynasty and groups in the society suspicious about Shias such as the Sunni merchant oligarchy and, today, Sunni Islamists allied and/or emanating from the tribal segments of the society. In this context, Shias have regularly sided with the rulers. Today, during a particularly tense moment between the government and the opposition, Shias remain one of the government's most reliable constituencies.

### **Iranian policy: Exacerbating or moderating rulers' reaction to Shia political movements**

The way state-formation developed and how Shias were incorporated delineates deep-seated patterns of behavior. However, its influence may be moderated or accentuated according to more short-term and circumstantial variables, namely the foreign policy of Iran and how it is perceived by the Gulf regimes, as well as domestic coalition politics.

What Iran actually does or is perceived to be doing by Gulf incumbents has always influenced the way rulers perceive their Shia populations, especially since the 1979 Islamic revolution. The stated aim of the Islamic Republic to "export the revolution" and its denunciation of the Gulf rulers – first among them the Al Saud – as lackeys of Western imperialism added to the pressure in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia and jeopardized established arrangements between the rulers and Shias in Kuwait.

In all the three countries, the Iranian revolution saw the radicalization of existing Shia Islamic movements. These movements, which had taken root in the 1960s and 1970s, resulted from the influence of Iraqi Shia Islamic movements tied to the higher Shia religious authority in Najaf (the al-Da'wa movement) and in Karbala (the Message Movement connected to the al-Shirazi clerical family). Although these movements were rivals, they had similar ideologies promoting, whenever possible, revolutionary action to establish Shia versions of the Islamic state theorized by

Sunni Islamist ideologues and, when this strategy seemed irrelevant, societal re-Islamization.

Significantly however, while the pattern of alliance between the Shia MPs and the rulers was (temporarily) broken in Kuwait, only in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia did this radicalization turn into a revolutionary project to overthrow the regimes through mass-demonstrations, terrorist violence, and coup d'état. In Kuwait, even the pro-Iranian activists always remained committed to the maintenance of Kuwait as an emirate ruled by the Al Sabah dynasty. This shows how the impact of the Iranian revolution was mediated by domestic circumstances: it resonated differently according to established patterns of interaction between Shias and the state.

The impact of the actual and perceived foreign policy of Iran is not necessarily negative. In the 1990s, the situation of the Shias improved in Saudi Arabia after a pragmatic shift in Iranian foreign policy following the death of Khomeini, the sidelining of Iran's most radical factions, and Iranian cooperation in the war to liberate Kuwait from Iraqi occupation. After these developments, the Shia Islamic opposition, which was dominated by the Shirazist current, was compelled to renounce its revolutionary project to espouse a reformist agenda and was able to strike a deal with the Saudi regime, allowing most of its members to come back from exile.

Another, more recent, example of this type of positive impact is the 2003-2011 period. The fall of Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq and the arrival to power of Shia Islamic movements in Baghdad fostered the expansion of the Iranian networks of influence in Iraq and created the perception among Arab rulers that the new regional order – resulting largely from American policy – was empowering Iran at their expense. Interestingly, the reaction of Gulf rulers was to engage in typical politics of recognition, granting Shias a measure of recognition as a legitimate religious collective different than Sunnis. This was an attempt to secure the loyalty of Shia citizens and dissuade them from engaging in subversive activities with the support of Iran: increased national integration was seen as a buffer against subversive Iranian influence.

In this respect, the most spectacular shift occurred again in Saudi Arabia, where the regime relaxed the systematic obstacle to constructing new Shia mosques and accepted an upgrading of the Shia personal status court system.

### **Domestic coalition politics: Restricting or opening political opportunities for Shia movements**

During the 2003-2011 period, enhanced intra-dynastic factionalism in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain explains the benevolence of some sections of the regimes towards Shias in their states. In Saudi Arabia, Abdallah bin Abd al-Aziz Al Saud, who was Crown Prince and regent while King Fahd was incapacitated by a stroke in 1995 and became king in 2005, was facing competition by the Sudayri faction of the ruling dynasty, at the time embodied by the powerful Minister of the Interior Nayef bin Abd al-Aziz Al Saud. The main issue of the competition was control of the succession, with the Sudayri struggling to impose one of their members as Crown Prince. This prompted Abdallah to seek supporters outside the family, becoming the main backer of a policy of Shia recognition. In reaction, the Minister of the Interior positioned himself as the upholder of conservatism and Wahhabi dogmatism.

A similar situation occurred in Bahrain, where the 2000s saw a mounting rivalry within the Al Khalifa dynasty between an old guard gathered around the Prime Minister Khalifa bin Salman Al Khalifa and a young reformist faction gathered around King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa and his son, Crown Prince Salman bin Hamad Al Khalifa. The mainstream Shia Islamic opposition – al-Wifaq – decided to support the reformist faction hoping that together they could sideline the old guard, which was seen as a major obstacle to more political liberalization. In the process, al-Wifaq became a co-opted opposition.

In Kuwait, the 2000s marked a return of the old pattern of coalition between the ruling family and the Shia MPs. On the one hand, the persistent strain between the government and the parliament, dominated by a Sunni Islamist-tribal opposition, enabled this shift. On the other

hand, the period saw the intensification of intra-dynastic competition, in particular between two nephews of the emir, Nasir al-Mohammed Al Sabah (who was Prime minister between 2006 and 2011) and Ahmed al-Fahd Al Sabah. Each co-opted different MPs, trying to garner support and also to embarrass one another. In this context, Shias became the loyal supporters of Nasir al-Mohammed, a career diplomat who had been ambassador to Iran before 1979 and had retained connections and business networks there.

In 2008, the alliance between Kuwaiti Shias and the Al Sabah rulers was solidified by one defining event. The MPs of the main Shia Islamic movement, which was openly pro-Iranian, decided to organize a mourning ceremony for Imad Mughniyya, a leading member of Lebanese Hezbollah who had just been assassinated in Damascus. Because Mughniyya had always been suspected to be one of the masterminds of a series of terrorist attacks in Kuwait in the 1980s, the move sparked considerable criticism, including among many Shias. The MPs responsible for the mourning ceremony were expelled from the opposition parliamentary bloc, and some of them were even briefly arrested. This was a golden opportunity for the rulers to broker a new deal. At the end, they showed full support to the Shia MPs against all the accusations, articulated primarily by the Sunni Islamist opposition, that they were traitors and Iranian agents. In exchange, the Shia MPs were asked to end their oppositionist stance.

### **The impact of the Arab uprisings**

On the eve of the 2011 Arab uprisings, there had been an improvement of the relations between Shias and the state in all the Gulf countries, driven by the favorable combination of regional geopolitics and domestic politics. Coupled with the regional context marked by the civil wars in Syria and Yemen, the uprising in Bahrain and the series of riots in the area of Qatif in Saudi Arabia fostered a veritable paradigm shift in the approach of the Shia issue by the Bahraini and Saudi regimes. It has been described by Justin Gengler as a “securitization of the Shia problem.”<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Justin Gengler, “Royal Factionalism, the Khawalid, and the Securitization of ‘the Shi’a Problem’ in Bahrain”, *Journal of Arabian Studies. Arabia, the Gulf, and the Red Sea*, 3 (1), 2013.

This paradigm shift occurred as the Bahraini internal dynastic balance of power of the 2000s was disrupted. The reformist faction's alliance with the Shia opposition did not survive the mass demonstrations, in part because of the loss of trust that had been built. The old guard argued that the reformists' strategy of co-opting the Shia opposition had been misleading, since the latter had seized the first opportunity to take to the streets to impose what they had not been able to negotiate peacefully. A similar pattern occurred in Saudi Arabia, where the trust was also weakened, leaving only repression as the credible option, in the eyes of the incumbents, to deal with the Shia issue. Clearly, 2011 was analyzed in both countries as a failure of the co-optation strategy developed in the 1990s and accelerated in the 2000s.

It must be noted that this paradigm shift occurred as the incumbents' *perceptions* of the threat were modified, not as a result of a fundamental transformation of the landscape of Shia activism itself. Before 2011, Shia activism was organized around a division between a majority reformist trend willing to build alliances with segments of the regimes as far as possible in order to obtain a limited opening of the political space, and a more radical trend convinced that it was impossible to obtain anything substantial with such a strategy. The latter regularly engaged in riots with the police forces, especially in Bahrain. In this country, the reformist Shia opposition – namely al-Wifaq – joined the uprising reluctantly and strived to maintain a reformist approach, calling for a constitutional monarchy, while the radical movements were advocating the establishment of a republican regime. In Saudi Arabia, the reformist trend did not join the riots in Qatif, which never gained the magnitude of the street movement in Bahrain.

Significantly, the Kuwaiti pattern was left untouched by the 2011 events, not the least because the Sunni Islamist/tribal opposition was the main actor of the 2011 events that pushed the pro-Shia Prime Minister Nasir al-Mohammed to resign. The deep-seated pattern of

incorporation resulting from the state formation process and the peculiarity of opposition politics allowed for the continuation of a high level of trust between the incumbents and their Shia allies. This did not go without posing some problems for relations between Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. The Kuwaitis refused to send troops to participate in the quelling of the demonstrations in Bahrain and showed no enthusiasm at the Saudi proposition to accelerate the unification of the Gulf Cooperation Council, which the Kuwaiti government saw as an undesirable consolidation of Saudi leadership.

## Conclusion

This brief analysis of the transformations of Shia politics in the Gulf monarchies shows how circumstantial variables can impact the more entrenched state-formation variable in different ways, deepening the pattern of flawed incorporation or tempering its effects. In the current circumstances, the main question mark is whether the particularly tense Bahraini and Saudi situations can shift to more integrative dynamics. To date, the securitization of the Shia problem is leading to a fragmentation of Shia political leadership: incumbents no longer want to elevate some Shia Islamist movements as monopolistic representatives of Shias as a community. This fragmentation could lead to further radicalization of some fringes of the Shias in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. Can they find support of transnational militant networks? In Iran, some radical groups remain committed to the revolutionary ideology who are ready to reactivate the 1980s revolutionary software. Iranian incumbents could also be willing to manipulate Shia movements as bargaining chips in future negotiations with Saudi Arabia. Radical minded Saudi and Bahraini activists could also link themselves to Iraqi Shia militias, for example by joining the fight against ISIS and other Sunni radical groups in Syria and Iraq, then export violence back home. Whatever happens, radicalization trends can be contained only by some form of coalition and cooptation of the still reformist mainstreams.

# Tilly goes to Baghdad:

## How the War with Da'esh can create a Shi'a State

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### Introduction

The process of state-building in post-Baathist Iraq has been dominated by Arab Shi'a political parties – particularly Islamist ones – and their domination continues to be electorally enforced by a climate of sectarian violence and fear. Though some may argue that this is a natural consequence of their demographic advantage (there is no doubt that Shi'a Arabs constitute the largest of Iraq's three ethno-religious groups), it does not necessarily follow that all Shi'a support Islamist groups, particularly when there are alternatives. However, the support for secular parties has dwindled in the face of extreme sectarian violence over the past decade and a half and has allowed Islamist groups to maintain a large stake in the government. Their control over the executive branch and key ministries has allowed some to violate the constitution by curtailing the role of certain state agencies and exploiting others for personal gain. Moreover, due to the general sentiment that Iraq is facing extenuating circumstances, these violations have largely gone unchecked and have thus endangered the consolidation of democracy. However, as evidenced by Prime Minister Abadi's current politics, Shi'a Islamist groups are divided amongst themselves and some have made greater overtures to inclusion and nationalism than others.

Multiple sectarian conflicts have allowed these parties to maintain an electoral dominance by appealing to the existential crises that their constituents face. Contrary to common belief, however, they did not do this by relying on an othering rhetoric towards Iraq's non-Shi'a groups. Instead, they have used certain sectarian crises as ways to reconstruct Iraqi nationalism to give it distinctly Shi'a undertones. Thus, the conflict with Da'esh represents yet

another opportunity to appeal to sectarianism to gain votes. However, in this case, the more nationalist strands of the Shi'a Islamist parties may be able to capitalize on the post-Da'esh moment.

Specifically, Charles Tilly's foundational claim that “war made the state, and the state made war” may have significance for state-building in post-Da'esh Iraq. Tilly builds off European history to illustrate how the need for material resources for war fueled a transition from indirect to direct rule, which, in turn, led to the enduring and autonomous state institutions that characterize the modern national state. In contrast to the wars that Tilly describes, modern interstate wars are rarely wars of territorial acquisition, which makes the 2014 Da'esh invasion of Iraq a unique test of Tilly's argument in a contemporary context. In light of this, I ask: can the war with Da'esh be used to create a state? And, if so, what kind of state?

Those who tried to export Tilly's argument to post-colonial settings, including the Middle East, unearthed alternative routes to state formation. In these cases, the presence of powerful third-party interveners (i.e. colonizers) and the proliferation of civil, rather than interstate, wars have complicated Tilly's argument. Despite these complications, there are multiple pathways that may lead from war-making to state-making in contemporary Iraq in the manner that Tilly describes. The most likely paths are those that bolster a Shia-dominant state that either has Iraqi nationalist undertones or Shi'ifies the state with no real attempt at inclusion.<sup>1</sup> The former appears to be the path that Prime Minister Abadi is pursuing while the latter reflects the goals of the Iranian-backed militias, including Badr and 'A'yib Ahl al-Haq.

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<sup>1</sup> See Fanar Haddad “Shia-centric state building and Sunni Rejection in Post 2003 Iraq” for a more detailed explanation of why the Iraqi state is likely to remain “Shia-centric.”

The war with Da'esh has spurred the Shi'a religious establishment and Shi'a Islamist parties to organize their militias into an army (the Popular Mobilization Forces), to collect money and resources from the population, and to engage in a popular campaign of homogenization built around a threatened Shi'a identity. By framing the fight in such a way, the Shi'a political leadership appear to be following Tilly's state-making recipe. At the same time, neither the Shi'a elite nor the militias that constitute the PMF are monolithic and, as such, the struggle between these groups to become the sole legitimate representative of the Shi'a will determine the extent to which the Iraqi national state will be a Shi'a dominated one. The ingredients for Tilly's state-building argument –popular legitimacy, mobilization, and financing – represent an opportunity for state-building that any Shi'a political actor can conceivably seize.

### **What have we learned from Tilly and his critics?**

Tilly adopts a Weberian definition of the national state as an entity that “successfully claims control over the chief concentrated means of violence within a population...” (Tilly 1985;170). According to Tilly, the increasingly costly and deadly wars of 18th and 19th century Europe are what led to the development of national states. The exorbitant cost of war forced state leaders to seek new means of acquiring men and money, including, most famously: taxation and conscription.<sup>2</sup> These required corollary institutions (e.g. census, national health systems, universal education), which served a homogenizing role by developing a common identity. When faced with war, this homogenization bred nationalism by encouraging the population to mobilize around an existing state and against a common enemy.

In attempting to export Tilly's argument outside of Europe, area specialists have either adapted by imposing scope conditions or they challenged it with the consideration of historical path-dependencies that preceded war-making

in Europe. For example, many scholars find that post-colonial state development processes differ widely from the European cases. Colonization enforced foreign institutions, meddled in state building and prevented organic processes from erupting. In his work on Africa, Herbst (2000) finds that alternative post-colonial models of state formation such as a revolutionary moment or external demands serve as shocks in the same way war does in Tilly's account. Thus, a scope condition that arises from Herbst's critique is that war makes a state when there is no supra national power intervening.

Centeno (2002) provides further scope conditions, using the Latin American case to argue that war only makes states when there is a basic administrative and extractive capacity and there are no alternative sources of revenue that would allow a state to bypass its citizens. Similarly, Ross (2001) explains that oil revenues allow some Middle Eastern states to eschew obligations towards their citizens, impeding democratization processes.

Thus, if we take all the critiques of Tilly as scope conditions, then interstate, territorial war creates a state if there are no alternative sources of revenue (Centeno), if there are no other, larger shocks like a revolution or a third party intervention (Herbst), and if there is a minimum extractive and administrative capacity (Centeno).

### **Assessing Tilly in Iraq**

In the case of the Shi'a and Da'esh, many of the aforementioned scope conditions have, to various degrees, been satisfied. Firstly, although many scholars find that the modern decline in territorial wars makes Tilly's argument inapplicable, Da'esh's territorial incursions and aims at establishing a state render this point moot. Secondly, the Shi'a religious establishment does not rely on oil rents but on religious taxes and accumulating donations. Thirdly, elite Shi'a clerics and Shi'a institutions have pre-existing organizational structures that rival those of the state,

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<sup>2</sup> Certain types of taxes became more popular because it was easier for the state to enforce them, while others like rents and tributes, which depended on middle-men and coercion, fell from favor (Tilly 1992; 87).



especially in southern Iraq. Finally, Da'esh's swift incursion into northern Iraq was a shock for the entire country, but its threats against the Shi'a holy shrines were particularly shocking to the south and proved instrumental in uniting the Shi'a and emphasizing their religious identity. Moreover, the successes of the PMF and the ISF against Da'esh have allowed the PMF to become, as Fanar Haddad explains, "a potent rallying point for a reinvigorated sense of Iraqi nationalism, albeit one with distinctly Shi'i overtones."<sup>3</sup>

Although Iraq had been involved in interstate wars in the past, what has prevented Tilly's argument from unfolding then was the Iraqi state's ability to draw upon oil rents as an alternative source of income. While the dependency on oil hasn't changed,<sup>4</sup> the Shi'a architects of the PMF responded to the Da'esh invasion independently of the Iraqi state and, for a time, without its financial support.<sup>5</sup> What this suggests is that war can lead to state formation outside of the pre-existing state, something that Tilly has left us ill-equipped to deal with, given that the state formation processes he studies are based in feudal society and not within the confines of previous state-building projects.

That being said, the Shi'a political leadership utilized their preexisting networks within the south to organize an army (composed of former militias and volunteers) known as the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF). Nouri Al-Maliki and his Iranian-backed allies cleverly hijacked a fatwa released by Grand Ayatollah Al-Sistani in order to legitimize the formation of their army.<sup>6</sup> The fatwa, released in June 2014, was of a *wajib kifa'i* (or, a collective obligation) for Iraqis

to join the security forces in the fight against Da'esh.<sup>7</sup> As Corboz demonstrates in another paper in this series, Sistani is arguably the most influential figure in the Shi'a world and, as such, his fatwas are binding for many people and lend much legitimacy to the PMF as a whole.

The infamous fatwa was delivered by Abdul-Mahdi Al-Kerbalai (Sistani's agent in Kerbala) during a Friday prayer sermon at Imam Hussein's shrine. The original fatwa and Sistani's later clarification of it (released as a statement on his website) show that Sistani's intentions were directed at bolstering the Iraqi national army and working through the Iraqi state. His July 11th statement emphasizes the importance of working within the framework "of the official Iraqi military and security forces and prohibiting the presence of armed groups outside of this legal framework."<sup>8</sup>

Despite Sistani's emphasis on the state's legitimacy, pre-existing militias used the fatwa to legitimize their own army, resulting in de-facto conscription and the popular rebranding of the PMF as the "holy" PMF.<sup>9</sup> The result of this fatwa is that an estimated 80 percent of fighting-aged men in southern Iraq have signed up with the PMF, frequently registering at religious offices.<sup>10</sup> By comparison, the Ministry of Defense's recruitment is dismal at less than half their stated goal.<sup>11</sup>

The PMF has also been able to collect money from several different sources. On one hand, they have forced the state to pay their salaries, aided by the Badr organization's

<sup>3</sup> Fanar Haddad "The Hashd: Redrawing the Military and Political Map of Iraq"

<sup>4</sup> Though some might argue that with the decrease in oil prices Iraq is more likely to be inclined to seek alternative sources of income.

<sup>5</sup> As the war with Da'esh progressed, certain groups in the PMF (like Badr) drew upon their connections with certain ministries to acquire state funds for their militias.

<sup>6</sup> For more information about the structure of the PMF see Falah Jabar and Renad Mansour. They show that the PMF consists of three strands: the Iranian-backed hardened militias, the Sadrists (Saraya al Salam which used to be Jaysh al-Mahdi) and Sistani's militias for the protection of the holy shrines.

<sup>7</sup> See Abbas Kadhim and Luay Al Khatteeb in the Huffington Post "What do you know about Sistani's fatwa?" for a brief summary.

<sup>8</sup> Translation provided by author, to see the original text of the statement go to: <http://www.sistani.org/arabic/archive/24925/>

<sup>9</sup> Outright conscription was enforced for employees of the holy shrines and the corporations associated with them. Shrine employees report that they are required to serve in the PMF every six months or else lose their jobs.

<sup>10</sup> Renad Mansour, "From Militia to State Force: The Transformation of Al-Hashd Al-Shaabi."

<sup>11</sup> Renad Mansour, "Your country Needs You: Iraq's Faltering Military Recruitment Campaign."

influence in certain government offices.<sup>12</sup> In fact, as of this year, the PMF's salaries have already been set aside in the Iraqi budget. Militias formed solely for the protection of the shrine cities rely on religious tithes and on donations from the population solicited through religious offices and donation boxes in the shrines. Monetary and non-monetary donations are handled largely through civil society organizations, which solicit donations from wealthy merchants in the Shi'a dominant south. These civil society organizations not only provide money for the PMF itself but have also created a social security apparatus of sorts that provides support for the families of fallen PMF volunteers as well as IDPs.

In addition, the Shi'a leaders have framed the fight in a way that emphasizes the homogeneity of the Shi'a population. The rhetoric of the PMF has permeated southern society and images of martyrs line highways and alleyways. The leaders of the PMF, despite multiple human rights violations,<sup>13</sup> are being heralded as heroes. Television channels air dramatized PMF campaigns, and children's books follow the glorified adventures of PMF soldiers. The integration of the PMF's rhetoric with the rhetoric of the martyred Al-Hussain is so commonplace that one struggles to untangle the historical tale from the present one.

Meanwhile, the south has become worryingly sectarian, more so than it ever was in the past. Locals constantly bemoan the loss of "our boys" for "their [Sunni's] mistakes." A few years ago and outside of Baghdad, Sunnis were unknown and more likely to inspire curiosity than distrust. Today, they inspire resentment and hate, which as Petersen (2002) demonstrates are the classic emotional mechanisms that drive ethnic violence.

Thus, when Da'esh announced its intentions to target the Shi'a south it allowed the Shi'a to coalesce around their identity against a common enemy who had some ties with

their northern countrymen. This made it easy to form and support the PMF because certain components of it were tasked with protecting the shrines and thus were sacred.<sup>14</sup> The formation of these forces and their support networks was rendered feasible by the pre-existing networks of clerics spread throughout the south. Tithes had always flowed in and directing resources towards the protection of the holy shrines could only be met with popular approval. In short, if the war with Da'esh is considered a war against the Shi'a (which the Shi'a have interpreted it as) then the scope conditions have been satisfied.

There are, of course, other dissimilarities between Tilly and the case at hand. The most important being the degree of foreign (Iranian) intervention, particularly in Iran's backing of certain militias (e.g. Badr, 'A'ayib Ahl al-Haq, Kata'ib Hizbollah).<sup>15</sup> While this foreign intervention is hardly unusual in the region (as Toby Matthiesen mentions in another paper in this series), its impact on the domestic politics and state-building project within Iraq make the direct comparison to Tilly more challenging. These groups are not only Iranian military proxies but they also profess ideological commitment to Ayatollah Khamenei and to the system of vilayet e-faqih (see Safshekan and Sabet or Kadivar in this collection), posing a serious challenge to Iraqi sovereignty and legitimacy.

Nonetheless, the organizational and homogenization processes that have occurred in the south cannot be easily stamped out and their consequences might result in the formation of a Shi'a state. The extent to which this state will be Shi'a dominated and non-inclusive will depend upon which of the Shi'a actors will seize the opportunities afforded by the Da'esh war most effectively. If the Iranian-backed PMF branches are able to capture this moment and if their behavior in the freed territories is any indication, then there will be an oppressive Shi'ification of the Iraqi state occurring. If, however, the more Iraqi nationalist Shi'a

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<sup>12</sup> A Ministry of Finance official informed me that the funds for the salaries of the PMF (for the upcoming year) have already been set aside in the Iraqi budget.

<sup>13</sup> The human rights violations of some PMF leaders in the Da'esh war are well-known and documented (see for example: Belkis Wille "Integrating Iraqi Fighting Forces is not Enough").

<sup>14</sup> Like the Lua'a Ali Al-Akbar, Saraya Al-Ataba Al-Hussainiya, Saraya Al-Ataba Al-Abassiya, Saraya Al-Ataba Al-Alawiya

<sup>15</sup> For a longer discussion of Iranian backed PMF militias see: Renad Mansour and Faleh A. Jabar "The Popular Mobilization Forces and Iraq's future"

actors are able to capture the moment then there will be more hope for inclusivity within an admittedly still Shi'a dominant context.

### What can political science tell us about post-Da'esh Iraq?

As demonstrated above, the various components of Tillian state-building have been more or less satisfied by the Da'esh war; however, what they have created is a unique historical opportunity rather than a certainty. While we know that the PMF is not a monolithic actor, the fact remains that among Shi'a Iraqis, the entire group enjoys unprecedented legitimacy. Fanar Haddad cautions that the PMF "...whose key constituent groups include paramilitary forces that are already firmly established in Iraqi politics, will be uniquely placed for political advancement should Iraq arrive at a 'post-ISIS moment.'"<sup>16</sup> While this is all true, it is also important to note that there is a counter-narrative in Iraq that challenges the PMF's primacy. The PMF's presence in major battles is now secondary to the ISF, particularly the Golden Division (Iraq's counter-terrorism special operating forces). This decreasing military relevance has made ambitious militias nervous and has led to ill-advised behavior, including some recent blunders in Kirkuk. Moreover, nationalist Iraqi counter-narratives have emerged, challenging the position of the PMF as the official protector of the Iraqi nation.

In essence, this counter-narrative is the Iraqi government's attempt to capitalize on the Tillian moment provided by the Da'esh war. The Iraqi state has displayed some capacity at doing this, but it has thus far not been as successful as rival PMF factions have been. In the end, the type of Shi'a state that will emerge will depend on whether Al-Abadi can enforce an Iraqi monopoly on the use of force, particularly on those PMF branches unwilling to cede their de-facto autonomy. If he cannot, the same groups that control the PMF have the resources and organizational capability to create a shadow state which, one day, may emerge to challenge Baghdad.

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<sup>16</sup> Fanar Haddad "The Hashd: Redrawing the Military and Political Map of Iraq"

# Alawite revivalism in Syria

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The Syrian Alawite community has long defined itself as part of the Twelver Shiite Imamate.<sup>1</sup> Yet its relationship with the broader Shiite community has been marked by fluctuations. Since the beginning of the 20th century, the rapprochement between the communities' religious leaders has widened, creating a platform for cooperation and sharing religious knowledge. More recently, with Shiite-centered paramilitary groups pouring into Syria to fight alongside the Syrian Armed Forces, this relationship has taken a new dynamic. Furthermore, the emergence of a new class of Alawite religious leaders reasserting their belonging to the Imamate jurisprudence and challenging previous historical laxness towards abiding by Islamic rituals have added multi-layered of complexities to this relationship.

Numerous scholarly publications have contributed to the formation of pre-conceived notions about the Alawites as the minority-ruling sect of Syria,<sup>2</sup> or as "constituting their own brand of Shiite Islam."<sup>3</sup> Historically speaking, the Ottomans begun addressing them "as full-fledged Muslims (albeit those in need of Orthodox tutelage)" at the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>4</sup> Yet defining the Alawite community as unorthodox is "the result of interpretation, power, rhetoric and persuasion, which again, reflect particular interests adopted by different actors."<sup>5</sup> In other words, it tells less about the validity or authenticity of their Islamic beliefs and more about the power relations between communal groups. Analysts have, to a large degree, employed two lenses when studying the Alawite community, the political or theological. While the former sees the community as over represented in the upper echelons of the Syrian political and security

apparatus,<sup>6</sup> the latter focuses on analyzing their private books. In this essay, I seek to focus on the recent socio-religious dynamics of the Alawite community in Syria and its evolutionary paths.

The Alawite community is reasserting its belonging to the Imamate's articulation of faith. With the increase of religiosity among the Sunnites and the Shiites, Alawite clerics are increasingly encouraging their constituents to abide by normative Islamic rituals. The community's historical laxness toward abiding by the normative Ja'afari *fiqh* (jurisprudence) and the *ibadat* (Islamic rituals) is being challenged by the efforts of imams, who are preaching to the Alawite youth about the necessity to thwart accusations of being "not Muslim enough" through abiding by the *ibadat*, like prayers and fasting during Ramadan. In parallel, they stress that it is an obligation for all Muslims, including the Alawites, to abide by the normative Islamic rituals.

## The Alawite revivalist movement

Proponents of the revivalist movement underline various reasons, inter alia, the Alawite clerics' historical overemphasis on the Sufi elements of their religious teachings, which came at the expense of studying the Islamic sharia according to the Ja'afari school of jurisprudence (Khayr 1991, 68). As said by a cleric, "Alawism is first and foremost a religious identity. Those who wish to strip it off its religious contents by stressing its cultural components (e.g drinking mate) are nowhere representatives of the Alawite community. Rather they are individuals who have eschewed an aggressive form of secularism.

<sup>1</sup> Friedman, Yaron. *The Nus'ayri-'Alawis an introduction to the religion, history, and identity of the leading minority in Syria*. Boston: Brill, 2010: 28

<sup>2</sup> See Zisser, Eyal. *The 'Alawis, Lords of Syria: From Ethnic Minority to Ruling Sect*. In: O. Bengio and G. Ben-Dor, ed., *Minorities and the State in the Arab World*, 1st ed. Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1999:129-141.

<sup>3</sup> Grehan, James. *Twilight of the saints: everyday religion in Ottoman Syria and Palestine*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016: 33.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid*

<sup>5</sup> Desplat, Patrick. "The Articulation of Religious Identities and their Boundaries in Ethiopia: Labeling Difference and Processes of Contextualization in Islam." *Journal of Religion in Africa* 35, no. 4 (2005): 484

<sup>6</sup> See Nikolas Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria: Politics and Society under Asad and the Baath Party*, 4th ed. (I.B. Tauris, 2011)

Many contemporary Alawite clerics legitimize their discourse by referencing a specific historical period during the French Mandate Syria when community leaders tried to create an Alawite religious revivalist movement, *haraka nahdawiya*.<sup>7</sup> This offered leaders an opportunity to reshape how Alawism was envisioned. As Pierret notes, a reformist trend emerged within the Alawite community that “aimed to rationalize the Alawi faith by drawing from the –incomparably more elaborated – Twelver scholarly traditions.”<sup>8</sup> He attributes the revivalist movement to three factors: the establishment of separate religious courts for the Alawites in 1922, the consequent adoption of the Ja’afari law, and the marginalization of the secessionist Alawite leaders in 1930’s.<sup>9</sup>

This movement gained its momentum from the rapprochement in the 1940’s between Shiite clerics of Iraq and Lebanon, and the Alawite clerics. The combined efforts of Alawite and Shiite clerics facilitated this trend of reformism that sought to redraw the boundaries of the moral and the religious contents of their collectivity.<sup>10</sup> Its premise is based on shifting how to acquire the religious knowledge by promoting the supremacy of the Islamic jurisprudence and defining it as the backbone of their teachings at the expense of any orally oriented Alawite religious tradition. In effect, the latter is relegated to a secondary role in defining the collective boundaries of the Alawite community. This shifts the status of the Alawite community from being defined by others as an “unorthodox” faith, lying at the periphery (or even outside) of the Muslim collective consciousness, into its center. Thus, it offers them the opportunity to be at equal par with other Muslims as it seeks not only Alawite empowerment

but also healing from the collective traumas embedded within a discourse of collective victimization.

As a result of this reformist trend, new Alawite knowledge was produced, which analysts and scholars have dismissed as “apologetic.”<sup>11</sup> For brevity, I present the reformist arguments concisely. The reformist trend argues that the deviation from the original teachings of Alawism had been the byproduct of different internal and external factors, inter alia, historical persecutions, seclusion in the mountains to ensure their communal survival, persistent need to practice *taqiya* (dissimulation), and ideological/doctrinal rigidity of their traditional religious men. The reformists stressed that the perceived deviation from “authentic” Alawism is not ingrained in their religious teachings. Rather, the need to refine their *nahj* (doctrine) stemmed from external factors that influenced how traditional religious teachers understood it. They continue that attempts of the “Others” to systematically assault and undermine the Alawites position in their Ja’farites religious school produced a form of Alawism that has departed from the original teachings of Alawism that is, in essence, *fiqh*-based.<sup>12</sup> The reformists also argue that for the past four decades secularism has deeply affected Alawites more than other communities.

Alawite religious leaders saw the historical laxness towards religious observance of Islamic rituals and the lack of the tradition of building mosques as a heavy burden on the community, limiting their integration within the imaginary collective Islamic community. Thus, the need to bridge “this cultural distance from learned tradition” emerged as representative of the collective aspirations of the Alawite community.<sup>13</sup> At the same time, placing themselves parallel

<sup>7</sup> See Firro, Kais M. “The ‘Alawīs in Modern Syria: From Nuṣayrīya to Islam via ‘Alawīya.” *Der Islam*82, no. 1 (2005): 1-31.

<sup>8</sup> Pierret, Thomas, “Karbala in the Umayyad Mosque: Sunni Panic at the ‘Shiitization’ of Syria in the 2000s”, in “The dynamics of Sunni-Shia relationships: doctrine, transnationalism, intellectuals and the media.” edited by Maréchal, Brigitte, and Sami Zemni, 99-116. London: Hurst, 2013: 101

<sup>9</sup> *ibid*

<sup>10</sup> al-Mohajer, Sheikh Ja’far. [al-Mohajer al-Amili Al-sheikh Habib al-Ibrahim: his biography, his works, his publications, and his poetry]. *Mo’assasat Tourath al-Shi’a*, 2009

<sup>11</sup> Douwes, Dick, “Going Public: Minority Muslim Communities and Public Space in Syria (Prior to the Revolt)”, in “Religion beyond its private role in modern society” edited by Wim Hofstee and Arie Van Der Kooij, 71-83, Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2013: 47

<sup>12</sup> For a quick summary, see Firro, Kais M. *he ‘Alawīs in Modern Syria: From Nuṣayrīya to Islam via ‘Alawīya*. *Der Islam*, 82(1), 2005:1-31.

<sup>13</sup> Grehan, James. *Twilight of the saints: everyday religion in Ottoman Syria and Palestine*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016: 57 (e-book)



to the Shiites of Lebanon, who were equally marginalized, widened the scope of their imaginary, and opened up the prospect for the creation of porous boundaries. This enabled the emergence of a new Alawite collective identity, defined by its clarity, its openness toward the others in general, and Shiism in particular.

### **Seeking knowledge in Islamic religious institutions.**

Champions of the religious revivalist movement look at Islamic centers of religious learning (whether Shiite seminaries, *hawza* or Sunni faculties) as the steppingstone for producing a class of Alawite 'ulama immersed in institutionalized Islamic religious knowledge. Equally important, they seek to produce a generation of pious Alawites that have solid knowledge about the Islamic faith and their religious obligations. For such a community of pious Alawites to be formed, the apathy towards abiding by the sharia needed to relegate, at its expense, the envisioned "authentic" Alawism comes to substitute it, defined with its observance to Sharia norms as encapsulated in the Ja'afari Imamate jurisprudence. As an Alawite cleric told me, "many Alawite clerics have wrongly advocated that those who know the tariqas are absolved of the *taklif shar'i* (the mandatory observance of Sharia) [...]. And this is the real problem."<sup>14</sup>

Their discourse formed the springboard for many Alawites to go and study in institutions of Islamic religious knowledge, both Sunni sharia faculties and Shiite hawza. Asking one of my interviewee, a young Alawite studying in a Shiite religious seminary and planning to come back to his town for *tabligh*, "the reason why I pushed myself to come to here is due to the negative views that the Sunni and the Shiites have against the Alawites. I was told that 'the Alawites are far away from Islam, and too lax when it comes to abiding by Islamic norms.' I told them, 'I am here

because of this. And I aim to build a generation of pious Alawites that follow properly their own fiqh, the Ja'farites Imamate."<sup>15</sup>

Sending Alawites religious emissary to study Islamic jurisprudence in Islamic religious institutions can be traced back to 1949 when a handful number of Alawite went to learn jurisprudence at al-Azhar in Cairo. About two years later, with the help of a Shia cleric from Lebanon, a religious emissary of Alawites students went into the holy city of Najaf, a major religious center, to learn the teachings of the Imamate jurisprudence.<sup>16</sup> This *tablighat* (proselytizing) emissary was meant to plant the seeds for a reformist movement among the Alawites and to instruct them on the religious teachings of "authentic Alawism."<sup>17</sup> Yet their efforts reached a dead-end after the Grand Ayatollah Mohsen al-Hakim, under the pretext of strained economic and political situations, reneged on his promise to continue his financial support for their studies.<sup>18</sup> However, the decision was likely due to the students' inability to adapt to the strict religious and cultural codes in the Shiite religious seminaries in Najaf and the pervasive inquiries of the Shiite students about the Alawites' religious backgrounds.<sup>19</sup>

### **Contemporaneous Alawite revivalism:**

This has continued until this time. One Alawite cleric who studied in a Shiite hawza between 1975 and 1981 said, "the role of a traditional Alawite cleric is very influential in building a moral society. His role compliments the roles of the Hawza only if he's a graduate of a hawza. Having a certified religious degree is what validates his credentials. To be an Alawite sheikh, you need to be a graduate of a Hawza. If he failed to graduate, or he dropped out then he can't be called an Alawite sheikh."<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Interview with a Syrian Alawite cleric #1

<sup>15</sup> Interview with a Syrian Alawite studying Islamic jurisprudence in a Hawza

<sup>16</sup> al-Mohajer, Sheikh Ja'far. [al-Mohajer al-Amili Al-sheikh Habib al-Ibrahim: his biography, his works, his publications, and his poetry]. 2009: 95

<sup>17</sup> ibid

<sup>18</sup> al-Mohajer, J.(2009). [al-Mohajer al-Amili Al-sheikh Habib al-Ibrahim: his biography, his works, his publications, his poetry]: 101,103, 104

<sup>19</sup> ibid

<sup>20</sup> Interview with a Syrian Alawite cleric #2(a graduate of Hawza)

The emergence of a new class of Alawite clerics from religious institutions seeks to weaken the monopoly of the traditional clerics over the religious knowledge. This burgeoning force embodies the narrative of the revivalist moment. These new clerics seek to fully immerse themselves in what they perceive as a superior religious tradition, the Ja'fari jurisprudence. They stress that the shortcomings of the traditional Alawite clerics stem from their lack of emphasis of all issues related to Islamic jurisprudence.<sup>21</sup> By emphasizing the Sharia over the tariqas, this new movement seeks to “re-calibrate” the Alawite beliefs to be in accordance with Islamic “orthodoxy” and to make Alawites on par with other Muslim leaders in terms of religious observance. In effect, the new class seeks to re-construct Alawism by tapping into a different religious epistemology than the traditional Alawism.

Traditional Alawism lacks a strong scriptural tradition.<sup>22</sup> However, this shift into a strong scriptural tradition serves the process of legitimizing Alawism as part of the final form of Ja'fari jurisprudence. Consequently, Alawite religious knowledge will be equal with the learned traditions of Sunni and Shiite Islam. The newly formed Alawite identity will be intimately linked to Islamic religious institutions in general and Shiite centers of religious learning in particular. The formation of a pious Alawite subjectivity requires daily acts of resistance against a historically secular ethos. Yet this ethos need not be constructed to alienate the surrounding secular environment and society. Rather, it needs to be “visionary, and not *sidamiyyan* (confrontational).”<sup>23</sup>

Local initiatives to raise religious awareness among the Alawites have ensued. A local Alawite imam, who works also as high school teacher, organizes *halkat tadrissiyah* (study circles) for the youths in his mosque during the summer for about four hours per day, and during the

Islamic months of Shaaban and Ramadan. The first class is about memorizing the Quran and its *tafsir* (exegesis). The second lesson is about *ahl al bayt* (the family of the prophet) and their values and what they endured. The third lesson is about how to pray. Explaining his approach in his mosque, he states,

“I wear a suit with no tie in the mosque, and as you can notice I have a very trimmed beard. The pupils see that the sheikh is not distinct from their schoolteachers, so the mosque becomes like any class in a school. All the classes are given in a way not to antagonize the students against any community.”<sup>24</sup>

This imam seeks to challenge Alawites' lenient attitudes toward Islamic rituals, which he attributes to the staunchly secular nature of the ruling Baath party of Syria. In his words,

“What really drives us on a personal level to push for an Alawite revivalism is seeing our youths being overtaken by secularism. In other words, when I see my daughter watching a Saudi cartoon TV show on a Saudi channel in which the girl is wearing a veil, and reciting the Quran, I want to make sure that my daughter knows that she's not different than this girl in terms of the same Islamic religious obligations.”<sup>25</sup>

Alawite clerics are emphatically reasserting their belonging to the Imamate jurisprudence. The emergence of a new class of clerics immersed in Islamic jurisprudence is challenging the monopoly of the traditional clerics over the access of religious knowledge. Furthermore, their local initiatives to teach Alawite youth awareness about their religious obligations are creating a sense of empowerment and an assertive Alawite identity that is based more on religious rather than ethno-cultural grounds.

<sup>21</sup> Interview with a Syrian Alawite cleric #3 (a graduate of Hawza)

<sup>22</sup> Doues, D. (2017). In: Religion beyond its private role in modern society: 72

<sup>23</sup> Interview with a Syrian Alawite cleric #2

<sup>24</sup> Interview with a Syrian Alawite Imam

<sup>25</sup> *ibid*

## Bringing the ‘Other Islamists’ back in: Sunni and Shia Islamism(s) in a sectarianized new Middle East

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Islamism and the relationship between Islam and politics have dominated academic discussion for several decades. However, this has not produced a consensus as to how to understand and study Islamism (for an overview, see Volpi, 2010). The “essentially contested” nature of the concept of Islamism has been reflected in all the energy spent on discussing how to define it (Utvik, 2011; Mozaffari, 2007; Esposito, 2005); whether we should speak about Islamism, political Islam or Islamic fundamentalism (Roy, 2010; Euben and Zaman, 2009; Fuller, 2003; Denoëux, 2002); how Islamism relates to post-Islamism, neo-fundamentalism, jihadism (Bayat, 2013; Roy, 2010; Mandaville, 2014); how Islamism and Islam as a religion are interlinked (Gunning and Jackson, 2011; Hamid, 2016); whether Islamism is more/less prone to violence or compatible with democracy and the nation-state (Piscatori, 1986; Esposito and Voll, 1996; Toft, 2007; Dalacoura, 2011); and whether the emergence and dynamics of Islamism should be accounted for by distinct theories that factor in Islam or is it possible focus on the same political and socio-economic factors that are used to explain other (non-religious) movements (POMEPS, 2016; Wiktorowicz, 2004; Meijer, 2005).

This debate is not only rich, but has also become increasingly sophisticated. At closer inspection, it appears, however, that it is very Sunni-centric in the sense that the majority of studies concern various forms of Sunni Islamism, whereas the “Other Islamists” – different kinds of Shia Islamist groups – have received far less attention. This choice of focus is seldom explicitly substantiated and the Shia/Sunni distinction and sectarianism have generally not held any prominent position in the otherwise very multidimensional debate on Islamism. Even in the instances when both Shia and Sunni Islamist groups have been included in discussions, there is usually little attention to whether, how or why the Shia/Sunni dimension might matter. If the question has been addressed, attention

has often been drawn to the striking similarities, at least before 2011, between Sunni Hamas and Shia Hezbollah, both of which were perceived as examples of “Islamist national resistance” whose messages resonated widely across the Shia/Sunni divide (Ayoob, 2008; Fuller, 2006; Valbjørn and Bank, 2007). Other studies have pointed out how Khomeini was a voice of Pan-Islamism rather than of a distinct kind of Shia-Islamism, how the Shia/Sunni question seldom was addressed by the spiritual fathers of the modern Islamism, how Sunni revivalist ideology helped pave the way for the Iranian revolution in 1979, and how the Islamic Republic subsequently inspired various Sunni Islamist groups (Khalaji, 2009; Mozaffari, 2007).

While various forms of Sunni Islamism as well as inter-sectarian similarities are indeed important in the study of Islamism, a quick look at the current Islamist scene suggests that it is anything but obvious that sectarianism and the Shia/Sunni distinction should be dismissed from the broader debate on Islamism(s). In the post-2003 Iraqi conflict, where various Shia and Sunni Islamist actors played prominent roles, sectarianization still had a limited regional resonance. But in the years since the 2011 Arab uprisings a “sectarian wave” has washed over large parts of the Middle East, as different kinds of Shia and Sunni Islamist groups are key players, and often adversaries (Hashemi and Postel, 2017; Abdo, 2017; Wehrey, 2017; Byman, 2014; POMEPS, 2013). Not only has Hamas parted ways with Hezbollah, but the latter’s rhetoric is also increasingly that of a Shia militia rather than an “Arab lion,” as it was hailed as in the Arab public during the 2006 Summer War (Saouli, 2013; International Crisis Group, 2014; cf. Valbjørn and Bank, 2007). In Yemen, despite its diverse demography, traditionally sectarianism has not played any significant role, but now both al-Islah and Al Qaeda in Yemen have adopted an increasingly anti-Shia voice (Al-Muslimi, 2015; Yadav, 2017). In Syria and Iraq,

the Islamist scene has in recent years been occupied by a range of Islamist groups with an increasingly sectarian agenda (Phillips, 2015; Lister, 2015). Even in places with almost no Shias, such as Egypt or Jordan, anti-Shia rhetoric has become prominent among internally rivaling Sunni Islamists groups (Saleh and Kraetzschmar, 2015; Wagemakers, 2016). Against this backdrop, it is time to bring the Shia/Sunni distinction as well as the sectarian dimension into the broader debate on Islamism(s) and explore the implications.

### The other Islamism debate

While the Islamist debate traditionally has been predominantly Sunni, the “Other Islamists” and the Shia/Sunni divide have not been completely ignored. At the time of the Iranian Revolution, there was a huge debate on whether Shia or Sunni Islam was more/less revolutionary than the other (for an overview of this debate McEoin, 1984; Kramer, 1987; Biglari, 2016). To the (limited) extent scholars and analysts had devoted attention to Shia Islam before the revolution, the general consensus held that Sunni Islam(ism) was more activist, political, and revolutionary than the allegedly quietist and apolitical Shia Islam. Thus, Shia Muslims, the argument went, were waiting for the 12th Imam to reappear, and until then they would shun worldly politics, which by definition was considered illegitimate. As a consequence, the Shia ulama were also considered largely apolitical. Unsurprisingly, this reading changed dramatically after 1979, as Shia-Islam now was presented – sometimes substantiated with references to the “basic nature of Shia-Islam” – as activist, political, and revolutionary to the core, a “religion of protest.” For instance, the Shiite idea about the Imamatus was highlighted as an example of the merger of political and religious rule, reflected in Khomeini’s ideas about *velayat-e faqih*. *The Battle of Karbala* was likewise highlighted as showing the importance for Shias of activism, protest, and standing up against injustice even if it required martyrdom.

The fact that doctrinal sources appeared so flexible that they could be – and were – used to substantiate

so different interpretation of the “basic” nature of Shia Islam(ism), led some observers to conclude that the differences between Shia and Sunni Islam did not matter, which may explain the marginal attention traditionally devoted to the distinction in the general Islamism debate. Some did, however, argue that Sunni and Shia Islamism differed, but provided a more nuanced approach, which combined religious and non-religious factors. An example is International Crisis Group’s (ICG) 12 years old report on *Understanding Islamism* (2005), which constitutes one of the few more recent examples of an explicit argument for making a distinction between Shia and Sunni Islamism. In addition to presenting a nuanced typology of Sunni Islamism, the report argued that Shia Islamism differed profoundly from Sunni Islamism and it would be wrong to conflate Khomeini’s Shia Islamism with Salafi or Qutb-inspired forms of Sunni Islamism. While Sunni Islamism had fragmented into rival tendencies with very different world views, strategies and forms of organization dominated by laymen rather than clerics, the report argued that Shiite Islamism has remained much more cohesive with the Shiite ulama playing a leading political role. These differences between Shia and Sunni Islamism were, according to the report, a result of Shia Muslims’ historical status as the minority form of Islam combined with the Shia ulama’s historical autonomy vis-à-vis the state (i.e., they had not been coopted by Sunni rulers in the same way as the Sunni ulama), and their continuing practice of *ijtihad*. This had made them more “modernist” than their Sunni counterparts and, thus, able to engage with contemporary problems and stay relevant. During the 20th century, the Sunni ulama, on the contrary, had been outflanked by laymen engaging in a more or less anarchic *ijtihad* of their own and, according to the report, this helps explain why the Sunni Islamist scene has been more diverse.

This other debate on (Shia/Sunni) Islamism has only had a limited influence on the broader Islamist debates. In view of the current efforts not only at rethinking Islamism (Hamid and McCants, 2017; POMEPS, 2014; 2016) but also at understanding the causes and consequences of the

current sectarianization of Middle East politics (Hashemi and Postel, 2017; Abdo, 2017; Wehrey, 2017; Byman, 2014; POMEPS, 2013; Matthiesen, 2013), it is now time to bring this historically less influential debate into a dialogue with the broader debate on Islamism(s) and examine how it may enrich our understanding of Islamism in a new sectarian Middle East. In doing so, four sets of questions serve as a useful starting point for such an exploration of the sectarianism/Islamism nexus and various expressions of Shia and Sunni Islamism(s).

### **(1) Should the Islamism typology debate be supplemented with a Shia/Sunni distinction?**

One of the most prominent and controversial issues in the broader Islamist debate concerns the basic question about whether Islamism should be perceived as a unitary phenomenon, or if it is useful to make an analytical distinction between different forms of Islamism. As for the former position, Mehdi Mozaffari (2007) argues that despite reciprocal animosity among Sunni, Shia, and Wahhabi Islamists, they have more in common than in opposition. In his view, they fundamentally share the same ideals and ultimate goals, practice the same methods, and nourish the same patterns of solidarity and animosity, and they can accordingly be treated as a single phenomenon. Conversely, proponents of the latter position highlight the importance of paying attention to divisions and differences that necessitate some kind of typology as a way of disaggregating the various forms of Islamisms (Ayooob, 2008). This will enable us not only to recognize how various Islamist groups differ as regards their goals, forms of activism and organization, leadership and membership profile, but also bring awareness about how specific Islamist groups can transform and evolve from one type of Islamism into another. The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, for instance, has undergone a number of dramatic transformations since the time of Hassan al-Banna, fitting into different “boxes” in an Islamism typology.

While the view that it is important to differentiate between Islamisms has gained a considerable prominence in the

broader Islamist debate, this has not been translated into any consensus on how to distinguish between different types of Islamism. Instead, a great variety of Islamist typologies have been suggested. In addition to simplistic distinctions between “radical/moderate” or “violent/peaceful” Islamism, it is possible to identify a range of much more sophisticated typologies such as resistance/revolutionary/reformist Islamism (Robinson, 2007), Islahi-Ikhwani/Jihadi-Ikhwani/Isalah-salafi/Jihadi-salafi Islamism (Utvik, 2011); reformist/revolutionary/societal/spiritual Islamism (Yavuz, 2003); Third Worldist/Neo-Third Worldist Islamism (Strindberg and Wärn, 2005); Statist/Non-Statist Islamism (Volpi and Stein, 2015), Salafist Jihadi/Ikhwani Islamism (Lynch, 2010), or mainstream/irredentist jihadi/doctrinaire jihadi Islamism (Gerges, 2005).

Each of these typologies highlight different dimensions of Islamism, but are still largely devoted to Sunni Islamist movements, as reflected in debates on the differences between Salafist Jihadism vs. Ikhwani Islamism or purist/politico/jihadi forms of Salafism (Lynch, 2010; Wiktorowicz, 2006). Much less attention has been paid to whether, and if so how, the distinction between Shia and Sunni might matter (among the exceptions: International Crisis Group, 2005; Nasr, 2007; Louër, 2008; Steinberg, 2009). If Shia Islamist groups not have just been ignored, they have usually just been placed in one of the “boxes” in a typology mainly derived from studies of Sunni Islamism without much explicit reflection about whether dynamics at the Shia Islamist scene somehow differ from the Sunni counterpart. An example could be how Hezbollah sometimes has been typologized, along with Hamas, as an example of “Islamist national resistance” or “third worldism” (Ayooob, 2008; Strindberg and Wärn, 2005). In view of the more recent changes on the Islamist scene and in the Middle East more broadly, it may, however, be useful to consider if the typology debate should be supplemented with a Shia/Sunni distinction based on a reexamination of some of the contributions to the aforementioned past but less influential debate on Shia/Sunni Islamism.



In such a discussion about whether it makes sense speaking about *Shia* and *Sunni* Islamism, a range of questions deserve to be addressed: what are the defining features of Shia and Sunni Islamism, and how and why do they differ? Has this changed over time? How important are differences in religious doctrine, influential myths, history, and intellectual currents? To what extent is it possible to use analytical tools based on experiences from Sunni Islamism to grasp Shia Islamism, for instance, is the inclusion/moderate hypothesis often used on the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood (Schwedler, 2011) also suitable to explain the result of the inclusion in Iraq of a Shia Islamist movements such as Hizb al-Dawa or SCIRI/ISCI?

In addition to these questions, it would, moreover, be useful to examine differences and similarities between Shia and Sunni Islamist groups in terms of relations to state power, membership profiles, as well as institutional and network structure, which are factors where Shia Islamism often have been presented as different from their Sunni counterpart. A quick look at the current Islamist scene leaves a complex picture. In Syria, where Shia and Sunni Islamists groups are fighting each other, the former appears less fragmented than the other just as the aforementioned ICG report would expect. However, by turning to neighboring Iraq, the current Shia Islamist scene looks very divided. Then there is the role of the ulama as opposed to laymen. Sunni Islamism is usually perceived as being concentrated among individuals without classical religious training, whereas Shia Islam is supposed to feature a stronger role for the official clergy based in particular cities and networks. While this pattern certainly can be identified in some places, a closer look at Shia Islamists movements like Hizb al-Dawa will, however, not only reveal inspiration from the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood but also a strong presence of laymen rather than clerics just like some of the leading proponents of Shia revolutionary ideology in Iran, e.g. Jalal al-e Ahmad and Ali Shariati, happened to be laymen (Bokhari and Senzai, 2013; Moghadam, 2011). So, while the Shia/Sunni distinction may deserve more attention, it is also clear that there is need for more work not only on whether but also

how and why Shia Islamism might differ from the Sunni counterpart.

## (2) What are the differences within Shia Islamism?

While the first set of questions concerned the possible role of *inter*-sectarian differences on the Islamist scene, the second set of questions focuses on *intra*-sectarian divisions. One of the lessons from the rich literature on how to typologize the (mainly Sunni) Islamist scene concerns how various (Sunni) Islamist groups differ as regards their goals, forms of activism, and organization, leadership and membership profile and how specific (Sunni) Islamist groups can transform and evolve from one type of Islamism into another.

While Shia Islamism is often presented as more homogeneous than their Sunni counterpart (International Crisis Group, 2005), a quick comparison of the current Islamist scene across places like Iraq, Iran, Bahrain, Syria, Kuwait, Lebanon and Yemen, however, reveals that Shia Islamism today take various forms. Moreover, a study of the history of Shia Islamist groups like Hizb al-Dawa or SCIRI reveals a number of transformations. This suggests that it is necessary not only to consider the potential value of making a distinction between Sunni and Shia Islamism, but also to how the latter can be subdivided.

One possibility is to draw on the existing literature from the Sunni Islamism debate and then just transfer one of these typologies to the Shia Islamist scene, so that we, for instance, begin speaking about political, missionary, doctrinaire jihadi, and irredentist-jihadi Shia Islamism. As pointed out in the aforementioned ICG report, a possible problem with this strategy is, however, that it does not acknowledge that the divisions within Shia Islamism may be quite different from those in Sunni Islamism requiring a different kind of typology.

Another strategy would be to develop a new kind of all-encompassing typology including both Shia and Sunni groups. One example could be Heghammer's (2009)

nuanced model that distinguishes between on the one hand violent/non-violent “manifestations” and on the other hand a variety of “rationales,” including state-oriented, nation-oriented, umma-oriented, morality-oriented or *sectarian*— and within some of these ten types of Islamism one may find both Shia and Sunni Islamist groups.

A third strategy seeks to develop a distinct Shia Islamist typology. This could be on basis of demographic differences (minority/majority) or variance in the specific local political contexts (e.g. democratic/authoritarian/civil war), as suggested by ICG (2005), who makes a distinction between Iranian, Lebanese, Iraqi and Pakistani Shia Islamism. Alternatively, a typology could be based on doctrinal differences, for instance based on the classic distinction between the three main variants of Shia Islam: the Fivers (Zaydis), the Seveners (Ismailis) and the Twelvers (Imamiyyah). Historically, they have differed not only as regards the question about the (number of) Imams, but also their views on politics, the state, and activism.

### **(3) How has the sectarianization of the Middle East politics impacted the (Shia and Sunni) Islamist scenes?**

If specific Islamist movements and the broader Islamist scene can transform and change, this raises a *third set of questions* concerning whether, how, and why the Arab uprisings and the subsequent sectarianization of much Middle East politics have led to changes between and within Shia and Sunni Islamism(s).

One dimension concerns the *inter*-sectarian relations between Shia and Sunni Islamist groups. The end of the traditionally close relationship between Sunni Hamas and Shia Hezbollah following the outbreak of the Syrian conflict represents an example of how the Arab uprisings have impacted the Islamist scene. The souring of the relationship in Yemen between increasingly anti-Shia al-Islah and the Houthi movement represents another example, and Qaradawi’s famous change from praising Hezbollah at the time of the Summer War 2006 to his 2013 denunciation of Hezbollah as “the party of Satan” is yet another (Lynch, 2013).

The current sectarianization has also impacted the *intra*-sectarian relations within Shia and Sunni Islamism, respectively. In debates on the current Yemeni conflict, the Houthi movement is often presented as Shia, but traditionally the Iranian Twelver Shia clerics in Qom would hardly have recognized these Zaydis as “real” Shias. In fact, the intra-Shia divide between Zaydi and Twelver Shia has often appeared more important than the differences between Sunnis and the Zaydis. In the 1960s, the Zaydi Imam was, for instance, supported by Riyadh. Today, the Saudis are presenting the Zaydi Houthis as part of a Shia camp, which the Iranians now acknowledge. Some observers have seen this as part of a larger trend towards a kind of homogenization of a “Shia block,” in which Zaydis and Alawites are now included among “the new Shias” (El-Husseini, 2016). Others are, however, suggesting that Shia Islamism is currently fragmenting, pointing to how the Iraqi Islamist scene, for instance, has been increasingly divided between pro-Iranian and Iraqi nationalist Shia groups (Sowell, 2015).

The Arab Uprisings and the subsequent sectarianization of Middle East politics may have impacted both inter and intra-sectarian relations of the Islamist scene, but it remains unclear exactly why and how.

### **(4) How have Sunni and Shia Islamists contributed to the current sectarianization of Middle East politics?**

The *fourth and final set of questions* reverses the question by asking whether and how various Sunni and Shia actors on the Islamist scene have contributed to the current sectarianization of Middle East politics.

This already became clear during the Iraqi civil war following the 2003 U.S. invasion. Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the leader of Al Qaeda in Iraq, not only became a prominent voice of anti-Shiism but also incited a violent sectarian conflict between Shia and Sunni Iraqis (Steinberg, 2009; International Crisis Group, 2006). In order to understanding why the Syrian conflict became sectarianized, it is likewise important to pay attention to

not only Bashar al-Assad's framing of the conflict, but also how various Sunni and Shia Islamists groups have made use of a highly sectarian rhetoric (Phillips, 2015; Anzalone, 2016).

At the same time, it is also obvious that the significance of sectarianism varies among Islamist groups just as it is possible to identify attempts at cooperation across the Shia/Sunni divide. In the early days of the Arab uprisings, Tehran did for instance also set up the "World Assembly for the Islamic Awakening" that emphasized the existence of a single, worldwide Muslim Ummah, which should unite "against the predatory powers led by the US" and promote an Islamic system of governance (Soage, 2017). More recently, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has hosted Moqtada al-Sadr, who previously was known as a Shiite "firebrand cleric" (Haddad, 2017).

For Sunni Islamism, the varying role of sectarianism among different groups has often been attributed to a theologically based difference between the Ikhwani/Muslim Brotherhood current and the Salafi/Wahhabi current. The latter is usually associated with an ingrained anti-Shiism closely linked to an influence from ibn Taymiyya and ibn Abd al-Wahhab (Ghobadzdeh and Akbarzadeh, 2015). While this undoubtedly plays a role, closer inspection reveals a more complex picture. Thus, the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria has historically been quite anti-Shia (Steinberg, 2009) and while this did not use to be the case for the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood, this has changed recently. As for *jihadi-Salafi groups*, *Al Qaeda in Iraq may always have been very anti-Shia, but Al Qaeda in Yemen, in turn, was not particularly occupied by sectarian*

*question before 2011 and Al Qaeda is generally considered less sectarian than Islamic State despite of their shared Salafi inspiration* (Anzalone, 2016).

Thus, similar to the three other sets of questions, there is still more to be said as for why and when sectarianism becomes a prominent theme for some Islamist groups and whether and how this has contributed to the "sectarianization" of Middle East politics.

### **On broadening the Islamist debate**

The Islamist debate has been both rich and sophisticated, but has also been limited by its de facto Sunni centric focus. In view of recent developments in the Middle East, in particular after the Arab uprisings, this negligence is no longer viable. There is a need to broaden the Islamist debate not only by paying more attention to various Shia Islamist groups, but also by bringing the broader Islamism debate into a closer dialogue with the more recent debate on sectarianism in a new Middle East and past discussions about Shia-Islamism. In doing so, there is a potential for enriching our understanding both of dynamics of various forms of Islamism and of the causes and the consequences of the current sectarianization of Middle East politics in the wake of the Arab uprisings.

*For a Full List of References, see: <https://pomeps.org/2017/12/15/bringing-the-other-islamists-back-in-sunni-and-shia-islamisms-in-a-sectarianized-new-middle-east/>*

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