

# The Dilemmas of Pan-Islamic Unity

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**T**HROUGHOUT THE 20TH CENTURY, THE COUNTRIES OF IRAN AND EGYPT have had a very complex relationship with one another. Among other things, Iran, a leading majority Shiite country that is also ruled by Shiites, and Egypt, the cultural and theological center of Sunni Islam, are home to two of the most important streams of modern Islamist revivalism—Shiite Islamism, and the Muslim Brotherhood, respectively. While the relations between Shiite and Sunni states and non-state movements have often been adversarial and even prone to violence, the relations between these two streams of Islamism, both of which stress as a matter of doctrine the ideals of pan-Islamist unity, have tended toward ideological convergence and collaboration. As one writer recently put it in an article on the Muslim Brotherhood’s website:

Many commentators in the West still believe in the fairy tale that Sunni and Shia Islamists are at odds. Though most Sunni jihadists tend to see Shias as heretics and Hezbollah as a Zionist tool (go figure), the Muslim Brotherhood, by far the most popular of the Middle East’s radical Islamists, and the Shia Islamists’ history of mutual influence and collaboration traces back to the first Islamic revivalists of the 19th century and the political thought of the Brotherhood’s own founder.<sup>1</sup>

The Brotherhood’s origins may in fact be traced back to a Shiite cleric. The Persian activist-intellectual Said Jamal Assadabadi, who is perhaps more widely known today as Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, was a key architect of the first wave of religious revivalism

that swept across the Sunni world during the latter part of the 19th Century. After migrating to Egypt in 1871, Afghani began spreading his reformist teachings, and influenced a new generation of Egyptian scholars who became passionate advocates of pan-Islamist ideals. Afghani's most famous disciple, Mohammad Abduh, would become the rector of Cairo's al-Azhar Seminary and a pioneer of the reformist socio-political approach to interpreting the Quran that underpinned the rise of salafism and its various streams. Later on, one of Abduh's leading students, Rashid Rida, would take his teacher's socio-political approach to the Quran in an increasingly more polemical and radical direction, becoming one of the first theoreticians of the Islamic state. Rida's writings were enormously influential on the thinking of Hassan al-Banna, and by extension, Rida became one of the spiritual godfathers of the Muslim Brotherhood, which until today remains the most influential and the broadest of all Islamist movements.

But the story doesn't end there. In yet another twist in Muslim history, the Muslim Brotherhood would in turn requite Afghani's gift to Sunni revivalism by directly stimulating the emergence of a unique form of Shiite Islamism in Iran in the 1950s. Indeed, the Islamic paradigm of pre-revolutionary Iran was profoundly shaped by the ideas of the Muslim Brotherhood as well as by kindred Sunni movements such as the Indo-Pakistani Jamaat-e-Islami and its founder Sayyed Abul Aala Maududi.<sup>2</sup> In this way, Sunni revivalist ideology helped pave the way for the 1979 Iranian revolution that culminated in Shiite Islamism's greatest achievement: the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Since the founding of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Shiite Islamism and the Egyptian Brotherhood have continued to find ways to collaborate with each other in what they've sought to portray as their common Islamic struggle against the West and the reigning regional political order. Moreover, the Islamic Republic has been a continued source of inspiration for the Egyptian Brotherhood in its unfulfilled struggle for an Islamic state of its own. Yet despite their long history of cooperation in the spirit of pan-Islamism, religious differences have also complicated the relationship between Shiite Islamism and the Brotherhood, rendering their ideals of Islamic unity difficult, if not impossible, to implement in political practice.

## The Return to the Quran

THROUGHOUT ISLAMIC HISTORY, SUNNIS HAVE OFTEN CRITICIZED SHIITE THOUGHT and practice for neglecting or, at best, paying insufficient attention to the Quran. That criticism—which is sometimes used to support the further claim made by radical Sunnis that Shiites are “rejecters” of Islam properly understood—is rooted in

part in the fact that Sunnis privilege the Quran in their juristic or legal reasoning practices much more than Shiites do.

Sunni jurisprudence, for instance, relies principally on the Quran and the Sunna of the Prophet Mohammad as expressed by the *hadith*, as well as on the consensus of scholars (*ijma*) as passed down through the four recognized legal schools. While Twelver Shiite jurisprudence makes use of these sources, it also draws heavily from the example put forth by the twelve Imams—from Ali ibn Abu Talib to the so-called “Hidden Imam,” Muhammad Ibn al-Hassan. Shiite tradition recognizes these Imams as having had a special connection to God, and their knowledge of Islam is believed to be infallible. Indeed, to many Shiites, the *hadith*, or recorded sayings and traditions of these twelve Imams, carry the same legal and theological weight as the Prophet’s *hadith*. Some Shiite scholars even equate the Imams’ *hadith* to the Quran. This view, which is scandalous to many Sunnis, maintains that the early Imams had the authority to interpret the Quran and to reveal its hidden sense. This is the case even if, Shiites insist, an Imam’s interpretation appears to be in conflict with the generally accepted apparent meaning of the Quran.<sup>3</sup>

Because of these divergent Islamic paradigms, Quranic exegesis has historically not occupied as significant a place in the traditional curriculum of Shiite seminaries as it has in Sunni seminaries. In fact, for a long time, in the Shiite seminaries of Iran and Iraq, teaching and studying the Quran was not considered a suitable calling and was not prestigious enough for a high-ranking cleric. Quranic exegesis was appropriate to professional preachers, but it was not seen as the highest form of religious practice or scholarship, at least not as reflected in the *faqih* style of education and discussion that predominated in the Shiite seminary. Indeed, Quranic exegesis was even perceived as being potentially damaging to a Shiite scholar’s religious prestige—a traditionalist view that has persisted into the modern era in important ways. This is one reason why the late Ayatollah Abul Qassem Khoi—one of the most influential of 20th Century Shiite scholars, and the predecessor to Ayatollah Sayyed Ali Sistani at the Najaf seminary—was deeply criticized by the Shiite faithful in the 1960s for publishing the first volume of a Quranic commentary, *Al-Bayan fi Tafsir Al-Quran*. The outcry over his focus on the Quran led Ayatollah Khoi to decide against publishing the rest of his commentary.<sup>4</sup>

In the modern era, however, Shiism’s traditional reluctance to engage in Quranic exegesis has been deeply challenged. This has been especially true as traditional Shiism has come into contact with certain reformist tendencies in the Sunni world, including the salafist call to “return to the Quran.” In fact, Egypt’s early 20th century Quranic commentators, which include most notably Mohammad Abduh (1849-1905) and his student, Rashid Rida (1865-1935), were instrumental in encouraging a similar tendency within Shiism. Under the influence of these Islamist reformist thinkers,

Shiite scholars, especially those based in Iran, increasingly began to reorient the focus of their scholarship on the Quran and the practice of Quranic exegesis.

Rashid Rida was perhaps the most important modern Sunni scholar of the Quran in influencing the growth of modern Shiite exegesis. The founder and editor of the reformist journal *Al-Manar*, Rida's prolific Quranic commentary is regarded widely by Sunni and Shiite scholars as groundbreaking and a herald of a new era of socio-political exegesis of the Quran. Since Rida had a solid upbringing in Islamic theology, *Al-Manar* reflected a classical Sunni point of view as well as a more traditional mode of theological argumentation (especially when compared with the works of later revivalists such as Said Qutb's *Fi Zilal al-Quran*). Although Rida did not succeed in finishing his commentary on the entire Quran, he did manage to publish his exegesis of the holy book from its beginning chapter until Sura Tawbah, the ninth chapter.

While Shiite scholars learned from and appropriated many aspects of modern Sunni Quranic exegesis, they also sought to develop their own distinctively Shiite exegetical perspective. The Iranian scholar Sayyed Mohammad Hossein Tabatabai (1892-1981) is widely regarded as the author of the most important work of Shiite exegesis in modern times, the 20-volume *Al-Mizan fi Tafsir-s al-Quran*. In many ways, *Al-Mizan* can be read as a counter-argument to Rashid Rida's *Al-Manar* as well as a Shiite commentary. Tabatabai frequently mentions Rida throughout the work, and like Rida, his innovative interpretations of the Quran also seem to stop abruptly at Chapter 9, Sura Tawbah. On many key issues—from the ideal Islamic society, to justice, jihad, and other topics of Islamic jurisprudence—Rida's influence on Tabatabai is undeniable. Yet at the same time, Tabatabai clearly went to great lengths to develop a uniquely Shiite socio-political exegesis of the Quran. This exegesis rejected outright Rida's characteristically Sunni criticisms of the Shiite theory of the imamate, as well as Shiism's belief in the infallibility and knowledge of imams.

One of the most significant implications of the modern Shiite scholars' turn away from their tradition and toward the Quran is that it has helped pave the way for the emergence of a distinctly modern ideological and political interpretation of the Quran. In fact, the general discourse on "the return to the Quran" found a most receptive audience among a new generation of thinkers that included clerics but also writer-intellectuals from the non-clerical class. These thinkers believed that the theological paradigm of traditional Shiism was not adequate to address the range of modern social and political challenges that Iranian society was confronting.

This intellectual ferment, caused by Shiism's increasing interaction both with Sunni reformists (*islahiyun*) or revivalists and Western political ideology, led to the development of a special school of religious thought. For the first time in Shiism's history, a religious view emerged from outside the clerical establishment. These new ideas emanated from doctors, engineers and other university-educated intellectuals

who, thanks to their direct engagement with the Quran, felt themselves experienced and knowledgeable enough about Islam to render the traditional Islamic sciences and institutions unnecessary.

Once freed from the structural and ideological encumbrances of Shiite tradition, groups like Mojahedin-e Khalq (MEK, the Islamic Socialist organization), and engineers like Mehdi Bazargan (Iran's first prime minister after the 1979 revolution), and even revolutionary clerics like Mahmoud Taleqani (who blended Shiism with Marxist ideals, inspiring a generation of clerical revolutionaries) produced a new and unique type of Quranic commentary. This was intended to respond to the new socio-political requirements of the time, and its contributors were influenced by the secular ideologies of positivism and Marxism.<sup>5</sup> They sought to present Islamist ideology as a superior alternative to secular political ideologies—one that provided a cure for all of humankind's problems, both on earth and in the hereafter.

It is true that these Iranian intellectuals greatly benefited from Shiite sources and notions. However, their emphasis on concepts like jihad and martyrdom were profoundly inspired by Sunni writer-intellectuals.<sup>6</sup> Just as jihad and martyrdom were central to the thought of Sunni intellectuals like Said Qutb, these issues also came to be two pillars of Islam for Iranian Islamic lay writers like Ali Shariati. In the works of Shariati and others, jihad and martyrdom are colored and formulated with reference to Shiite culture and literature. But the idea of highlighting those notions among many others, as an attempt to create an Islamic ideology, was greatly inspired and shaped by the Muslim Brotherhood's writers and members.

## The Revolutionary Clerics

THE AGGRESSIVE SECULARIZATION POLICIES IMPLEMENTED BY REZA SHAH PAHLAVI, who ruled Iran as Shah from 1925 to 1941, aimed to block the Shiite clerical establishment from two institutions that they had traditionally ruled: the schools and the judiciary. These policies created a new generation of ambitious young Shiite clerics who became more and more alienated from Iran's ruling elites and culture. In addition to their growing disaffection, these young clerics found themselves increasingly with little reason to continue to adhere to traditional Shiite thought and political practice, in which the clergy was seen as the source of legitimacy for the monarchy. For this generation of scholars, traditional Shiism seemed unresponsive and ill-equipped to address the dramatic transformations taking place in Iranian society. In their view, the Muslim Brotherhood's teachings on the Islamic state provided a fresh, religiously authentic, and politically compelling solution to the challenges they faced.

One of Shiite Islamism's most important founding fathers was a young cleric

named Sayyed Mujtaba Mir Lowhi, also known as Navab Safavi (1924-1955). Safavi established a group called *Fadaian-e Islam*, or the “Devotees of Islam,” which led a popular movement against the Shah’s regime, and against the perceived corruptions of Iranian society from 1945 and 1955 that included a string of political assassinations. Like the early Brotherhood, the Fadaian-e Islam believed in a pan-Islamic ideology of religious purification and political revival. They rejected nationalistic ideology as inherently un-Islamic, and held that revivalist Shiites and Sunnis should unify in the face of Islam’s enemies, and struggle to repel modernity and its ideas from Islamic lands. The Devotees also held that Islam presents a perfect, comprehensive system for governing every aspect of human life. In their view, the only solution to the contemporary problems facing the Muslim world—including its backwardness and political weakness relative to Western countries—was the creation of a genuinely Islamic state that would implement the sharia.

Fadaian-e Islam’s ideological view and agenda not only paralleled that of the Muslim Brotherhood, but it appears to have been directly inspired by it. In 1954, Safavi traveled to Jerusalem, where he participated in an Islamic conference. There he addressed the Palestinian cause and intermingled with Sunni revivalists. After speaking at the conference, he traveled to Egypt and met with Brotherhood leaders, where he became intimately aware of the Sunni movement’s plight under the iron-fisted rule of Gamal Abd al-Nasser, Egypt’s nationalistic, secularizing and autocratic leader. During his time in Egypt, Safavi actually penned a letter to the Egyptian president, excoriating him for his policies on the Brotherhood. Safavi wrote that the president’s “harsh reaction to the Muslim Brotherhood has provoked deep resentment in the heart of Muslims. Reconsider this issue and try to do something that would not bring you a painful regret.”<sup>7</sup>

After returning to Iran, Safavi began a campaign to promote the Muslim Brotherhood’s pan-Islamic ideology within his Persian homeland, and he successfully introduced the Brotherhood’s ideology to a new generation of Shiite clerics. When his Fadaian-e Islam was established, its members represented the first modern attempt within Iran to build an independent Islamic society—along with a militia—whose purpose was to reform Islamic life and to endeavor to establish an Islamic state.

The Palestinian cause lay at the center of Fadaian-e Islam’s revivalist ideology, and in retrospect, the Devotees appear to have played a pioneering role in making the anti-Israel struggle a central issue for the Iranian religious community, which hitherto had generally not concerned itself with Arabian affairs. In Safavi’s view, the battle against Israel wasn’t simply a local conflict, but part of a larger, regional Islamic struggle against modern government, including the Iranian monarchy.

In fact, one of the reasons for Safavi’s hostility toward the monarchy stemmed from an incident in which the Shah prevented Safavi from mobilizing and deploying

5,000 volunteers to fight against Israel. In a speech at the Faiziya religious school, Safavi said, “If we want to destroy Israel, we have to start from Tehran; that is to say we have to first eliminate [the] Pahlavi regime in order to be able to fight Israel.”<sup>8</sup> For Fadaian-e Islam, the Shah’s regime was politically and morally corrupt, and complicit in supporting the “Jewish occupier” of Palestine. The movement unleashed a campaign within Iran to delegitimize the monarchy on the basis of its relationship with Israel and its lack of an Islamic identity. The group encouraged high-ranking Shiite clerics to take a stand against both Israel and the Shah.<sup>9</sup>

The Shah’s regime eventually apprehended Safavi, and in the course of his interrogations, the Devotees’ leader revealed extensive contacts between his organization and the Sunni revivalist movement, including the Iraqi *Jamyyat Montade Al-Nashr*, the Syrian *Jamyyat Al-Ulama*, the Egyptian *Shobban Al-Muslemin*, as well as the Muslim Brotherhood’s various branches in Egypt, Syria and Iraq.<sup>10</sup> Because of these unorthodox relationships with foreign movements and the assassination of government officials like General Haj Ali Razmara, the Shah’s regime dealt with Fadaian-e Islam aggressively and condemned its leaders to death. Not surprisingly, the Arabian Muslim Brotherhood eventually emerged as a leading critic of Mohammad Reza Shah and his policies against Shiite Islamism.

Safavi’s Brotherhood-inspired Fadaian-e Islam left an indelible mark on Iranian religious and political life. Among other things, it helped to steel popular Muslim enmity against the monarchy, and ultimately laid the philosophical groundwork for the Khomeinist Revolution of 1979. One of the Devotees’ most decisive achievements, which lasts to this day, was its radicalization of the culture, ideas, and institutions of the Shiite clerical establishment.

For its part, the clerical establishment was initially split over Fadaian-e Islam and how to regard Safavi’s heterodox teachings. Safavi was of course himself a cleric, and many other younger scholars, including Ayatollah Abulqassem Kashani and Ayatollah Rouhollah Khomeini, the father of the 1979 Islamic Revolution, became early supporters of the Devotees against the regime and the perceived corruptions of Iranian society.

Yet despite the Devotees’ emergence from within the clerical class, the traditional strata of the Iranian clerical establishment—including the most revered and emulated religious authority of the time, Ayatollah Mohammad Hossein Boroujerdi—shunned the Fadaian-e Islam and their ideas. Safavi dismissed the charges of the clerical establishment, claiming his movement followed a higher authority and ideals than the clerics and their traditional mores. For example, when Ayatollah Boroujerdi renounced Fadaian-e Islam’s use of coercive tactics in securing funding from the people to aid its struggle of creating an Islamic state, Safavi replied, “Our intention is to borrow from people. What we take is for establishing a government based on the model of

Imam Ali's government. Our goal is sacred and prior to these tools. When we established an Ali government-like state, then we give people their money back."<sup>11</sup>

Fadaian-e Islam unleashed a string of pronouncements against the clerical establishment's higher-ups. They found fault with the jurisprudence of Boroujerdi without explicitly naming him, and argued that traditional Shiite jurisprudence was irrelevant and unresponsive to the requirements of the modern era. Here, the Devotees' assault on traditional authority resembled the attacks of revivalist movements like the Brotherhood and the Jamaat-e-Islami on the established ulama in the Sunni world. The Devotees even proposed a plan for dramatically transforming the clerical establishment so that it would best serve the establishment and goals of an ideal Islamic state.<sup>12</sup> Eventually, this line of attack went so far as to call for the excommunication of Boroujerdi from the clerical establishment and a call to defrock him of his clerical turban and mantle.<sup>13</sup> This request to forcibly remove a religious leader was the first of its kind in Shiite history. A few decades later, however, the defrocking of religious scholars who opposed Shiite Islamism had become common practice in the Islamic Republic.

Revolutionary Iran's founders—including Ayatollah Rouhollah Khomeini and Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran's current Supreme Leader—were all deeply influenced by Fadaian-e Islam, and by extension, by the Brotherhood revivalist ideology that undergirded Safavi's teachings. In his autobiography, Ali Khamenei says that he entered into the world of politics under the influence of Navvab Safavi. Today's Supreme Leader himself became an early champion and translator of the works of the Brotherhood intellectual, Said Qutb.

Had it not been for Fadaian-e Islam's early sympathetic support of the Muslim Brotherhood, many of the philosophical writings of the Muslim Brotherhood might never have been as influential in Iran. But a massive process of translating Sunni revivalist authors from Arabic to Persian started less than a decade after Safavi's execution. In addition to Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's translations of Said Qutb, other Brotherhood revivalists—including Said's brother, Mohammad Qutb—were also extensively translated into Persian. Besides the works of these Egyptian writers, the main writings of Abul Ala Mawdudi and other Pakistani and Indian Islamists were translated into Persian at around the same time. These books became the main source of nourishment for Iranian militant clerics' sermons and writings during the pre-revolution era.<sup>14</sup>

Iran's revolutionary generation discovered in the works of the Brotherhood a new conceptual apparatus that permitted them to both reject the sources of traditional Shiite authority and to elaborate a new Islamic ideology that aimed at being fully competitive with secular and modernist ideologies. Among other things, the Brotherhood's writings provided enticing depictions of a militant Islam that sought political power,

the implementation of the sharia, and resistance against the West and communism that helped shape the political rhetoric of Iran's revolutionary era. But the Brotherhood thinkers also supplied theoretical nourishment for the development of a uniquely Shiite theory of the Islamic state. In fact, Ayatollah Khomeini's own theory of Islamic government, or "the Guardianship of Jurist" (*vilayat-e-faqih*), was elaborated under the influence of Rashid Rida's *Al-Imamat al-Uzma va al-Khilafat al-kubra*, in which Rida theorized about the construction of an Islamic government ruled by Muslim jurists.<sup>15</sup>

## Sectarian Conflict and Ideological Alliance

THE HISTORICALLY-ROOTED RIVALRY BETWEEN SHIITE AND SUNNI ISLAM IS SELDOM addressed in the writings of modern Islamism's spiritual fathers. In fact, writers like Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and Mohammad Abduh were more inclined toward the ideals of pan-Islamism and unity among Islam's various sects. They sought to discover a common ground between divergent Islamic traditions on the basis of what they perceived as Islam's original unity and its forgotten spirit of intra-Muslim solidarity. The ideal of Islamic unity also appealed to traditional Shiite and Sunni authorities such as the aforementioned Mohammad Hossein Boroujerdi at the Shiite seminary in Qom, and Shaykh Mahmoud Shaltut of Cairo's Al-Azhar Seminary.<sup>16</sup>

Gradually, however, under the influence of Rashid Rida (who was more influenced by Wahhabi ideology than was his teacher, Abduh) and Said Qutb, Arabian Sunni revivalism began to exhibit some anti-Shiite leanings. In fact, the Muslim Brotherhood's anti-Shiite inclinations were noticed by some Shiite clerics, including Hossein Modarresi Tabatabai, who traveled to Lebanon and Egypt during the 1970s. In his travelogue Tabatabai wrote that it seemed as if the Brotherhood believed that it is a religious "duty to avoid Shiite books, not to read them and not to let others to read them, because [they believe that] Shiite books are 'religiously misleading' [i.e. they contain theological errors or immoral points]."<sup>17</sup>

As we've seen, Tabatabai's motivation for writing *Al-Mizan* wasn't simply to produce a modernist commentary on the Quran on the model of Rida's *Al-Manar*. Rather, he sought to develop a uniquely Shiite exegetical mode that was critical of Rida's Sunni views and supplied a Shiite alternative to them. One of Tabatabai's most prominent disciples, Ayatollah Abdullah Javadi Amoli, taught a course in which he insisted that clerics should study *Al-Mizan* in order to inoculate themselves against the anti-Shiite influence of *Al-Manar*. *Al-Manar*, Ayatollah Amoli argued, "did nothing but ignore the hadith [in which the Prophet appoints Ali as the first caliph of Muslims] and hence, beginner students should avoid reading *Al-Manar*... unfortunately our [Shiite] seminaries, instead of following the path of *Al-Mizan*, are following the model of *Al-Manar*."<sup>18</sup>

Ayatollah Amoli's concern, that Sunni revivalist influences were leading Shiites away from Shiism as such, was an anxiety shared by many Shiite scholars at the time, including both traditionalists and reformists. In the politically-charged atmosphere in Iran, into which Islamist revivalist ideology was introduced, the underlying anti-Shiite tendency of the Muslim Brotherhood tended to be overlooked. In fact, some revolutionary clerics who translated the Muslim Brotherhood's works mentioned in their "translator's notes" that, while they might not personally agree with certain ideas expressed in those books, their concerns over intra-Islamic sectarianism were secondary to their primary goal of disseminating the ideological core of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Nonetheless, the doctrinal differences between the Muslim Brotherhood, and the Shiite Islamism that it helped inspire, could not be completely overlooked in favor of their mutually shared political agendas and pan-Islamic identity. This especially proved to be the case once the Shiite Islamists managed to seize power in Iran in 1979. Rather than merely reflect upon and advocate the creation of an Islamic state, Iran's new rulers were forced to actually attempt to govern one. And while both Sunni and Shiite Islamism agree on the principle that the essential goal of the Islamic state is to implement the sharia, there are important discrepancies between different Islamic legal schools over what this actually means and requires. In a predominantly Shiite country like Iran, it was not surprising that Shiite clerics decided to propagate their own uniquely Shiite understanding of the sharia.

Thus, while Iran's revolutionaries insisted on the pan-Islamist character of their revolution, their uniquely Shiite identity, and the Shiite character of their regime stoked concerns and even fears among Sunnis. These have served to complicate Iran's subsequent efforts to export its revolution and to become the leader of the pan-Islamist revival.

## The Dilemmas of Transnational Ideology

THE CONCEPT OF MUSLIM UNITY LIES AT THE CORE OF MANY, THOUGH CLEARLY NOT all, streams of Sunni and Shiite revivalism. As a political ideal, Islamic unity has often proven to be a powerful rhetorical tool in efforts to mobilize diverse peoples in the service of a common political agenda. Indeed, that political agenda often becomes the reason for Islamic unity itself: Sunni and Shiite Islamists routinely claim, for example, that resistance against the West requires that Muslims put aside their religious differences. Perhaps most notoriously, Iran's championing of Hamas, the Muslim Brotherhood offshoot in Gaza, is one way in which the largely Persian and Shiite Islamic Republic has sought to curry political favor and prestige within Arab

and predominantly Sunni countries. This has certainly been a successful strategy for Iran in that it has helped the Islamic Republic win the hearts and minds of many elements, not only within Hamas but also within the larger Brotherhood universe in Egypt and elsewhere in the region.<sup>19</sup>

Yet despite its political utility, and despite the fact that both Brotherhood and Shiite Islamists see Muslim unity as a requirement of religious law, Islamic unity is difficult to justify much less sustain by existing Sunni and Shiite religious paradigms. In fact, from the perspective of traditional Islamic jurisprudence and theology, neither Sunnis nor Shiites are able to find sufficient common ground for convergence, since the points of divergence between these two branches of Islam are over concepts that define their respective religious beliefs and practices. Even the concept of God in both sects is shaped differently, and by two separate conceptual apparatuses. Of course, this has not prevented modern Sunni and Shiite Islamism, with their expressed contempt for the pieties and other encumbrances of Muslim tradition, from striving to find new ways to transcend their historically-rooted differences.

The 1979 Iranian revolution—and the Islamic Republic’s subsequent efforts to export its revolution across the Muslim world, including to Sunni Arab societies—has marked the most ambitious effort to date to overcome these differences. Both the Brotherhood and the emergent revolutionary Shiite state have continued to seek to work together in a cross-national framework to promote Islamist ideology and political unity. Yet this agenda has also presented challenges for both movements. Among other things, it has required these movements to effectively ignore or to seek to minimize the legal and religious aspects of their respective traditions, and to focus more on Islam’s political dimension. Yet as a purely political matter, the spirit of transnational, intra-Islamic solidarity has proven difficult to sustain over the long term in an era where politics is shaped not only by religion, but also by national and other identities.

The triumph of the 1979 revolution alarmed the Arab regimes. This was so because of revolutionary Iran’s belligerence toward them and its consequent expansionist regional policies. The Arab regimes were also fearful because Shiite Islamism’s success in toppling the Shah’s pro-Western, secular government encouraged Sunni Islamists to think that their own secular rulers could be overthrown. Within this context, it was not surprising that Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood at first welcomed the Iranian revolution led by Ayatollah Khomeini, despite their divergent religious identities.

But the Brotherhood’s public support for Iran faded after Egyptian President Anwar al-Sadat was assassinated by Khalid al-Islamboli on October 6, 1981 and the Egyptian government unleashed a new wave of repression against groups espousing pan-Islamist ideology. The Muslim Brotherhood subsequently became more reticent in its praise of the Islamic Republic of Iran (Tehran, for its part, would eulogize Sadat’s assassin

Islamboli as a martyr). Under Mubarak's rule, crackdowns on the Brotherhood in Egypt forced the group to conceal its pan-Islamic ambitions. Other developments—including the Iran-Iraq War, which lasted for nearly a decade from 1980-1988, and exacerbated already tense relations between Sunni and Shiite and Arab and non-Arab populations throughout the Middle East—further worked to exert pressures on the pan-Islamist rhetoric and agenda of the Brotherhood.<sup>20</sup>

In part, as a consequence of the new pressures to downplay its pan-Islamic ideals in its political discourse, the basic religious differences between Sunnism and Shiism became a central problematic for the Brotherhood's ideology. For instance, in January 1982, Umar Tilmisani, then the leader of the Muslim Brotherhood, told the Egyptian weekly magazine *al-Msuwwar*: “We supported him [Khomeini] politically, because an oppressed people had managed to get rid of an oppressive ruler and to regain their freedom. But from the doctrinal point of view, Sunnism is one thing and Shiism is another.”

The more the Sunni-Shiite divide was conceived by the Brotherhood as a problem of religion, the more the Brotherhood's thinkers sought to develop religion-based means to overcome it. In 1985, for example, Tilmisani wrote in the Egyptian magazine *Addawa* (no.105) that “the convergence of Shiism and Sunnis is now an urgent task for the jurists.” He added, “The [early] contact between the Muslim Brotherhood and [Iranian clerics] was not done in order to make Shiites convert to Sunni Islam, but the main purpose was to comply with Islam's mission to converge the Islamic sects as much as possible.”

Despite this and subsequent efforts to discover a new basis for Sunni-Shiite convergence, political developments have continued to frustrate the Brotherhood's search for Islamic unity. In recent times, the general resurgence of Iranian power and influence has stirred up considerable controversy within Sunni Arab circles, including within the Brotherhood, over what Iran ultimately seeks, and what, in turn, should be the proper Sunni and Arab reaction to it. On this issue, the Brotherhood is deeply divided between those who adhere to a pan-Islamist ideology and those who primarily see the Brotherhood as a Sunni, Arab, or nationalist movement. This internal Brotherhood debate will continue to be a defining dynamic in Sunni revivalism's future, with no clear resolution in sight.

Meanwhile, Shiite Islamism has sought its own resolution to the Sunni-Shiite divide and the dilemmas posed by the contradictions between its identity as a pan-Islamist movement and its actuality as ruling over a predominantly Shiite state. This resolution was found in a ruling elaborated by Ayatollah Khomeini that held that the Islamic Republic's Supreme Leader is authorized to overrule what is prescribed by the sharia in favor of the regime's interests. Khomeini made it clear that in any contradiction between Islamic law and the interests of the regime, the ruling jurist

is obligated to prioritize the interest of the regime and to ignore the sharia. Accordingly, the Islamic government remains in an emergency state and considers safeguards to its survival its top priority, above both national and religious laws. On October 27, 2009, in a public speech, General Mohammad Ali Jafari, the commander-in-chief of Revolutionary Guard said, “The Islamic Republic is a divine sacred government whose safeguarding is prior even to performed prayer”—(that is, the defense of the republic has priority over *Salat* or *Namaz*, the obligatory Islamic prayers).

In practice, this view has meant that Iran has pursued Islamic unity as a principle of its foreign policy while simultaneously pursuing more exclusivist and discriminatory policies at home in accord with regime interests. The Iranian government, for example, has destroyed Sunni mosques and seminaries in the politically restive southeastern provinces of Sistan and Baluchistan, and exercises a comprehensive discriminatory policy against Sunni Kurds in Iranian Kurdistan. The government appears to be less biased toward the Brotherhood’s Iranian-based branch, whose activities actually appear to be favored by the government.<sup>21</sup> Internationally, however, the government uses its relations with Sunni groups to serve its own agenda, with little concern for religious differences or for that matter, for stirring up sectarian conflict. The Islamic Republic has even forged strong working relations with anti-Shiite Islamists.<sup>22</sup>

## Conclusion

DESPITE THE HISTORICALLY-ROOTED POLITICAL AND RELIGIOUS RIVALRY BETWEEN Shiism and Sunnism, various currents of modern Islamist revivalism, including most especially Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood and Iran’s Shiite Islamism, have sought to overcome their respective traditions and to forge ever closer ties between Islam’s two branches in the spirit of Muslim political unity. Present day circumstances have given rise to new common ground, new boundaries and new frameworks between the two groups for ideological convergence and cooperation. As a consequence of this, both sects have taken on roles radically different from those they once played in the traditional world.

And yet, none of modern Islamism’s various ecumenical efforts to bridge the Sunni-Shiite divide have been particularly fruitful or politically sustainable over the long-term. Despite their common sources in modern reformism and decades of efforts by both Sunni and Shiite clerics to peel away their traditional differences, problems inevitably arise when one of these branches of Islamism exercises power. These problems emerge, in part, from a basic ideological contradiction within some strands of Islamism between the ideals of pan-Islamic unity and the principle that Islamism’s primary

goal is to implement the sharia. Since the latter goal requires seeking guidance and a model from the schools of traditional jurisprudence, efforts to implement the sharia inevitably reflect an exclusivist or religiously partisan character.

Nevertheless, the ideal of Muslim unity persists in large part because of its political utility. The Islamic Republic of Iran especially has used it to make alliances with Sunni groups, including the Muslim Brotherhood, in order to promote its foreign agenda. As such, while the mistrust between Shiites and Sunnis is not easily resolved, modern Islamist ideology has created common ground for cooperation between these historically rival sects.

## NOTES

1. The official website of the Muslim brotherhood:  
<http://www.ikhwanweb.com/Article.asp?ID=3705&SectionID=0>.
2. For a brief account on the influence of the Pakistani group, as well as the Muslim Brotherhood, on Iranian Islamic fundamentalism see: Enayat, Hamid, *Modern Islamic Political Thought* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982) pp. 69-110.
3. For the theological stats of "Imam" in Twelver Shiism see: Amir-Moezzi, Mohammad Ali, *Le guide divin dans le Shi'ism original, Aux sources de l'ts of "Imam" in twelver Shiism* see: Amir-Moezzi, Mohammad Ali, *Le guide divin dans le Shi'ism original, Aux sources de l'ésotérisme en Islam*, (Paris: Verdier.1992).
4. Al-Khoi, Al-Sayyed Abul Qassem Al- Moussavi, *Al-Bayan fi Tafsir Al-Quran*, Dar-Al-Twohid lennashr wa al-towzi, Al-Kuwait, fourth edition, 1979. In 1962, Morteza Motahhari, an acclaimed disciple of Mohammad Hossein Tabatabai said, "Almost a month ago, one of our scholars traveled to Atabat (four Shiite holy cities in Iraq). He said, "I met with Ayatollah Khoi. I asked Ayatollah Khoi, 'why did you quit your tafsir (Qurani commentary) course?' Khoi replied: "There are some problems and difficulties in teaching tafsir.' I told him in Qom Allameh (Mohammad Hossein) Tabatabai had continued his tafsir course and spent most of his time on that. 'So why [you do not do the same]?' Khoi said 'Mr. Tabatabai has sacrificed. He has lost his social credibility:" see Motahhari, Morteza, *Maj-mooe-ye Asar*, Nashr-e Sadra, Tehran, 1387, Vol. 24, p. 534.
5. Hemaidah Al-Naifar has described Moujahedin's and Sayyed Qutb's Quranic commentaries as two examples of an ideological interpretation of the Quran: see: Al-Naifar, Hemaidah, *Al-Insan wa al-Quran wajhan le-wajh; Al-Tafasir al Quraniya Al-Moasara, Qeraaton fi Al-Manhaj*, Dar Al-Fikr, Syria, 2000.
6. For a discussion about jihad and martyrdom in Said Qutb's thought and a comparison between him, Khomeini and Mawdudi as three leaders of radical Islam see Cook, David, *Martyrdom in Islam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) pp.138-143.
7. Khosrowshahi, Sayyed Hadi, *Fadaian-e Eslam, Tarikh, Amalkard, Andisheh-ha*, (Qom: Kolbeh-ye Shorouq) p.147.
8. Khaterat va Mobarezat-e Shahid Mahallati, Markaz-e Asnad-e Enqelab-e Eslami, Tehran, 1376, p. 25, cited from Jafarian, Rasoul, p.197.

9. Influenced by the Navvab group's propaganda, many clerics issued a fatwa and banned trade with Jews. There were some other clerics who refused to do so. One of them was Ayatollah Kazem Shariatmadari who said, "Iranian Jews are our countrymen." See Milani, Abbas, *Eminent Persians: The Men and Women who Made Modern Iran, 1941-1979*, (Syracuse: University of Syracuse Press, 2009).
10. Jafarian, Rasoul, *Jaryan-ha va Sazman-ha-ye Mazhabi-Siasi-e Iran, Az Rouye Kar Amadan-e Mohammad Reza Shah ta Enqelab, Sal-ha-ye 1320-1357*, chap-e nohom, (Tehran: Khane-ye Ketab, 1387) p. 207.
11. *Ibid*, p.213.
12. Here, an interesting parallel can be drawn between the rivalry and clashes of Fadaian-e Islam and the clerical establishment in Iran, and the tension between the Muslim Brotherhood and the Sunni clerical establishment in Egypt and elsewhere.
13. Rahnoma, Ali, *Niroo-ha-ye Mazhabi bar Bestar-e Harakat-e Nehzat-e Melli*, (Tehran: Gam-e no, 1384) pp.57-76.
14. Ayatollah Ali Khomeini translated *Al-Mustaqbal le haza al-Din*, (Ayandeh dar Qalamrov-e Islam, Entesharat-e Sepideh, Mashhad, 1345), (Eddea Nameh-I Alay-he Tammaddon-e Gharb va Resalat-e Islam, Mashhad, 1349, with his brother Hadi); *Tafsir-o fi Zelal Al-Quran* (Tarjomeh-ye Tafsir-e fi Zelal Al-Quran, Tehran, 1362—this translation was completed before the revolution). Khomeini's brother, Mohammad, also a cleric, translated Qutb's *Khasaes Al-Tassavvor Al-Islami Vijeggi-ha-ye Ideology Islami*, (Tehran: Moassesseh-ye Melli, 1354). More than ten other works of Said Qutb were translated later on by others. For a detailed report on books translated from Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, Pakistani and Indian Islamists see: Jafarian, Rassoul, pp.378-388. Mohammad Ali Guerami, a cleric who translated *Al-Adala al-Ijtima'iyi fil Islam* into Persian, cites one member of the revolutionary movement who admitted to the influence of the book on other mujahidin members. Guerami, who was imprisoned during the Shah's reign, remembers that political prisoners were reading this book too. In the "translator's preface," Guerami states that the government should be run by clerics and Islamic jurists (*faqih*s), a philosophy which lives on until today in Iran. (Guerami, Mohammad Ali, *Khaterat, Markaz-e Asnad-e Enqelab-e Eslami*, (Tehran, 1381) pp.59-60).
15. For a brilliant account of Rida's treatise see, Kowtharani, Wajih, *Al-Dowla wa Al-Khilafa fi al-Khitabe al-Arabi Ebban al-Thowra al-Kamalia, Dar al-Talia, Beirut, 1996*. In his book, Rida praised the leadership role that Iranian clerics played in the "Tobacco Movement" against concessions to the British in the early 1890s, and he argued that Sunni clerics should similarly engage in political struggle. He accepted Shiite criticism of the way Abu Bakr and Omar, the first two caliphs, were elected, and admitted the necessity of *ijtihad* in understanding the religious texts. Khomeini's treatise *Hokoumat-e Eslami*, (Islamic Government), is clearly inspired by Rida's book, especially in its concept of Islamic government, the role of clerics, and the constitution of a government state.
16. For a detailed historical account of this tendency see: Brunner, Rainer, *Islamic Ecumenism in the 20th century, The Azhar and Shiism between Rapprochement and Restraint*, (Leiden: Brill, 2004).
17. Moddaressi Tabatabai, Hossein, "Az Forat ta Nil; Gozari bar Mahd-e Adyan-e Bozorg va Tamaddon-ha-ye Kohan" in *Khaterat-e Vaid*, No. 14, Azar 1351.
18. A report on his course is available online:  
<http://74.125.113.132/search?q=cache:4z7WxDNva6cj:www.tebyan.net/Hawzah/Hawzah+News/2007/3/4/34602.html+جداوی+یلم+نازی+مل+ان&cd=2&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=us>.
19. Although a Brotherhood offshoot, Hamas prefers to be seen as an independent Palestinian group, since their relationship with the Egyptian government, already tenuous, would be even more strained if Hamas were openly acknowledged to be connected to the Brotherhood. Meanwhile, it suits Cairo to downplay the Hamas-Muslim Brotherhood link. As for Hamas's links to Iran, during

- his February 2009 trip to Teheran, Hamas leader Khaled Mashaal expressed his gratitude for the Islamic Republic's ongoing generous support of Hamas, asserting that "the people of Gaza...have always appreciated the political and spiritual support of the Iranian leaders and nation." According to state television, Mashaal said that "Iran has definitely played a big role in the victory of the people of Gaza and is a partner in that victory." Iran was highly vocal in supporting Hamas during the recent Gaza War at a time when the Egyptian government was not. Iran, in fact, led the charge in seeking to embarrass and delegitimize the Egyptian government for its failure to openly help Hamas.
20. With the end the war, in fact, the Muslim Brotherhood was among the first from the Arab Sunni world to openly seek to foster ties with Iran. At the request of Shaykh Ghazzali, Iran agreed to unilaterally release the Egyptian prisoners of war who were members of Iraq Army. The Brotherhood's relations with Iran have since been strengthened.
21. While many barriers remain to a formal link between Iran and Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, the Brotherhood operates a branch in Iran that has legal permission from the government to function and works within the framework of the Iranian constitution. The Iranian Muslim Brotherhood is headquartered in Tehran and has several branches throughout the country. The group has expressed its commitment to the Islamic Republic's Constitution and has promised to participate in the political process. Jamaat-e Davat va Eslah, a Sunni group in the Iranian province of Kurdistan, first claimed to be an independent organization for all Iranian Sunnis, especially in the northwestern and southeastern regions of Iran. (See, for example, <http://www.eslahe.com/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=677&mode=thread&order=0&thold=0> But recently, Mohammad Mehdi Akif, the Muslim Brotherhood's General Guide, stated that the Muslim Brotherhood in Iran has renewed its baya, or pledge of allegiance, with the Egyptian MB. He denied rumors of a split. (See for example, <http://www.ikhwanonline.com/Article.asp?ArtID=47536&SecID=210> ) According to Jamaat-e Davat va Eslah's mission statement, one of its requirements is that its members must be Iranian nationals. Support for ethnic, religious and sectarian freedom and rights, and the ideal of pan-Islamic unity are among the group's goals. (The group's mission statement is available online: <http://www.islah-web.org/html/images/pdf/Asasnameh.pdf>) Clearly the group has close ties with Iranian reformists and supported their candidate in a previous 2005 presidential election. Apparently Jamaat-e Davat va Eslah is the largest and most prominent Sunni group in Iran, enjoying the government's permission to participate in political activity as well as in its own education program.
22. For example, according to the *New York Times*, the Saudi authorities allege that the leader of Al-Qaeda in the Persian Gulf, Abdullah Al-Qaraqi, lives and moves freely about in Iran, along with more than 100 Saudis who work for him. The U.S. Treasury Department announced that Saad bin Laden, son of Osama bin Laden, was arrested by Iranian authorities in early 2003, but that "as of September 2008 it was possible that Saad bin Laden was no longer in Iranian custody." According to the director of national intelligence, Michael McConnell, Saad bin Laden is now most likely in Pakistan.