

The Shiite Turn in Syria

By Khalid Sindawi

SYRIA HAS NEVER HAD A LARGE SHIITE POPULATION, BUT IN RECENT years there has been an increase in conversions to Shiism within Syria's Sunni, Ismaili, and Alawite populations. The geographical proximity of Iran to Syria has always led to a certain degree of Iranian influence there, which increased with Bashar al-Asad's succession to power in 2000 after the death of his father Hafiz. The Syrian government's encouragement of Iranian missionary activity may be the chief cause of the increase in conversions, but it is not the only one. The existence of an indigenous Shiite population and of historic Shiite shrines in various parts of Syria, the nature of Shiite worship, the media's power, the perceived victory of Hizbullah in the Lebanon war of 2006, the strategic wooing of influential Syrians, economic and educational inducements to the less affluent, and the dominance of the Alawite sect in politics are other factors that must be considered.

Accurate statistics about the various religious groups in Syria are not easy to come by because of the Alawite regime's sensitivity in matters of this kind. The *International Religious Freedom Report* for 2006, published by the U.S. State Department, notes that Alawites, Ismailis, and other Shiites constitute thirteen percent of Syria's population, or about 2.2 million people out of a total population of 18 million.¹

Another report, *Religious Communities, Creeds and Ethnic Groups*, published in 2005 by the Ibn Khaldun Center for Developmental Studies in Cairo, states that Shiites constitute one percent of Syria's population,² while the percentage of Alawites is between eight and nine. Shiite internet websites claim that Syria's Shiites comprise two percent of that country's population.³

In addition to its indigenous Shiites, Syria also hosts a community of Iranian

Shiite émigrés who reside mainly in Damascus, as well as a large number of Iraqi Shiites who arrived during the 1970s and 1980s as a result of the oppressive policies of the former Iraqi regime. The population of Iraqi Shiites grew still further in the wake of the invasion of Iraq in 2003.⁴

In general there is no social discrimination against Shiites in Syria. They are socially integrated and intermarry with other Muslim groups. The small number of Shiites in Syria may explain in part why they have not developed the kind of sectarian particularism seen in other countries in the region. Shiites live in most of Syria's provinces, although the highest proportion lives in Tartus, a province that accounts for 44 percent of the country's Shiite population. Some Shiites have attained high positions in Syria, among them Mahdi Dakhl Allah, a former Minister of Information, and Saib Nahhas, a prominent businessman. The best-known Shiite families in the country include the Nizam, Murtada, Baydun and al-Rumani families.

The Shiites in Syria do not obey a single "source of emulation" (*marja taqlid*).⁵ Some are followers of the Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani in Najaf, Iraq; others are devoted to the Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the highest religious authority in Iran; still others follow Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah in Lebanon.

The Alawite Factor

WHAT EXPLAINS THE RELATIVELY FAVORABLE TREATMENT OF SHIITES IN SYRIA? Their positive status existed even before the advent of the Bashar al-Asad government, which has taken a more openly favorable stance towards Iran and Shiism. Since 1963, Syria has been ruled by a regime that belongs to the Alawite sect, which has affinities with Shiism. The ruling Baath Party has always realized its precarious position, and its predominant Alawite membership tries to maintain a balance between having their claim of belonging to Twelver Shiism recognized, while not losing their ethnic and cultural identity as well as their secret religious doctrines.⁶ The party has therefore pursued policies aimed at legitimizing the Alawite creed, which has played a significant role in formulating Syrian policy toward Shiites.

One outcome of Alawite political dominance has been the importance that Syria attaches to its relations with the Shiites of Lebanon and Iran. These relations have from time to time been strengthened thanks to close personal ties with Lebanon's Shiite leaders. This was especially true of Musa al-Sadr at the beginning of the 1970s. Syria also gave special concessions to leaders of the Iranian opposition.⁷

Under Syria's one-party political system, the law forbids the establishment of political parties whose ideology is at variance with that of the ruling party. Syria's autocratic regime has insisted on keeping religion out of politics as the Muslim

Brotherhood found out to its great consternation on February 2, 1982, when they rebelled against the Syrian government. The Syrian government arrested 20,000 political prisoners among the Muslim Brotherhood and killed 10,000 people; 600,000 were blacklisted.⁸ This helps to explain why the Shiites have not developed any political organizations of their own, but have kept their distance from politics and restricted themselves to religious matters.⁹ Shiite religious rights are maintained, and despite the regime's secular ideology, it takes care to ensure the loyalty of the country's various religious establishments, perhaps to compensate for its general lack of popular support.

Survey Results

A PIONEERING STUDY FUNDED BY THE EUROPEAN UNION AND CONDUCTED BY field workers in the first six months of 2006 provides useful data on the Syrian religious landscape.¹⁰ It indicates that the provinces with an Alawi majority had a higher percentage of converts to Shiism than other provinces. According to this study, the numerical distribution of conversions to Shiism among Alawites in the various provinces is as follows: Tartus 44%, Latakia 26%, Hims 14%, Hama and Damascus 16%. Among Sunnis the percentages are as follows: Aleppo 46%, Damascus 23%, Hims 22%, Hama 5% and Idlib 4%. The number of converts in the provinces of Deir al-Zor, al-Raqqa and al-Qunaytara is too small to be significant. Among Ismailis the percentages of conversions in the various provinces are as follows: Hama 51%, Tartus 43%, Aleppo 3%, Damascus 2%, Idlib 1%.

The rate of conversion of Sunnis to Shiism is very low, 2% overall. Perhaps not surprisingly, some 7% of the Sunni Muslims who converted in the Damascus area belong to families that had originally been Shiite but became Sunnis in the course of time, such as the al-Attar, Qassab, Hasan, al-Lahham, Bikhtiyar and Ikhtiyar families. In Aleppo, 88% of converts to Shiism are said to come from such originally Shiite families.

According to the EU study, the known cases of Sunni conversion to Shiism cannot be ascribed to standard social or economic causes in any of the denominations. In Damascus, for instance, 64.4% of converts to Shiism belong to families of middle- to high-income merchants and professionals. The great majority (69%) have at least a high school education. In Aleppo, too, it was found that 61% of the converts came from the middle or upper classes. Among the poor, 39% of the converts belong to former Shiite families (they thus "renewed" their Shiite affiliation); their conversion thus probably had religious grounds. Among Sunnis the proportion of converts for financial reasons (in all the provinces included in the study) was a mere 3%.

According to the study, conversions rarely took place for mercenary reasons, apart from a few Sunni converts, especially university students, said they were not religious at all, but decided to convert “in order to obtain enough money to finish their studies or to marry, despite the fact that neither the Sunni nor the Shiite creed meant anything to them.” Another finding among Sunni converts, especially those who converted after the war in Lebanon in 2006, was that they claimed to have done so “out of love for Hezbollah and Hasan Nasrallah.”

As for Alawite converts in all the Syrian provinces, the study found that, unlike Sunni converts, the great majority (about 76%) were students or unemployed. Some military people have converted as well; this information came from an Alawite cleric in Tartus, since official information about military personnel is not easy to come by. Ismaili converts, like Sunni converts, overwhelmingly (84%) come from middle- to upper-class families.¹¹

The European Union’s study arrived at the following conclusions concerning conversion to Shiism in Syria, the last of which in particular might be worrisome news for the Alawite-dominated regime:

1. Most cases of conversion, in the past as well as in the present, occur among families that have traditional Shiite leanings (Ismailis, Alawites), not among the Sunni population.¹²
2. The low rate of conversion among Sunnis suggests that in fact no missionary activity has been taking place among them, especially in light of the fact that some Sunni converts belong to formerly Shiite families that had adopted the Sunni creed at one time or another.
3. The percentage of conversion for economic or financial gain is so low that “conversion for mercenary reasons” can be ruled out as a trend. (Apparently the result of this study does not reflect all those who converted to Shiism. Other studies indicate that a large percentage of the new Shiites in Syria converted for reasons of financial gain.)¹³
4. If the current rate of conversions among Ismailis and Alawites continues unabated, the former sect will die out within ten years and the latter within a quarter of a century.¹⁴

As we shall see, substantial anecdotal evidence from various provinces of Syria calls into question the second and third conclusions above, regarding the lack of missionary activity and mercenary conversions.

Syria's Shiite Shrines

SEVERAL INTERNATIONALLY IMPORTANT SHIITE SHRINES SERVE AS ANCHORS FOR THE Shiite population in Syria as well as attracting visitors from abroad. The shrines are financially self-supporting and belong to the Ministry of Religious Endowments. However, Iran has taken the opportunity to extend its influence into Syria by financing development in some of these locations.

Native Syrian Shiites live mostly in various neighborhoods of the capital itself, as well as in a few towns and villages in the provinces of Hims and Hama.¹⁵ Most Iraqi Shiites in Syria reside in the Sayyida Zaynab region to the south of the capital Damascus, an area that has grown up around one of the main shrines of Shiism, the tomb of Zaynab the Great¹⁶ daughter of Ali b. Abi Talib.¹⁷ Zaynab's tomb, which is used for lectures and religious celebrations, as well as for the dissemination of Shiite religious literature,¹⁸ is the largest Shiite center in Syria. In addition, numerous Iranian tourists visit the shrine. The number of pilgrims, which stood at 27,000 in the year 1978, rose to 202,000 in 2003. This increase in visits has also brought about an increase in Iranian influence in Syria.¹⁹

The shrine of Sayyida Ruqayya is the second most frequently visited Shiite shrine in Syria.²⁰ Due to its central location inside the capital, it draws large crowds for the daily public prayers and the weekly Friday prayer. The shrine's imam, Shaykh Nabil al-Halbawi, is one of the most prominent Shiite personalities in Syria.

At times the presence of Shiite shrines in Syria has led to Iranian involvement and has resulted in friction. At the beginning of the 1990s at the shrine of Sayyida Sukayna,²¹ located in the Small Gate (*al-Bab al-Saghir*) cemetery in Damascus,²² the Iranians constructed a large tomb over the old one. They purchased the land around it for a courtyard that would be capable of holding the hundreds, and later thousands, of Iranian pilgrims who began visiting the site, now called Sayyida Sukayna, Daughter of our Master Ali b. Abi Talib, Peace Be On Him. After having purchased the land, the Iranians also began constructing a very large *husayniyya* (Shiite house of prayer) at the grave site.

The large building in Darayya, located very close to Damascus, is still under construction, but already shops and residential buildings have arisen around it, as well as hotels, in preparation for the establishment of a Shiite center in the city of Darayya. Senior Iranian leaders visit the site and express their support for the project. The latest among these was Iran's Prime Minister Ahmadinejad, who arrived there on his latest visit to Syria, on January 20 2006.

The town's residents were aware of the Iranian plans for their city and protested

to the mayor, who was favorably disposed towards the residents. However, the Syrian regime, and especially its security agencies, took a harsh stand, fired the sympathetic mayor, and installed another one. The new mayor informed the townspeople that he could do nothing since the security forces had threatened dire consequences for the entire town if its residents continued to protest against the Iranian project. The signs on the shrine and the shops are all in both Arabic and Persian. As a result of the area's development, land prices and the rent of shops have skyrocketed.²³

Prior History of Shiism in Syria

SHIISM HAS A LONG HISTORY IN SYRIA. IT CAN BE TRACED BACK TO THE SEVENTH century CE, although it became prevalent there only in the tenth century CE. The Shiite creed continued to spread during the ascendancy of the Ismaili Shiite Fatimid dynasty (969-1172 CE), which ruled over Egypt and extended its control to Syria as well during the eleventh century CE. Subsequently, however, Shiism in Syria began to wane due to the animosity of the Ayyubid dynasty (1171-1250 CE) and later of the Ottomans (1517-1798 CE). By early modern times the adherents of Twelver Shiism in Syria had become a small minority.

The first prominent modern Shiite to have engaged in converting others to Shiism in Syria was the scholar Abd al-Rahman Khayr (b.1925). However, conversion did not take place in significant numbers before the activities of Jamil al-Asad, brother of the late Syrian President Hafiz al-Asad, in the 1980s.

The beginnings of the trend to conversion can be traced back to a visit that Musa al-Sadr made in 1974 to the elders of the Alawite community in the Latakia Mountains in the coastal area of the country. He was preceded by the Ayatollah al-Shirazi, who produced the well-known ruling according to which the people of that region were to be considered Twelver Shiites.²⁴ Jamil al-Asad began to encourage conversion to Shiism in this same region, especially among members of the Alawite community. He sent groups of Alawites to study Twelver Shiism in Iran, and upon their return to Syria they disseminated the Shiite creed among their fellow Alawites. Al-Asad built husayniyyas in the mountains, where before there had been only Alawite shrines. In order to make Shiism more acceptable to the people there he appointed a Shiite shaykh to head the Alawite al-Zahra Mosque in the city of Baniyas on the Syrian coast.²⁵

After Hafiz al-Asad came to power in 1970, some Sunni religious leaders expressed their opposition to him because of his Alawite religious affiliation. In order to ingratiate himself with them, al-Asad began attending services in mosques and gave dinner parties during the month of Ramadan for religious leaders following their fast.

He also had his brother Jamil set up the Alawite al-Murtada Association, with branches all over Syria. Hafiz al-Asad established the al-Murtada Association in order to show that the Alawites belonged to the larger community of Shiites so that they would not remain a minority.²⁶

After some in-depth research, Hafiz al-Asad asked the Ayatollah Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah to work in Syria. He opened an office in the Sayyida Zaynab neighborhood of Damascus, and later Syrian television began broadcasting programs with the Iraqi Shiite Shaykh Abd al-Hamid al-Muhajir. However, after Bashar al-Asad came to power in the year 2000, Fadlallah's influence waned somewhat; his place was taken by the Iranian embassy, working through its cultural attaché in Aleppo.

Although the late Syrian President Hafiz al-Asad maintained a strategic alliance with Iran, he did not permit the principles of the Iranian Revolution to gain a foothold in Syria. In fact, he systematically and firmly restrained the Iranian presence, and occasionally went so far as to close down institutions funded by Iran, including clinics. The Iranians attempted to gain entry into areas populated by Alawites by exploiting their religious affinities with them, but the Syrian president took a number of steps both inside and outside the Alawite community to ensure that the Iranian attempt to infiltrate the Syrian heartland did not succeed. The president also ordered the Mufti of Syria, Ahmad Kaftaru, to establish schools for Quranic study throughout Syria, including in predominantly Alawite regions of the country. These schools are called "al-Asad Institutes for Memorizing the Quran." He also forbade sending students to study religion in Iran.

Increasing Iranian Influence in Syria

WHEN BASHAR AL-ASAD BECAME PRESIDENT, THE BALANCE HIS FATHER HAD established began to shift in favor of Iranian influence and Shiism. Campaigns were instituted among ordinary Syrians to encourage them to convert to Shiism. Numerous sources have accused Dr. Ahmad Badr al-Din al-Hassun, Syria's Chief Mufti, of having secretly converted to Shiism. Many such accusations were heard in the wake of his sermon on last year's Ashura Day. In that sermon he made many statements sympathetic to Shiite doctrine, accusing all the Muslim caliphs, from Muawiya onward, of unbelief, and stating that Ali was God's proof for His creatures and that the existence of the Prophet's family ensured justice and peace in the world.²⁷

It should be noted, however, that the Islamist Syrian Member of Parliament Muhammad Habash, head of the Islamic Studies Center in Damascus, has denied the recent allegations that have appeared on websites and in the Arab press declaring the Chief Mufti's secret conversion to Shiism.²⁸

Under Bashar al-Asad's rule a number of changes have occurred in official propaganda, as reflected in the local and satellite television channels and radio stations available in Syria. Syrians have access to foreign networks like al-Manar, which broadcasts from Lebanon and promotes conversion to Shiism in Syria and elsewhere. There are also a number of local channels that broadcast Shiite traditions, pictures, lectures, and Quranic exegesis and openly carry missionary content. Syrian television gives a weekly (at least) hour-long broadcast slot to the Shiite missionary Abd al-Hamid al-Muhajir. It also gives broadcast time to the Iraqi Abd al-Zahra, especially during the month of Ramadan, when he reads Quranic verses followed by songs and hymns in praise of the Prophet's family. Another source of Shiite material is an FM radio station that broadcasts ideological and political messages similar to those of the Hezbollah radio stations in Lebanon and those belonging to the Supreme Council of the Iranian Revolution in Iraq.

The Asad regime promotes the media appearance of pro-Iranian shaykhs at the expense of Sunni notables. These Shiite clerics use the official media to give lessons whose content is liable to arouse conflicts between Sunnis and Shiites (an example being their attitude towards the Prophet's Companions). The positions they have taken have been met with very sharp reactions, especially in Damascus but in other areas as well, such as Aleppo and its environs.

Today there are reportedly more than five hundred husayniyyas under construction in Syria; according to other sources, this number refers just to Damascus. In addition, the regime has naturalized Iranians and pro-Iranian Iraqi Shiites. According to some sources, twenty thousand Iranians have been given Syrian citizenship.²⁹ This, however, has been disputed by Syrian Sunni clerics.³⁰

While the Syrian regime has granted Syrian citizenship to tens of thousands of Iranians, it has been denying citizenship to native Syrian Kurds for forty years. The Syrian regime also supports Iran in its repression of the Bedouins of Ahwaz in Iran (although they are Shiites, too). In October 2007 newspaper reports claimed that the Syrian regime had turned over to the Teheran government a number of Ahwazis who oppose the Iranian regime.

Observers point out that the close relations between Syria and Iran, especially since their strategic alliance in 1980, have enabled Iran to operate in Syrian territory. Thus senior Syrian and Iranian officials attend the various celebrations organized by the chancellery in Damascus on Iranian national holidays, such as the annual celebration in honor of the Iranian Revolution, and religious holidays, such as the death of Husayn on the day of Ashura.³¹

Tribal heads, especially in the al-Raqqa area, are invited by the Iranian ambassador to visit Iran free of charge, as are other notables in Syria, including professors at religious colleges. One such trip was made by a group of tribal leaders headed by

Hamid al-Jarba, the shaykh of the Shamr tribe, Faysal al-Arif, the shaykh of the Khafaja tribe, and Awwad al Awamleh, the shaykh of the al-Wahb tribe from the town of al-Buwayhij. Such visitors come back to Syria laden with presents and with bulging pockets.³²

Financial inducements play a notable role in Iranian promotion of Shiism. Poor people, for instance, are given loans in the name of Muslim solidarity, and eventually are told they do not have to pay it back.³³ Similarly, free medical care is provided in Iranian charity hospitals in Syria, such as the Imam Khomeini Hospital in Damascus and the Red Crescent Hospital and the Charity Hospital in Aleppo.

Syrian and Iranian Shiite missionaries sometimes offer cash to people, or offer to help them in their commercial or official dealings. Such inducements are usually offered to notables and heads of clans, especially in the area between the Euphrates and Tigris rivers, where this method is merely a continuation of the Iraqi system for controlling the people through the heads of tribes and clans. Another way to encourage converts is by providing them with a wife, or with basic necessities such as oil, sugar, rice, and butter.

The Asad regime has also imported a special Iranian militia whose task is to protect the government. The militia is composed of about three thousand Iranian troops as well as a number of units of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard that specialize in urban warfare. These troops operate alongside the Syrian Republican Guard, headed by Mahir al-Asad.³⁴

According to a number of sources,³⁵ those who display opposition to the wave of religious and political missionary work carried out by Iranian organizations—which is felt especially strongly in the Syrian province of al-Raqqa—and those who dare express disapproval of the fact that some poverty-stricken members of Bedouin tribes were converted to Shiism, claim that many of the Bedouin tribes converted to Shiism for financial motives. These critics attest that the Syrian government and Iranian missionary activity took advantage of the Bedouin's poverty to convert them to Shiism. In the al-Raqqa province, the opponents were liable to be arrested by Syrian security forces and accused of being Wahhabis or fundamentalists.

The Role of Education

EDUCATION IS ANOTHER TOOL USED BY THE ASAD GOVERNMENT TO PROMOTE Shiism and ties with Iran. For example, at the beginning of the 2006-2007 school year, a Shiite religious college was opened in the town of al-Tabaqa, with an enrollment of more than two hundred students. The Shiites had no trouble receiving a permit to open this college, although in the entire country there are only two Sunni

religious colleges, one in Damascus and the other in Aleppo. The latter had to wait decades for approval, which finally came in 2007. Recently it was reported that Iran has received permission from the Syrian authorities to establish a large Iranian university with numerous faculties.³⁶

Scholarships are made available for study at Qum and Teheran, especially for advanced students chosen for their academic or social background. These institutions give preferential treatment to students who support the authorities. Such students are then given jobs, as happened with Syria's Chief Mufti, Ahmad al-Hassun, and others. Some students are permitted to study at the *hawza* (Shiite seminary)³⁷ of the shrine of Sayyida Zaynab, where they do not pay tuition and are provided with a monthly, unconditional stipend. Lending libraries, called "stores" (*hawanit*) have been opened by the Iranians in all the Shiite centers in Syria. The libraries also distribute books free of charge and give prizes (of 1,000 Syrian pounds per book) to readers.³⁸

All of these measures encourage the study of Shiism. The Syrian Ministry of Education may have overreached, however, when it issued a ban on primary-school education in Sunni religious institutions of learning. Sunni religious scholars, and especially the Association of Ulema in Syria, declared this to be an oppressive step. At first, despite the tensions this step aroused within the Syrian cabinet, the regime did nothing to alleviate the situation. The Association of Ulema even met with President al-Asad himself to discuss the situation, but he refused to overturn his minister's decision. Ultimately, however, after the internal turmoil in Syria and the conflict between the Syrian Sunni leadership and the Iranian institutions came to a head, the Syrian regime decided to back off from its decision to abolish primary-school education in Sunni religious institutions of learning.³⁹

The Effect of the Lebanon War of 2006 on Shiite Conversions in Syria

IN THINKING ABOUT SHIISM IN SYRIA IT IS IMPOSSIBLE TO IGNORE THE ROLE OF Hezbollah, the Lebanese Shiite organization with ideological and strategic ties to Iran. While Syria was in control of Lebanon it provided the organization with political and military support, and in return Hezbollah was Syria's main ally in Lebanon.

The thirty-three day war between Israel and Lebanon in the summer of 2006 gave rise to a wave of admiration among Syrians for Hezbollah leader Hasan Nasrallah and his organization because of their resistance against Israel. As a result, Shiism came to be seen in a more positive light, and more Syrian Sunnis converted to Shiism. Hezbollah's perceived achievements and victories in the war also brought about

an increase in Iranian activity. According to Mustafa al-Sada, a young Shiite cleric who came into contact with numerous Sunnis who showed an interest in adopting the Shiite creed, “George Bush did us a service and unified the Arabs.” Al-Sada said that he knew seventy-five Sunnis in Damascus who had converted to Shiism since the beginning of hostilities in Lebanon in July 2007, and that the war gave additional impetus to the rising trend in recent years to adopt the Shiite creed.

Wail Khalil, for example, a twenty-one-year-old student of international law at Damascus University, says that “for the first time in my life I saw a war in which the Arabs were victorious.” Subsequently Khalil, a Sunni, began to observe Shiite rites, and he plans to convert completely to Shiism.⁴⁰

Since the war, pictures of Hasan Nasrallah and of Khamenei have been more widely displayed than the region’s other political leaders. Anyone walking through the streets of Damascus today will see pictures of President Bashar al-Asad alongside the Hezbollah leader. These pictures are displayed on shop fronts, private cars, buses, and walls. Local Syrian intellectuals explain that these pictures express patriotism rather than sectarian religious feelings,⁴¹ since Nasrallah has become more a national symbol than a religious one.⁴²

Charges and Countercharges

IN REACTION TO THE INCREASING PACE OF CONVERSION TO SHIISM IN SYRIA AND the Syrian government’s indifference, the prominent Saudi religious propagandist Salman al-Awda, head of the Islam Today Institute, sounded a warning on October 22, 2006. He pointed out that “Shiite expansion among Sunnis constitutes playing with fire.”⁴³ In statements to the press Awda declared that “Shiism is spreading apace in Syria especially, and in a number of other countries of the Muslim world as well. A part of this trend may be ascribed to political motives, in other words to show support for the Iranian political presence. But this does not mean that others do not confuse the political and ideological aspects.”

Awda points to the various ways the Shiite creed is being disseminated in Syria: “Material inducements are used to convince people to adopt Shiism. As a result husayniyyas have proliferated, and all attempts to oppose this trend have been put down.” Awda’s declarations came after a number of Iranian organizations constructed two shrines, one over the grave of the Companion Ammar b. Yasir and the other over the grave of the *tabii’i* Uways al-Qarni in the northeastern province of al-Raqqa, where Iranian cultural offices were opened as well.⁴⁴

Shiite clerics in Syria rebut Awda’s accusations. The two most prominent Syrian Shiite religious leaders in Syria, Abdallah Nizam and Nabil Halbawi have denied

that any “Shiite missionary campaign” is taking place among Sunnis and have demanded that the accusers produce evidence for their claims.

A prominent religious leader of the Alawite community, Dhu al-Fiqar Ghazal, has also denied any efforts to convert Alawites to Shiism. In a lengthy talk on arab-iyya.net⁴⁵ he spoke about the differences between Alawites and Shiites and stressed that the Syrian regime did not rule as an Alawite regime, and that the Alawites had gained their position thanks to the love of the people. He added that Syrians coexist well with each other and that the Alawite community is more open and secular than most, and willing to maintain dialogue with those who are different.

The Shiite cleric Abdallah Nizam, supervisor of Shiite institutions and shrines in Syria and a teacher at the Sayyida Zaynab hawza sent a letter of rebuke to Awda in which he said: “We wish to put al-Awda’s mind at ease; there is no danger to the Sunni creed here, and we oppose people selling their faith.”

Like Awda, former Syrian Vice President Abd al-Halim Khaddam, who opposes the present regime, accuses the Iranian ambassador in Damascus of engaging in missionary work in Syria. Khaddam claims “the Iranian ambassador in Damascus moves around Syria with greater freedom than its own Prime Minister.”⁴⁶ In an interview with UPI, Khaddam declared that the Iranian ambassador exploited the poverty in the country by building shrines where Companions of the Prophet supposedly stayed and by giving money to the poor, with the objective of building an Iranian party within Syria by means of converting people to Shiism.

Other prominent Syrians have accused the Iranian cultural chancellery in Damascus of activities that are not consistent with its declared aims; that it promotes conversion to Shiism in Syria, and that it actually operates under Iran’s Supreme Spiritual Leader Ali Khamenei, despite its official status as a part of the Iranian embassy.

Dr. Wahba al-Zuhayli, a well-known Syrian Islamic cleric and thinker, accused the chancellery of offering inducements in the form of cash, houses and cars in order to attract people to Shiism. He pointed out that “hundreds of Syrians in Deir al-Zor, al-Raqqa, Dar’a and the al-Ghuta region near Damascus have succumbed to the chancellery’s inducements and converted to Shiism” (according to a newspaper report from October 31, 2006 on the news website belonging to the Middle East Center in London).

The Shiite conversions have also roiled Sunni Islamists. The head of the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria, Ali Sadr al-Din al-Bayanuni, told the Quds Press Agency that “the entire conversion to Shiism activity in Syria is just an attempt to create confusion so as to bring about a change in the social composition of Syrian society.”

Conversion in Deir al-Zor

THE WAVE OF CONVERSIONS TO SHIISM IN THE DEIR AL-ZOR REGION CAN BE TRACED to the town of Hatla, where ten percent of the total population of thirty thousand has embraced Shiism. The conversions began with Umar al-Hammadi, a sergeant major in the army who served in western and southern Syria and converted to Shiism in 1979 while stationed in Dar'a. He is reported to have worked closely with the Iranians, and in the same year he also convinced his cousin and brother-in-law, Yasin al-Ma'yuf, to embrace the Shiite creed. At that time these were the only two converts.

In 1982 the Imam al-Murtada Association, founded by Jamil al-Asad, invited Syrian notables and tribal chiefs to the Association's headquarters in al-Qardaha and asked for their cooperation with its missionary activities. Al-Mayuf was appointed head of the Association's Hatla branch. The association was very active and spent great sums of money, until it was closed down by Hafiz al-Asad in the mid-1980s. But before it was disbanded, Yasin Mayuf was put in contact with Iran. He became one of the students sent to that country. He and others, including Ibrahim al-Sayir, continued to receive money from the Iranian Cultural Chancellery in Damascus, the Sayyida Zaynab *hawza*, and from a number of Shiites from the Persian Gulf.

After Mayuf came back from Iran at the beginning of the 1990s, Shiite influence began to be felt in public. Even the call to prayer in the Hatla mosque now included the phrase "and Ali is the regent of Allah." Mayuf, who had become a very wealthy man thanks to Iranian support, used his money to induce people to convert to Shiism, either by way of direct payments, or by letting shops in a bazaar he owned for a paltry sum. Next to his home, Mayuf built a prayer hall where Ashura commemoration ceremonies were held.

Husayn al-Raja, a relative of Mayuf, as the chief Shiite missionary in the Deir al-Zor region, also has become a wealthy man.⁴⁷ He has reportedly hosted large banquets to which he invited tribal notables and many people from the village. He has filmed the events and sent the videotape, which purportedly features people that he has converted to Shiism, to Iran. For this he has received great sums of money. He is also said to film gatherings, such as weddings and popular festivals, sending the videos to Iran on the same pretext. In fact, he allegedly sent one of his men to film cars on the highway between al-Raqqa and Deir al-Zor, which he then claimed to belong to people whom he had converted to Shiism.⁴⁸ At present Raja gives a weekly sermon in al-Raqqa.

A number of intellectuals⁴⁹ in the Deir al-Zor region are also active in promoting conversion to Shiism. One of these is Amir Shabib, owner of a bookstore called the Venerable Quran Bookshop on Deir al-Zor's main square. Another is Abdallah Hamdan, whose father converted to Shiism first, followed by his son in 1990. He is a cousin of

Yasin al-Mayuf. At the time of writing he sells books on the Euphrates Bridge near the al-Saraya Mosque. He gives away books on Shiism, especially to women and girls. (Among the books which are given away there: *Twelver Shiism* and *The Prophet's Family* by Muhammad Jawad Mughniya, and *The Prophet's Family in Noah's Ark* by Munir Ali Khan.) He sells other books on installment in order to attract more customers.

In the Deir al-Zor region, in the town of Hatla and its neighboring villages, at least six husayniyyas have been built recently.⁵⁰ Numerous husayniyyas can also be found in the surrounding villages. The land on which the husayniyyas are constructed is acquired for huge sums of money, as an inducement to the owners. Such transactions take place even in towns where there are no converts to Shiism, in order to gain a foothold in the area. Occasionally land is bought for a million Syrian pounds per dun-am, although its market price is no more than fifty-thousand. Increasing numbers of large and ornate husayniyyas are currently under planning and construction.

Muhammad al-Shamri reports that young converts to Shiism argue against the Sunni faith in front of their friends and colleagues while offering them monetary and material inducements. Marriages to willing Shiite women are quickly arranged for those whom they manage to win over; the brides are often Iranian. Shia converts also invite the villagers and tribe members to feasts and provide them with supplies such as rice, flour, sugar and the like. At first they do not call on their guests to convert, but merely attempt to win their hearts. Later, at a second or third feast, they will try to convince them to adopt the Shiite faith.⁵¹ Furthermore, it is reported that the aforementioned Yasin al-Mayuf and Husayn al-Raja brought bags of money from Damascus to Deir al-Zor during the Lebanon war in the summer of 2006, which was distributed among non-Shiite Lebanese refugees who came to the area, perhaps for purposes of conversion.

Money for conversions continues to arrive in the province, although sources differ about the precise origin. A man from the Persian Gulf area is said to arrive at Deir al-Zor once a month. According to some reports he, and not the Iranian Cultural Chancellery in Damascus, brings the money, although according to other reports the man and the Chancellery work in cooperation with each other. This man gives the money to Mayuf and Raja and tells them how much to distribute to each convert. The usual sum is five-thousand Syrian pounds per month.

Not all attempts to expand Shiite practice in the province have succeeded. For example, in 1996 Abd al-Hamid al-Muhajir⁵² made a journey through the provinces of Syria and visited centers of conversion, including the Ammar b. Yasir⁵³ mosque. The Syrian authorities ordered the preachers in the mosques and students to attend a sermon given by Muhajir, but its content aroused the anger of a number of Sunni clerics, who succeeded, with the help of some tribal leaders close to the regime, to put a stop to his travels throughout the country.

In 1998 a group of Shiite clerics visited the mufti of Deir al-Zor during the holiday

of Id al-Fitr. They attacked the Sunni creed, whereupon the mufti said to them: "I was with President Hafiz al-Asad just two days ago, and he told me that he did not want any sectarian strife here." With these words he foiled their plan to curse the Prophet's Companions.⁵⁴

Similarly, in 2003 a delegation of Shiite clerics from Damascus visited the Khalid b. al-Walid Mosque at the outskirts of Deir al-Zor. They informed the mosque's preacher that they had an official permit to search for tombs of members of the Prophet's family and to maintain them properly. They asked that he cooperate with them and that he let them supervise the mosque. When he refused, they attempted to harass him and to acquire the land around the mosque, where they intended to construct a large *husayniyya*. Their attempts did not succeed.

In 2006 some wealthy Shiite converts wanted to construct a *husayniyya* in the village of Ayn Ali. But a day after the foundations were laid, the villagers took them apart and removed them. At the moment of writing the attempt to construct the *husayniyya* has not been renewed.

Shiism in the Province of Dar'a⁵⁵

SOME TOWNS IN DARA, SUCH AS BUSRA AL-SHAM, HAVE HAD AN INDIGENOUS SHIITE population for a century, but their Shiites have professed to be Sunnis. This was the case until 1997 the arrival of Zaydan al-Ghazali, both the son-in-law of Rustum Ghazala, the former head of Syrian intelligence in Lebanon, and the cousin of Brig. Gen. Rustum al-Ghazali, head of Syrian Intelligence in Lebanon. A college graduate who joined the Muslim Brotherhood and later the al-Murtada movement, Ghazali embraced Shiism publicly and began to proselytize. He received financial support from Iran and gave inducements to young people, especially cash, furniture, books and clothing. He also promoted temporary marriages with young girls in order to satisfy men's sexual needs without committing them to permanent marriage. Anyone who opposed him found himself in prison or was threatened by the Syrian security forces, to which Ghazali was very close through his family connections.

Currently Ghazali holds the position of preacher at the Ali b. Abi Talib Mosque in the al-Zahira neighborhood of the city of Dara, a Sunni mosque that Ghazali took over by force.

The population of the province of Dara also contains a large Iraqi Shiite population that pre-existed the fall of Baghdad in 2003 and has continued to grow. In the city of Dara one entire street is occupied only by Iraqi Shiite merchants. They have built a *husayniyya*, where all who convert to Shiism can make use of such facilities as a kindergarten, a computer room and a library for children.⁵⁶

Abu Jafar al-Iraqi has had a profound influence on conversions to Shiism in this region. Iraqi engaged in missionary work among the wealthy, as well as among physicians, to whom he offered free trips to Iran; he also gave gifts and cash to the poor and to students. He attended meetings at which he cursed the Prophet's Companions and accuse Aisha of adultery. He disseminated hundreds of Shiite missionary books throughout the province and was the preacher at the recently constructed Great Messenger Mosque in Dara.

Iraqi left Syria for Iraq after the fall of Baghdad; his place was taken by Kazim al-Tamimi, a Shiite missionary, too, but with less of a presence than the former. For that reason Iraqi was called back, but for reasons unknown he left again two months after his return.

The building of husayniyyas has been an indicator of the increasing prominence of Shiism in the province of Dara, as well as a tool in the attempt to convert more Syrians. The first husayniyya in the city of Dara was built in 1976 near the airport, next to two Sunni mosques. Shiite clerics from Iran, Iraq, Lebanon and Syria are constantly invited to visit, in particular Abdallah Nizam, head of the Muhsiniyya School in Damascus, a powerful Shiite cleric and leader who takes part in every convocation of Shiite clerics in Syria. Other towns, ranging in population from 33,000 inhabitants to 5,000 inhabitants, also boast husayniyyas.⁵⁷ In some cases, such as in the town of al-Maliha al-Gharbiyya, the building of the husayniyya has led to a voluntary segregation of Shiites from Sunnis, and the Shiites have even given their stores and workshops new and typically Shiite names.

Conversion to Shiism has also taken place in many towns and villages where there are no husayniyyas. In the town of al-Sura, for example, a particular Shiite family is actively engaged in missionary work, providing inducements to young people to convert. It is reported that the father even offers his daughter in temporary marriage in order to attract young men. A third-year student at the Sayyida Zaynab Hawza, this young woman has supposedly entered into more than fifty temporary marriages within a span of a few months.⁵⁸

Conversion to Shiism in the Province of al-Hasaka⁵⁹

A NUMBER OF SOURCES⁶⁰ POINT OUT THAT SHIITE MISSIONARIES IN THE PROVINCE of al-Hasaka (whose population is mostly Kurdish) have recently begun to be very active. Flyers calling on people to convert, targeting mainly young people and the unemployed, have been distributed in shops in the city of al-Hasaka; these brochures

promise a monthly stipend of between 5000 and 10,000 Syrian pounds (about \$200) to converts. Shiite missionaries exploit the region's poverty, with the full knowledge of the local authorities. According to some sources this activity is sponsored by the Iranians, through their cultural attaché in Aleppo, with the cooperation of the Syrian intelligence services. The attaché is a cleric by the name of Ayatollah Abd al-Sahib al-Musawi, a sophisticated Iranian Arab, who speaks fluent Arabic.

The leaders of the missionary movement in the province have allegedly trained a great number of people, either by sending them to Iran on full scholarships, for the purpose of studying the Shiite creed, or by financing trips to visit family members in southern Lebanon. The missionaries enjoy the protection of the Syrian authorities, who allow them full use of the province's mosques and grant them complete freedom of movement.⁶¹

The leaders of the conversion movement also buy land for the construction of husayniyyas. The latest such acquisition was in the Kurdish city of Qamishli. Recently, too, a husayniyya dedicated to the Prophet's family was constructed in al-Nashwa, financed by a Shiite businessman from Kuwait.

The Shiites in the al-Hasaka Religious College instituted the recital of prayers for the birth of a Shiite saint; some of the college's teachers also teach that temporary marriages are sanctioned by Muslim law.⁶²

The leading Shiite missionaries in the province are Mahmud Nawaf al-Khalif, Dr. Hasan al-Ahmad al-Mashhadani and, perhaps the most prominent, the black-turbaned Abu Firas al-Jabburi (Mustafa Khamis), in addition to Abd al-Muhsin Abdallah al-Sarawi, author of a number of books,⁶³ among them *Eight Issues Easily Understood*. At least one of the province's missionaries owns a large bookstore, where weekly meetings are held and people are enticed to adopt Shiism.⁶⁴

Conversion to Shiism in Latakia

CONVERSIONS TO SHIISM IN THE CITY OF LATAKIA⁶⁵ BEGAN IN THE 1980S, AT the instigation of the al-Murtada movement. This movement constructed some seventy-six husayniyyas in the Latakia region, the largest of which, in the Damsarkhu neighborhood, has an area of 6000 m², and the smallest, in the village of Ayn al-Tina, has just 40 m². In the past these husayniyyas were not used for missionary activity at all; rather, they served as meeting places for people opposed to the government. However, after the death of President Hafiz al-Asad, when his son Bashar enabled Teheran to gain increasing influence—especially after the fall of Baghdad—the Iranians began to manage the affairs of the Shiites in Latakia. This new phase was inaugurated by the construction of a hawza (The Great Messenger Hawza) in the

al-Azhari neighborhood of Latakia, on a tract of land belonging to a Sunni endowment. The hawza's manager is an Iraqi citizen, a representative of Khamenei, by the name of Ayman Zaytun.

In the al-Ziraa neighborhood a cultural center has been constructed that employs over three-hundred Iraqis and Lebanese whose job it is to approach people and offer them inducements to convert. Iranian officials visit the province regularly. While visiting the area, the Iranian Minister of Housing gave away three hundred newly built apartments to new converts to Shiism in Latakia. Even the head of Iran's Expediency Discernment Council, Rafsanjani, visited the region and called on the inhabitants to visit Iran.

Neither the province governor nor the provincial party secretary, the two highest officials in the region, go anywhere without Ayman Zaytun, whose picture often appears in the daily newspapers. Zaytun has a say in all administrative appointments in the city, and quite openly promises jobs to converts to Shiism. At a closed meeting he went so far as to boast that "the West thinks we shall attack it from Sidon and Tyre, but we shall surprise them from Latakia and Tartus." Shiite leaders in Latakia promise young people jobs, acceptance to university, and even wives. Those who want to participate in a holy war are sent to southern Lebanon.

Syrian universities and colleges also display the effects of Iranian influence. For example, the president of Tishrin University in Latakia provided two buildings on the campus to the Iranian ambassador in March 2007 for the purpose of establishing an Islamic college within the university.

Conversion to Shiism in Aleppo

ALEPPO, TOO, HAS BEEN EXPERIENCING THE PHENOMENON OF CONVERSIONS TO Shiism, with several prominent residents serving as missionaries.⁶⁶ The main Shiite center in Aleppo is the al-Nuqta Mosque near Jabal al-Hawshan. Near the city there are two Shiite villages, Nubbal and al-Zahra, whose inhabitants are very active in Shiite affairs.

Shiites control the Aleppo Red Crescent, the Red Crescent Hospital in the city is Iranian. The Iranian Consulate in Aleppo, headed by Abd al-Sahib al-Wahid al-Musawi, is very actively engaged in missionary work among university students. The consulate is quite close to the campus and provides meals to students in the hope of inducing them to convert.⁶⁷ Shiites in Aleppo typically hold large celebrations on the Prophet's birthday, the birthday of the sixth Imam Jafar al-Sadiq, and during Islamic Unity Week.

An example of the latter was the celebration on May 30, 2002, which took place

at the al-Nuqta (“The Drop”) shrine; the celebration was attended by some five thousand Shiite men and women, mostly from the villages of Nubbal and al-Zahra, as well as some Sunnis. The festivities were very carefully prepared by the Iranian consul in Aleppo, including a large screen for those who were not close enough to see the notables, along with loudspeakers and projectors. The walls were covered with large signs on which traditions about the Prophet were inscribed. The celebration opened with the recitation of a few Quranic verses.

Hezbollah figured prominently there. Hasan Nasrallah’s picture was placed next to those of Khomeini and Ali Khamenei. The organization was represented by Nasrallah’s deputy, Shaykh Naim Qasim, who spoke about Hezbollah’s achievements in southern Lebanon in terms of their propaganda value to the Shiites. He was followed by a Shiite poet, Abd al-Karim Taqi, who recited a poem about conversion to Shiism. At the end of the celebration the Iranian cultural attaché al-Musawi spoke, and mentioned a number of books that might prove useful for promoting people’s faith, such as *Nahj al-balagha* and *al-Sahifa al-Sajjadiyya*. But perhaps the most significant event at the celebration was a mass marriage ceremony, in which sixty couples were wedded at the Iranian embassy’s expense (as proclaimed by the announcer at the event). Musawi also announced that each of the grooms would receive a gift from the Iranian embassy and Khamenei’s office.⁶⁸

Conversion to Shiism in Idlib

SIMILAR ACTIVITIES PROMOTING CONVERSION HAVE TAKEN PLACE IN THE province of Idlib.

Towards the end of 2006 a religious Shiite college opened in the province. Its curriculum is Iranian and the school offers numerous inducements to potential converts. Shiite missionaries are very active in the province. Some of them hand out monetary inducements, such as a sum of 2500 Syrian pounds, to whomever names his son Hasan or Husayn.⁶⁹

One of the most prominent centers of Shiite activity in the province is Zarzur, a village near the Turkish border. The first conversions to Shiism in the village occurred in 1945, performed by Muhammad Naji al-Ghafri, himself a convert to Shiism. His missionary activities were supported by the Iranian embassy in Damascus, which maintained regular contact with him and financed the construction of a husayniyya.

Today a fourth of the village’s inhabitants are Shiites. Whole clans have converted, including the Tarmash, the al-Manjad, and the Asayyad. By now Shiism has also spread into some neighboring villages, although in smaller numbers.⁷⁰

Conversion to Shiism in Hims and the Coast

IN HIMS THERE IS A LARGE CONCENTRATION OF SHIITES IN THE AL-BAYYADA neighborhood, one of whose streets is named Iran Street. There is also a large Shiite mosque there. The village of al-Hamidiyya, not far from Hims, is Shiite as well.

Iranian and Iraqi Shiites are active along the Syrian coast. Jamil al-Asad controlled the Syrian ports and the areas nearby with the support and encouragement of his brother Hafiz al-Asad. He also did missionary work in these areas to convert Alawites to Shiism. One of their great successes has been that the head of the Tartus religious endowments (*awqaf*), Dr. Muhammad al-Sayyid, has publicly advocated the Shiite creed, as stated on the front page of *al-Minbar*, a journal devoted to converts to Shiism.⁷¹

Looking Ahead

TODAY SHIITES CONSTITUTE SOMEWHAT MORE THAN ONE PERCENT OF THE EIGHTEEN million people presently living in Syria. Many circumstances at present—geographic, political, historic, and financial, but perhaps not overwhelmingly religious or doctrinal—are conspiring to cause an increase in conversions to the Shiite creed. The percentage of Shiites in the year 1953 was not more than 0.4% of all the Syrian population.

The increasing number of conversions is, first, the consequence of geography and history. Shiites in Syria today possess a considerable number of institutions and shrines, the most important of which are the tomb of Sayyida Zaynab, the shrine of Sukayna daughter of Husayn, and the “Mosque of the Drop” in Aleppo. All these sites are visited by numerous Shiite pilgrims from the Persian Gulf, Iraq and Iran. Iraqi Shiite immigrants as well as Iranian pilgrims who come to visit Shiite shrines in Syria constitute a considerable human army imbued with the Shiite creed, and help disseminate its ideas and doctrines.

Other features of Shiism have made the creed attractive to potential converts. Shiites build houses of study next to their shrines and establish religious authorities there, which has given them a certain independence with respect to religious rulings and the leadership of the community. Shiites, moreover, celebrate many holidays, including Ashura, al-Ghadir, the birth and death dates of the Twelver Shiite imams, and others. Sunnis are invited to these celebrations and are thus exposed to Shiite ideas.

Politics has also played an important role in fostering Shiite conversions. After Bashar al-Asad came to power in 2000, Iranian influence in Syria grew considerably, supported

and encouraged by the Syrian regime. As a result numerous Iranians and Iraqis became naturalized Syrian citizens, and the pace of conversion to Shiism grew, especially among Alawites, who had a desire to belong to a larger and more broadly-based community.

The Iranian embassy and its cultural attaché in Damascus have been active in the dissemination of the Shiite creed in Syria and are active in missionary work in every province of the country, which they support by way of financial inducements, scholarships to Iranian universities, free medical care, monthly stipends, and more. In addition, the Lebanon war of 2006 fanned anti-Western sentiment by the Syrian media, who oppose the existence of Israel and support the resistance movements in the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and in Lebanon. This aroused a wave of admiration for Hasan Nasrallah, with the result that many Syrians converted to Shiism and Shiite activities in Syria intensified.

This kind of demonstration of pro-Shiite feeling (by showing admiration of Nasrallah) may be only momentary, as it is rooted in an emotional reaction rather than on deep-seated religious conviction.⁷² However, whatever the nature of the motivation, the fact of the swing towards Shiism within Syria remains.

NOTES

1. *International Religious Freedom Report 2006*, URL: <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2006/>.
2. Sa'ad al-Din Ibrahim (ed.), *Religious Communities, Creeds and Ethnic Groups, Eighth Annual Report 2005*, Cairo: Ibn Khaldūn Center for Developmental Studies 141, URL: <http://www.eicds.org/arabic/publicationsAR/reports/2005-min-AR.doc>.
3. See, for example, the following URL:
www.arabic.cnn.com/2007/middle_east/4/2/shiite~/syria/index.htm1.
4. Official statistics put the number of Iraqi refugees in Syria (of every ethnic group) at 1.2 million, while the UN Commissioner for Refugees estimates the number of Iraqi refugees at 800,000.
5. The term “source of emulation” in Shiite usage refers to senior clerics who have the right to render independent judicial judgments. This class of religious scholars among Twelver Shiites came into being in the nineteenth century CE in Iran. The idea of a class of such “sources of emulation” has developed in Shiite sources despite the fact that it has no roots in early Shiite thought. For more details see: Moojan Momen, *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam: The History and Doctrines of Twelver Shiism* (London: Yale University Press, 1985), pp 140-146, 248-278; Ahmad Kazemi.Moussavi, “The establishment of the Position of Marja'iyat al-Taqlid in the Twelver Shi'ite Community.” *Iranian Studies* (1985); L. Clarke, “The Shi'i Construction of Taqlid,” *Journal of Islamic Studies* 12:1 (2001), pp 40-64.
6. Although the Alawites, known also as Nusayris, are a sect that grew out of Shiism, they differ in fundamental ways from Twelver Shiites.
7. The Syrian President Hafiz al-Asad and the Lebanese Shiite leader Musa al-Sadr were close personal friends. In September 1973 the latter published a legal ruling (*fatwa*) that recognized the Alawites

- living in Lebanon as Shiites. The purpose of the ruling was to promote relations with Syria. That country did indeed express its great satisfaction with the ruling. For more details on this issue see: Ahmad Khalidi and Husayn J. Agha, *Suriyya wa-Iran Tunafisu wa-Tu'awinu (Syria and Iran: Competition and Cooperation)*, trans. 'Adnan Hasan (Beirut: Dar al-Kunuz al-Adabiyya, 1997), pp 12-13.
8. See www.ikhwan.net/wiki/index.php1.
 9. www.arabic.cnn.com/2007/middle_east/4/2/shiite.syria/index.htm1.
 10. The 32-page study is entitled "The Shiitization Process in Syria 1985-2006: A Socio-Statistic Paper, a 1985-2006," Damascus, November 2006, prepared under the Auspice of UMIS, The National Council for Truth, Justice & Reconciliation in Syria. It was carried out clandestinely, and the names of the researchers do not appear in the publication (they are kept on a separate document by the financing institution in Belgium), for fear they would face persecution for receiving funds from abroad. The study contains an Introduction by Nizar Nayyuf, an economist and political scientist who specializes in the comparative socio-economics of the dictatorships in the Mediterranean region.
 11. Hamida Hamid, "A Study on Conversion to Shiism in Syria," *Elaph*, Jan. 7, 2007.
 12. The great majority of conversions among Ismailis are of a purely ceremonial nature, such as separating men and women at prayers, in contrast to the usual "nearly mixed" prayers in that sect.
 13. See p.9.
 14. Hamida Hamid, "A Study on Conversion to Shiism in Syria," *Elaph*, Jan. 7, 2007.
 15. The greatest concentration of Shiites in Damascus is to be found in the neighborhood of Hayy al-Amin, where the Imam Ali b. Abi Talib Mosque, the al-Zahra Mosque, and the venerable Muhsiniyya School are located.
 16. She is called "the Great" to distinguish her from other women with the same name. For more details on her see: Hasan al-Safar, "al-Mar'a al-'Azima: Qira'a fi Hayat al-Sayyida Zaynab bint 'Ali 'Alayhima al-salam" (*The Great Woman: Readings in the Biography of Sayyida Zaynab Daughter of 'Ali, May Both Rest in Peace*), (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-sayyida Zaynab al-khayriyya, 1993), pp 280-284; Faraj al-Imran, "Wafat Zaynab al-Kubra" (*The Death of Zaynab the Great*), (Kuwait: Maktabat al-alfayn, 1986), p 65; Muhammad Hasanayn al-Sabiqi, "Marqad al-'Aqila Zaynab" (*The Resting-Place of Zaynab the Wife*), (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-'alami, 1979), p 109.
 17. The tomb is located in the southern part of al-Ghuta, the oasis south of Damascus. Today the village, located about seven kilometers from Damascus, is known as *qabr al-sitt* ("the Lady's Tomb"). The tomb itself is on the west side of the village. For details see: www.imamreza.net/arb/imamreza.php?id=1925.
 18. Abd al-Safir al-Husayn, *Tahdhir al-Barriyya min Nashat al-Shi'a fi Suriyya (A Warning to the Land about Shiite Activities in Syria)*, (Cairo: Dar al-Muhaddithina, 2007), p 22. The shrine itself consists of a mausoleum with a golden dome, two imposing minarets, and adorned porticos. Its total area is about 15 square meters and has a capacity of 5000 people.
 19. Muhammad al-Hasnawi, "Iranian Influence in Syria," October 13, 2005, URL: www.arrae.com.
 20. For details about it see: www.malkiya.net/vb/showthread.php?t=5085.
 21. For more details see: A. Arazi, "Sukayna bint al-Husayn," *Encyclopedia of Islam*, 2nd ed. (1960), Vol. IV, 802a-803b.
 22. For more details see: www.imamreza.net/arb/imamreza.php?id=2305; Kawthar Fu'ad Sadiq, "al-Shahida al-Sayyida Ruqayya bint al-Imam al-Husayn b. 'Ali b. Abi Talib, al-Khamis min Safar Dhikra Rahiliha" ("The Martyr the Sayyida Ruqayya, Daughter of the Imam Husayn b. 'Ali b. Abi Talib; the Anniversary of Her Death is on the Fifth Day of the Month of Safar"), *al-Naba'*, issue for the feast of 'Ashura' 1428 AH, URL: www.annabaa.org/ashara/. The wall no longer exists today, but in earlier

- times a cemetery was established outside the wall, opposite this gate. It is one of the city's largest and best-known cemeteries; today the city's expansion has brought it nearly into the center.
23. Bashir, *Report on Conversion to Shiism in Syria* (File on the Conversion Movement in Darayya), URL: www.syriakurds.com/2007/sheasy/sh020.htm.
 24. See: www.shababek.de.
 25. An Alawite convert to Shiism, Ghayth 'Ammur, heads the conversion efforts in the city of Baniyas now, after Jamil al-Asad's death. Before being converted by Jamil al-Asad he was not a religious person, and owned a video store. Ghayth is a member of the Syrian National Party.
 26. See: www.syriahr.com.
 27. He also accused the Prophet's Companions of not taking the post of caliph away from 'Uthman and giving it to 'Ali, and also of giving the post to Abu Bakr. Furthermore, he attacked Abu Bakr, 'Umar, 'Uthman, 'Abd al-Rahman b. 'Awf and Abu 'Ubayda b. al-Jarrah for removing 'Ali from the post of caliph. In addition, he claimed that the Prophet's family was infallible, and that its least member was greater than the greatest Companion. For more on the Mufti's speech see: Munir Ghadaban, "Oh Learned Clerics of Syria, Is It Not Time to Take a Man's Stand in the Face of the Mufti?," URL: www.syriakurds.com/2007/sheasy/sh004.htm. See also: Yusuf al-Husayni, "Shiite Activity in Syria's Towns and Villages," URL: www.ahlalheeth.com/vb/showthread.php?t=113193.
 28. See the following website: www.stdp.org/8-11-altayr-alsori.htm.
 29. See: "Religious Leaders Reject the Dissemination of Iranian Shiism in Syria," URL: www.aljaml.com/node/9168.
 30. "Clerics Deny That Iran Disseminates Shiism in Syria," *al-'Arabiyya*, November 19, 2007, URL: www.aljaml.com/node/9168.
 31. "Conversion to Shiism in Syria: Various Bodies Try to Disseminate Shiism among the Kurds in Syria," URL: www.syriakurds.com/2007/sheasy/sh019.htm.
 32. Muhammad al-Hasnawi, "al-Nufuz al-Irani fi Suriyya" (The influence of Iran on Syria) www.od-abasham.net/show.php?sid+4997.
 33. Riyad Alam al-Din; "Istratigiyyat Iran linashr al-tashau' fi Suriyya" (The Iranian strategy to spread Shi'ism in Syria) *Al-Watan al-Arabi Newspaper* Vol. 1532, June 6, 2006.
 34. Ahmad al-Ayyubi, "The Iranian Incursion into Syria under the Auspices of the Asads," Nov. 19, 2007, URL: www.syriakurds.com/2007/sheasy/sh005.htm.
 35. Ibrahim Omar; "al-tamaddud al-shi'i fi al-'alam al-Islami wafi al-Sham al-Mubarak" (The spread of Shiism in the Islamic world and in blessed Syria).
 36. Abd al-Safir al-Husayn, "Tahdhir al-Barriyya min Nashat al-Shi'a fi Suriyya" (*A Warning to the Land about Shiite Activities in Syria*), (Cairo: Dar al-Muhaddithina, 2007). Al Husayn Abd al-Sattar, *op.cit.*, p. 66.
 37. The Hawza is an institution of Shiite religious learning in which the curriculum is based on the principle of independent judgment (*ijtihad*). Although the full term for the institution is *al-hawza al-ilmiyya*, it is commonly denoted by the word *hawza* alone, devoid of attributes. Most *hawzas* are located next to the tombs of Imams or other great clerics. The reason for this lies in the fact that Shiite pilgrims give endowments to these shrines and the funds thus made available benefit all the adjoining institutions. This provides the hawza with a means of support, enables pilgrims to seek the advice of the students and teachers there, and frees the latter to pursue religious learning. For more detail see my article: Khalid Sindawi, (2007). "Modern Shi'ite Religious *Hawza* Instruction and Its Role in Shaping Shi'ite Identity" (The *Hawzas* of al-Najaf and Qumm As a Case Study), *Middle Eastern Studies*, 43(6), p 831-856.
 38. Muhammad al-Hasnawi, "Iranian Influence in Syria," October 13 2005, URL: www.arrae.com/modules.php?name=News&file=print&sid=6680.

39. See: www.albainah.net/index.aspx?function=Item&id=13332&lang.
40. Allen Nickmeyer, "A Wave of Conversion from Sunnism to Shiism in Syria, Due to Admiration for Nasrallah," November 19, 2007, URL: www.m-alhuda.com/showthread.php?t=665. See also Ahmad al-Ayyubi, "Iran Penetrates the Arab World: Facts and Figures, Dimensions and Indications," November 19, 2007, URL: www.syriakurds.com/2007/sheasy/sh012.htm.
41. "Clerics Deny That Iran Disseminates Shiism in Syria," *al-'Arabiyya*, November 19, 2007, URL: www.al-jaml.com/node/9168.
42. See, for example, what the Syrian expert on minorities Nabil Fayyad says in the article mentioned in the note above.
43. Salman b. Fahd b. Abdallah al-Awda is a propagandist for the Saudi Salafi movement and author of a number of books on Islamic jurisprudence. Today he manages the well-known Islamist website *al-Islam al-yawm* ("Islam Today"), on which he also disseminates his own lessons and lectures, which are also available on audio cassettes. For more details on him see: www.radio.islamtoday.net/tr-jmah.cfm?st=1.
44. "Conversion to Shiism in Syria: Various Bodies Try to Disseminate Shiism among the Kurds in Syria," URL: www.syriakurds.com/2007/sheasy/sh019.htm.
45. Hayyan Nayyuf, "Shi'at Suriyya Yaruddun 'Ala Ittihatim Bi' al-tabshir' Bayna al-Sunna wal-'Alawiyyin" (Syrian Shiites react to their accusers for missionary activities among Sunnis and Alawites), www.alarabiya.net/article/2006/11/0628855.html.
46. Ubayy Hasan, "On Conversion to Sunnism and Shiism in Syria: An Answer to the Wahhabis and Those Who Imitate Their Ways," URL: www.aljaml.com/node/11387.
47. Al-Husayn, *Tahdhir al-Bariyya min Nashat al-Shi'a fi Suriyya (A Warning to the People about Shiite Activities in Syria)*, (Cairo: Dar al-Muhaddithin, 2007), p 71; Yet another well-known convert to Shiism in the Deir al-Zor region is Ibrahim Abu Gharghura, from the village of al-Abd. He became extremely wealthy and now owns a great deal of real estate, including a large villa in the Tudmur project near Damascus. He married off his daughter to an Iranian, and his sons married Iranian women.
48. *Ibid.*
49. Among the most prominent converts to Shiism in Hatla are the following: Husayn Raja, Yasin al-Mayuf, Musa al-Mulla Abd, Ali al-Jasim, Hasan al-Habali, Khadr al-Jasim, Muhammad al-Jasim, Abu Ali Khalaf al-Hadir, Mahmud al-Said, Isa al-Hilal, and Umar al-Ali b. Hammadi, the first Shiite convert in Hatla. For more details see: Abu Yusuf al-Husayni, "Shiite Activity in Syria's Towns and Villages," URL: www.ahlalhdeeth.com/vb/showthread.php?t=113193.
50. *Ibid.* The first of these husayniyyas, in Hatla, was built by Muhammad Hasan al-Balat. Another was built by Amin al-Raja with funds from Abd al-Muhsin al-Hairi, and a third, called "the Imam al-Hasan husayniyya," was built by Diya Habash. Yet another husayniyya was built by Yasin al-Mayuf and a fifth, called "The Great Messenger husayniyya," was built by Husayn al-Raja. A sixth husayniyya, named after the Imam Jafar al-Sadiq, was built by Ibrahim Musa Mulla.
51. Muhamad Salih al-Shimri, "Shahid 'Ayan: al-tashayu' fi Dir al-Zur Imtidad Farisi walaysa Madh-habiyan" (Eyewitness: Conversion to Shiism in Dir al-Zur is Persian expansionism and not doctrinal), www.syriakurds.com/2007/sheasy/sh017.htm.
52. Abd al-Hamid al-Muhajir (b. 1950) is a Shiite cleric and a well-known preacher, born in Iraq. He went to high school in Karbala. In 1963 he joined the hawza there and pursued both secular and religious studies at the same time. He went through all the stages of hawza education and went on to teach Islam at schools for Quran recital.
53. Ammar bin Yasir (567-657 CE) was a Companion of the Prophet who emigrated to al-Madina with

him and fought at the battles of Badr, Uhud, al-Khandaq and Bayat al-Radwan. The Prophet called him "The good benefactor." Umar appointed him governor of Kufa for a time. He was present at the battles of the camel and Siffin with Ali b. Abi Talib. He did at the battle of Siffin at the age of ninety-three.

54. Muhammad Salih al-Shimri, "Shahid 'Ayan: al-tashayy' fi Dir al-Zur Imtidad Farisi walaysa Madhhabiyan" (Eyewitness: Conversion to Shiism in Dir al-Zur is Persian expansionism and not doctrinal), http://www.ikhwansyria.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=887&Itemid=29
55. Dara is a city and province to the south of Damascus. The city, with a population of 117,000 is located about one-hundred km from the Jordanian border. Among the province's major towns are Nawa (pop. 80,000), Tafas (pop. 31,000), Ankhal (pop. 30,000), Jasim (pop. 29,000), Dail (pop. 38,000), Busra al-Sham (pop. 33,000), al-Sanamayn (pop. 2,400) and others.
56. Ahmad al-Ayyubi, "Iran Penetrates the Arab World: Facts and Figures, Dimensions and Indications," November 19, 2007, URL: www.syriakurds.com/2007/sheasy/sh012.htm
57. There is also a husayniyya in Busra al-Sham, a town of 33,000 people. It is less active than the one in Dara, to which it is subordinate. Still, it engages in missionary work, especially during the first ten days of the month of Muharram.

In al-Shaykh Miskin, a town with some 20,000 inhabitants, a husayniyya similarly active and energetic as the one in Dar'a has been built. It is run by an Iraqi, Abu Muntazar. Only Shiites were permitted to take part in its construction. It, too, has facilities for children, like the husayniyya in Dar'a.

In the town of al-Qarfa a husayniyya called "Muslim Unity" has been built by Iran. Its construction was supervised by its current preacher, Zaydan al-Ghazali, who enriched the poor in order to draw them to him. He openly receives financial backing from Iran, and equally openly visits educated people and notables and calls on them to convert to Shiism. To these people he also offers money, whereas to the poor he offers temporary marriages.

In Tafas, a town with 31,000 inhabitants, the Shiites began making preparations for constructing a husayniyya. Currently, however, the local Shiites meet in a large house, which they consider their husayniyya for the moment. It was given to them by a certain Muhammad al-Hijazi, a man close to the Iranian ambassador to Syria and a representative of Khamene'i, whom he has visited on a number of occasions.

58. See "Shiism in Dara," URL: www.d-sunnah.net/forum/showthread.php?t=34097; Bilal Muwaffaq, "Conversion to Shiism Becomes Prevalent in Five Counties in the Province of Dar'a," November 19, 2007, URL: www.syriakurds.com/2007/sheasy/sh001.htm.
59. Al-Hasaka is a city in north-eastern Syria on the Khabur and al-Jaghjagh rivers, with a population of 1,100,000. It is the main city of the province by the same name, at a distance of 600 km from Damascus, 494 km from Aleppo and 179 km from Deir al-Zor. The province's main cities are al-Hasaka, al-Qamishli, al-Malikiyya, Ras al-Ayn, Ayn Diwar, Ramilan al-Amaliyya, al-Qahtaniyya, Amuda, al-Darbasiyya and Tall Nimr.
60. Ibrahim Darwish, "On Proselytizing for the Shiite Cause in al-Hasaka: How Cheap Religion Is to These People!," February 18, 2007, URL: www.syriakurds.com/2007/sheasy/sh014.htm.
61. "Various Bodies Try to Disseminate Shiism among the Kurds in Syria," April 20, 2007, URL: www.syriakurds.com/2007/sheasy/sh019.htm.
62. Al-Husayni, *A Warning to the Land about Shiite Activities in Syria*, p 73.
63. Abu Yusuf al-Husayni, "Shiite Activity in Syria's Towns and Villages;" see also: Al-Husayni, *op. cit.*, p 73-74.
64. *Ibid.*, p 73.

65. Latakia is Syria's main harbor and the capital of the province of the same name, on the Mediterranean coast. The city has some 650,000 inhabitants belonging to numerous Muslim and Christian denominations and many different ethnic groups (Turkmen, Armenians, Kurds and more). Among these the Armenians have preserved their original language and culture more than most.
66. Among the most important missionaries in the area are Dr. Mahmud Akkam, a professor at the Schools of Law and Education of Aleppo University and a preacher at the al-Tawhid Mosque, one of the city's largest and most popular Sunni mosques; Ahmad Hassun, Syria's Chief Mufti; and Muhammad Adib Rahhal, a convert to Shiism.
67. Abu Yusuf al-Husayni, "Shiite Activity in Syria's Towns and Villages;" see also: Al-Husayni, *A Warning to the Land about Shiite Activities in Syria*, p 52.
68. Al-Husayni, *op. cit.*, pp 53-55.
69. Al-Husayni, *op. cit.*
70. "Shiite Expansion in Syria—Conversion to Shiism in Zarzur," URL: www.muslim.net/vb/showthread.php?t=189953. The neighboring villages include 'Amud, Khariba, al-Malnad, al-Janudiyya and al-Dariyya.
71. Al-Husayni, *A Warning to the Land about Shiite Activities in Syria*, p 69.
72. "Shiism in Syria: Religious Rights Preserved in an Oppressed Society," URL: www.arabic.cnn.com/2007/middle_east/4/2/shiite.syria/index.html.