

# The Paradoxes of Shiism

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**T**HE FOCUS OF THIS ISSUE OF *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology* IS ON contemporary Shiism, and especially its diverse radical expressions, which might collectively be termed “Shiite Islamism.” (Other possible names include radical Shiism or political Shiism.) This form of Shiism is currently the reigning doctrine of the Islamic Republic of Iran founded in 1979; it is embodied in its constitution, institutions and politics. Our objective in this volume is to present the current character and direction of radical Shiism. This has proven to have a variety of expressions and implications, largely but not solely through the agency of the Islamic Republic of Iran and its current leadership. The articles presented here seek to cover this variety.

The emergence of Shiite Islamism, and its present day objectives and activities, invite a number of important general and frequently historical questions: What is or has been Shiite Islamism’s relationship to the wider movement known as Islamism, the radical reform movement within Islam that has enjoyed great vitality within the Muslim world over the past 30 years? What is radical Shiism’s relationship to Imami or Twelver Shiism, the form of Shiism to which the majority of contemporary Shiites in Iran and elsewhere adhere and from which radical Shiism has itself emerged? What is radical Shiism’s relationship to the broader phenomenon of Shiism, whose history stretches back nearly to the founding period of Islam and which, over that history, has generated a variety of forms or sects? Addressing these questions necessitates clarification of the distinctive character of Shiite Islamism, for it both resembles and diverges from all three: Islamism, Twelver Shiism and Shiism.

This essay will address these questions. It will begin with the first of these questions: What is the historical relationship between Shiite Islamism and modern Islamism in general? Answering this question requires an account both of the

historical divide between Sunnism and Shiism and the modern conditions that gave rise to Islamism. This explanation of the character of modern Islamism, both Sunni and Shiite, will in turn provide a basis for examining the other questions concerning Shiite Islamism's place within Shiism as a whole.

## Modern Islamism and its Sunni and Shiite Varieties

ISLAMISM AROSE IN THE 19TH AND 20TH CENTURIES, AT A TIME WHEN THE Muslim world as a whole had undergone and was still undergoing a dramatic decline in its power, status and prosperity. Islamism was founded on the belief that one important cause of the Muslim world's decline was the corruption of Islam itself, a corruption that had arisen over the long course of Islam's history. To this day, Islamism continues to define itself as a movement that aims to purify and reform Islam so as to reverse the modern decline in the Muslim world's fortunes.

This Islamist reformism originally arose within Sunni environments, and received its first solid organizational expression with the founding in Egypt of the Muslim Brotherhood in 1928. (A majority Sunni country, Egypt had last experienced major Shiite influence in the tenth through the twelfth centuries, when it was ruled by a radical Shiite movement and dynasty—the Ismaili Fatimids.) The primarily Sunni environment was also true of still earlier reform movements, which have come over time to be intertwined with modern Islamism and its radical vision. These include the Deobandi movement that emerged in 19th Century British India, as well as the Wahhabi movement, founded in the 18th Century in the northern Arabian Peninsula. The Sunni origins of modern Islamism have had significant consequences for the relationship of Islamism first to Shiism as such and also to Shiite Islamism. The dominant tendency within Islamism has been hostility toward Shiism.

Perhaps the best known example of this is provided by the Wahhabi movement and its founding notions of corruption and its vision for reform. From the outset, this movement placed a special emphasis on reforming what it regarded as a corruption in the most fundamental teaching of Islam: the teaching of God's absolute unity. The major writings of Muhammad ibn Abd al Wahhab, the founder of the Wahhabi perspective, focus on *Tawhid*—meaning unity or unification—as their most important subject. Abd al-Wahhab regarded many practices of his Sunni contemporaries, including some of very long standing, as tantamount to a rejection of this teaching and the embrace of polytheism. These included many of the practices of Sufism, or Islamic mysticism, which, through the growth of Sufi Brotherhoods from

the 12th Century onward, had become ubiquitous in the Sunni world. Abd al-Wahhab especially objected to the veneration of so-called Sufi “saints,” which was often attached to the shrines made of their tombs, and entailed the celebration of the anniversaries of their births and deaths. He was even opposed to the special attention devoted to the tomb of the Prophet Muhammad and his birthday.

Abd al-Wahhab saw Shiism in this same polytheistic light and with even greater animosity. By his era, the tombs and shrines of the Shiite Imams had long been important places of pilgrimage for Shia believers. Moreover, the commemoration of the death of the 3rd Imam, Hussain, had become the occasion and basis for the holiday of Ashura—a holiday unique to Shiites. Abd al-Wahhab reviled these Shiite practices and others, and his hatred for what he viewed as Shiite polytheism eventually found political expression through the establishment of the Saudi state in the 18th Century, to which he had given his support and blessing. At several times during the history of that state, Saudi rulers and their forces invaded and attacked southern Iraq, the site of the most important Shiite shrines. Insofar as Wahhabism has been a major contributor to the sensibility of Sunni Islamism, the latter has tended to share in Wahhabism’s hostility toward Shiism.

More generally speaking, all strands of Sunni Islamism have invoked the standard of the founding generations of Islam—the *Salaf as-Salih* or Virtuous Ancestors—as the guide for the reform of Islam they have sought to bring about. Such ancestors include Ali ibn Abu Talib, the cousin, son-in-law, and second disciple of Muhammad, and the Fourth Caliph of Islam. Ali, of course, is venerated by Shiites as the only rightful successor to Muhammad as caliph of the community of believers, and is understood by Shiites to be the first Imam. But the Sunnis recognize before Ali the legitimacy of the first three caliphs—Abu Bakr, Umar and Uthman—who de facto rejected the claim of Ali’s supremacy, along with the many other early Muslims besides who supported their caliphates. In invoking the model of the *Salaf as-Salih*, therefore, Sunni Islamism brought to the forefront the historical circumstances that eventually led to the division of Sunnis and Shiites, and the original quarrels which energized the hostility between them. Since Shiites detest and even publicly revile the first three caliphs, as well as others of the *Salaf*, the general orientation of modern Sunni Islamism was bound to deepen the already potent divide between it and Shiism, including Shiite Islamism.

On the other hand, there have been those within the Sunni Islamist universe—most notably, among the Muslim Brotherhood—who have periodically adopted a more conciliatory, even ecumenical approach toward Shiite Islamism. The basis for this approach derives in part from the contemporary experience common to all Muslims—that is, from the common decline in their worldly fortunes, a problem that Islamism, in both its Sunni and Shiite varieties, has sought to overcome through reforming Islam.

Notwithstanding their different theological understandings of what this reform requires or should seek to achieve, Sunni and Shiite Islamists have often shared the same enmities as well—and especially toward the modern non-Muslim powers both of the West (especially the United States and, before that, Great Britain) and of the East (especially the Soviet Union and, formerly, the Russian Empire.) The modern rise of these non-Muslim states had coincided with the relative decline of the Muslim states, and had frequently come at those states' expense: in Central Asia via Russian expansion; in Persia via both Russian and British influence; in India via British imperialism; in North Africa via French imperialism; and finally, in the Muslim heartlands through the decline of the Ottoman Empire, the last great Muslim state, which was defeated in WWI and subsequently dismembered.

Sunni and Shiite reformers and radicals also had common enemies closer to home—the autocratic, modernizing and secularizing regimes of the Muslim world that had been established in the aftermath of WWII. The reformers regarded these regimes as totally inappropriate to the requirements of Islamic politics and religion. In their view, another model for Muslim political life—the “Islamic State,” which was to be governed entirely through and by Islamic law—was required. The conflict between the Islamists and the new secular governments routinely led to harsh repression of the Islamists, which had the effect of enlarging the latter's sense of grievance and hostility. In these dire circumstances, a certain Sunni-Shiite Islamist fellow feeling became possible.

This was somewhat enhanced as a consequence of the Iranian revolution of 1979 and the founding of the Islamic Republic of Iran by the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. Among the reasons was the fact that the Islamic Republic represented a form of the “Islamic State,” and hence, represented the achievement of a goal that inspired Islamism as a whole. Iran came to be governed by Shiite rather than Sunni law, and in that respect, many Sunni Islamists viewed it as repugnant or corrupt. Nevertheless, Khomeini's success could not help but be somewhat inspiring, since the Sunni Islamist movement had, to that date, no similar achievement, with only the partial exception of the Wahhabi-dominated monarchy of Saudi Arabia (which is itself seen as increasingly illegitimate by Sunnis.)

Moreover, prior to the Islamic revolution, Iran was a large, powerful state that had been on the road to ever greater secularization—a process distressing to all Islamists—and that was also an ally of the hated United States and West. The extraordinary reversal of these circumstances in 1979 seemed to demonstrate to the Sunni Islamist movement that similar successes were not impossible for them. Khomeini himself attempted to reach out to Sunni Islamists in this spirit, and early on enjoyed some brief success.

This success, however, was rather quickly overtaken by another significant event—

the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the launching of the so-called Afghan Jihad to overturn it. This offered Sunni Islamists their own field of endeavor, one that they eagerly embraced. This jihad ended in success—the withdrawal of the Soviet Union—and that victory was understood to be still greater a few short years later when the Soviet Union collapsed. The Sunni Islamists still take credit for this momentous event, which led them to be persuaded that they were, in their own right, on the path to still other victories. The establishment of Sunni-dominated “Islamic States” in the Sudan and in Afghanistan under the Taliban only reinforced that view. From this position of relative strength, Shiite Islamism was perceived increasingly by Sunni Islamists not as a potential collaborator but as a rival.

In recent years, that rivalry was at its most intense in Iraq, where the head of al Qaeda in Iraq, the late Abu Musab al Zarqawi, was especially well-known for his murderous hatred of Shiites. This has been matched at a lower level in other quarters (such as Syria) as a result of Iran’s growing power and the extension of its reach through proxies, such as Hezbollah and Hamas, into Sunni Muslim areas. In general, the so-called salafi and jihadi wings of the Sunni Islamist movement remain hostile to Shiism, Iran and Shiite Islamism. And, of course, major Sunni Muslim states such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Jordan are wary of and opposed to the growing influence of Iran. King Abdullah of Jordan famously decried the growth of what he called the “Shiite Crescent.”

On the other hand, Iran’s growing regional power—and the prospect of more through its prospective acquisition of nuclear weapons—has had a positive impact in certain Sunni quarters. As Iran’s pursuit of its ambitions is directed against Western and especially American influence, and champions the annihilation of Israel, it has received some admiration in Islamist circles—for example, from the Muslim Brotherhood and especially its founding Egyptian branch. This admiration is also related to Islamist antipathy to Sunni regimes, particularly the Saudi and Egyptian governments, which have been vigorously criticized by Iran in recent times. However, Brotherhood appreciation and support for a common front of Sunni and Shiite Islamism is not simply univocal. For example, Shaykh Yusuf al Qardawi has asserted his opposition.

However the Sunni-Shiite dynamic may operate in the future, from the perspective of Islamism as such—as a general movement of radical Muslim reform—there is an additional complicating factor in the relationship between Sunni and Shiite Islamism. Well before the Iranian Revolution, several of radical Shiism’s eventual leaders were deeply familiar with the history of the Sunni Islamist movement, its leaders and their writings, and had been influenced and inspired by their example. The Shiite clerics among them, who were obliged to know Arabic as a matter of course, read the Sunni Islamists as they appeared in the Arab Muslim world. But they also took

the step of having these writings translated into Persian so that they were more widely accessible to potential followers in Iran. Thus Sunni Islamism has had some impact on the generation and development of Shiite Islamism.

In this light, it is not surprising that there are various commonalities between modern Sunni and Shiite Islamism. Among the most important is the fact that both Islamist movements were self-consciously devoted to an attack on tradition, and proposed radical new understandings in its place. Nevertheless, despite certain features common to both Sunni and Shiite Islamism—including borrowings from non-Muslim radical movements like Communism and Fascism—Shiite Islamism remains a separate phenomenon; a distinct form of Islamism.

Perhaps the most important factor distinguishing between Sunni and Shiite Islamism are their respective approaches to tradition. Both Sunni and Shiite Islamism have proposed a radical departure from and transformation of their traditions. Nevertheless, the distinctive character of these traditions necessarily played a role in their transformations, if at some times only because they presented something different to be overcome. This, in turn, affected their respective ideological development and outcomes.

In the case of Sunni Islamism, several strands within the tradition were given special emphasis at the expense of others. This special emphasis was in itself an expression of the radical departure from a practice that had generally embraced a variety of traditions—most famously by allowing adherence to any one of four legal schools. It was also relatively accommodating of a variety of theological traditions, especially of the mystical, Sufi variety. Sunni Islamism, in contrast to this relatively pluralist tradition, was and remains especially partial to one legal school—the Hanbali school, which is known for its particular austerity and harshness. Sunni Islamism has also been partial to a somewhat related tradition whose adherents are known as the *Ahl al Hadith*—the people of the Hadith (or the accounts, reported on the authority of the Salaf, of the Prophet Muhammad’s sayings and doings.) The adherents of this tradition were characterized by a distrust of all Muslim literature other than the Qur’an and the Hadith, as they had been collected in major compendia.

Sunni Islamism expressed its departure and critique of the historical tradition by privileging Hanbali jurisprudence and the Hadith. In so doing, it also revived the thought of certain leading classical authors, in particular the 13th Century scholar, writer and polemicist Ibn Taymiyyah. The Sunni Islamist preoccupation with Hadith was a consequence of their invocation of the Salaf; it also contributed to a general spirit among Sunni Islamists that sought to imitate the ways of the pious ancestors. Insofar as Sunni Islamism seeks to imitate the Salaf, it reaches back to a time before there was a “tradition,” and is thus radically untraditional in this sense.

For reasons mentioned earlier, and especially because of the distinct distaste among

Shiites for the Salaf except for Ali and his partisans, the issue of tradition was for the founders of Shiite Islamism almost necessarily the opposite of the Sunni Islamist view. Several more specific factors—both contemporary and ancient—were also involved in shaping the Shiite view of tradition. The most contemporary and immediate factors are two-fold. First, the Shiite Islamist transformation of the tradition was primarily, if not exclusively, the work of one man—Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. Because of this, Shiite Islamism has (at least at this stage in its historical development) a relative clarity and coherence that Sunni Islamism presently lacks. (As is well known, Sunni reformism is currently divided among a variety of tendencies frequently hostile to one another). Second, the Shiite transformation of tradition actually succeeded in becoming embodied in a state whose first ruler was Khomeini himself.

The ideological and political core of Khomeini's transformation of tradition was the doctrine of *vilayat-e-faqih*—the Rule of the Jurist. The innovation behind Khomeini's doctrine lay in the idea that Shiite scholars were uniquely entitled to rule, and this is the doctrine that serves as the basis for the Iranian constitution and the institutions of the Iranian state—including above all the office of *Rahbar*, or Supreme Leader. Since Khomeini was the first occupant of this office, it has permitted him to give further definition to Shiite Islamism. (The same is true in part of his successors, the consequences of which will be discussed below.)

Khomeini's doctrine of *vilayat-e-faqih* and the political system that was elaborated on its basis was indeed an innovation within and against the background of Shiite tradition, and more particularly, within Twelver or Imami Shiite tradition. Indeed, the rule of the jurist doctrine is still rejected by important Shiite authorities such as Ayatollah Sistani of Iraq and even by Iranian Ayatollahs who represent what is often called the "quietist" Shiite tradition. In their view, the rule of jurist is not only sub-political, but should remain so until the re-appearance of the true "ruler" of all Muslims—the 12th or Hidden Imam. In this perspective, Khomeini's reinterpretation of Shiism is thus not merely an innovation but a usurpation of the supreme and divine authority that traditional or quietist scholars granted only to the Imam.

But despite the radical departure from the quietist tradition that Khomeini and his followers had called for, his innovations did not simply represent discontinuous, radical breaks from Shiite tradition as a whole. Indeed, unlike the founders of Sunni Islamism, who were generally lay people rather than jurists (the traditional authorities within Sunnism), Khomeini was himself a Shiite jurist of the highest rank. Moreover, the constitution that he established affirmed the traditional view that the genuine ruler of Iran was the Hidden Imam. Thus, in his person and in his actions Khomeini upheld an ambiguous relationship with Shiite tradition.

Moreover, while Khomeini's innovations were genuine and unique, they built upon earlier developments in Shiism. Within the Iranian context and at the merely

political level, Khomeini was acting more or less in line with the relatively active role that Shiite clerics had played in Iranian politics from the late 19th Century onward. As a doctrinal matter, this politically activist clerical tradition stemmed from a radicalization of certain earlier innovations within Shiism whose roots lay hundreds of years earlier. In particular they represented a radicalization of *ijtihad*—or the principle and right of independent reasoning in the interpretation of Islamic law.

This right—which was traditionally denied to Sunni jurists—came to be held by the highest and most qualified Shiite jurists. It thus afforded these jurists an independence and flexibility that derived from the absence of the direct rule of the Hidden Imam, and was meant to ameliorate that situation. During the era in which this right was first propounded, it represented an innovation, but it would later come to be accepted as more or less part of Shiite tradition. Khomeini built upon that traditional right and power, while raising it to a new and more radical level.

Most generally, therefore, Khomeini's innovations may be seen as reflecting an important tendency within Shiite history viewed as a whole: the extraordinary fertility of the Shiite community in producing “innovative” movements, including movements with distinctively new political ambitions. In fact, on two important occasions in the past, such movements led to the establishment of powerful and relatively durable states: the Fatimid Empire, which was founded through the radical Shiite movement known as Ismailism, whose ultimate base was Egypt and whose formal existence lasted from 909 to 1171; and the Safavid Empire of Iran, which was launched by the *Safaviya* Sufi Shiite order, and which formally lasted from 1501 to 1722. The Shiite Islamism of the contemporary era might be seen as a further instance of this innovative tendency within Shiism that seeks to radically alter the existing political order.

As a historical matter, this kind of radicalism typically competed with more “quietist” Shiite orientations—just as Shiite Islamism does today. Moreover, this intra-Shiite competition has both historically and in the contemporary era shaped the character, actual prospects and direction of Shiism's more radical tendencies. In this sense, too, contemporary Shiite Islamism seems to partake of a unique “tradition.” Finally, however innovative Shiite Islamism is, it embraces components whose origins lie deep within Shiite history. Its innovation consists partially in its reordering of those components into a new whole. For these reasons, if one is to clarify and better understand the distinctiveness of Shiite Islamism, a brief if inadequate exposition and history of Shiism is necessary. It is appropriate to begin with a brief look at Imami or Twelver Shiism as it had come to be formulated prior to Khomeini's revolution. That revolution, according to the quietist view, represented a discontinuous break with Twelver tradition. But against this, Khomeini claimed to speak for Twelver Shiism, and that assertion is maintained by his successors.

## Contemporary Imami or Twelver Shiism

THE MAJORITY OF CONTEMPORARY SHIITES, WHETHER THEY LIVE IN IRAN, IRAQ, Lebanon or elsewhere, adhere to a particular form of Shiism known as Imami or Twelver Shiism. These names derive from the most fundamental teaching of this kind of Shiism—the doctrine that the rightful rulers of the Muslim community are a series of twelve Imams, beginning with Ali ibn Abu Talib and continuing on through 10 generations until the 12th Imam. (Two of the Imams, the 2nd and 3rd, were brothers.) The last of these Imams, whose name was Muhammad al-Mahdi, partially disappeared from human sight in the 9th Century, and then disappeared completely in the 10th. However, this Hidden Imam, or “Mahdi” as he is also called, is not totally absent from the world and he remains, according to Twelver Shiite belief, the world’s rightful and in some ways its effective ruler. At some time in the unspecified future, it is prophesied that the Mahdi will reappear fully and exercise this rule. The Hidden Imam, like his predecessors, possesses perfect wisdom and moral infallibility. As a result, the Hidden Imam’s direct and manifest rule will amount to the redemption and perfection of the world, or—to use the Shiite formula—the Mahdi’s return will “fill all the earth with justice and equity as it now is filled with injustice and corruption.”

The distinctiveness of Twelver Shiism, in relation to Sunnism, involves not only this doctrine, but practices specific to it, including a call to prayer different than that of Sunnis. The most important of these practices is a holiday unique to Shiites known as Ashura. It commemorates the murder of the 3rd Imam, Hussain ibn Ali, who, as was mentioned earlier, was killed in 680 near the southern Iraqi city of Karbala. This took place during Hussain’s unsuccessful attempt to claim the office of caliph or Imam, to which he and Shiites believe he was entitled. Within Shiite practice, the Ashura holiday is celebrated—especially today—with several distinctive rites, all of which express mourning at Hussain’s unjust fate. These rites include passion plays, which reenact the events of his murder, as well as rites in which Shiites may scourge themselves as acts of mourning as well as penitence for the failure of Muslims to come to Hussain’s aid in his hour of need.

When possible, Shiites are encouraged to make pilgrimages to Hussain’s tomb in Karbala, as well as to the tombs and shrines of other Imams, many of whom are also thought by Shiites to have been murdered. These shrines are principally located in other Iraqi cities—Najaf, Baghdad and Samarra—and in Mashad, Iran. These cities have emerged as the historic centers of Shiite legal and theological study.

It is customary for ordinary Shiites to decide upon which contemporary jurist is

most eminent and therefore qualified to direct them in legal matters. Such a jurist is understood to be a *Marj al Taqlid*—that is, a model of emulation. Apart from recourse to such jurists in legal matters, Shiites also express their recognition of their authority by substantial financial contributions to the schools and other institutions these clerics direct. Such donations are due, in principle, to the Imam according to Shiite teaching, and are accepted on his behalf by the jurists. (It may be noted that the sums of money involved in this practice have been very substantial, and have often included revenue-producing properties provided as endowments. As a result, the resources that Shiite jurists may control are frequently a major factor in the economies of Shiite societies.)

Twelver Shiite jurists thus enjoy a very privileged position—even more privileged than Sunni jurists. The character of that privilege is partially reflected in the fact that senior Shiite jurists are said to be *mudjtahids*—that is, they are men endowed with the right to independent judgment, or *ijtihad*. Like all jurists, their rulings are likely to look to legal precedent and tradition, although they are not absolutely bound by it. This independence is distinctive to Shiite tradition, and is reflective of two basic Shiite tenets: the belief that the Twelve Imams were all entitled to absolute independence of rule as a result of their perfect wisdom and moral infallibility; and the notion that in the absence of the manifest rule of the Twelfth Imam, the jurists are to act as his representatives. Therefore, in the Mahdi's absence, and only in his absence, the jurists then could partake of some of the freedoms to which he was entitled—some but not all. Above all else, the Twelver tradition held that jurists do not have the right to exercise direct political rule, for this right was, after all, the unique privilege of Ali and his rightful heirs—the privilege whose assertion, from the beginning, lay at the very heart of Shiism. The corollary of this belief was, at least for Twelver Shiites, that the full empowerment of Shiite rule must await the return or reappearance of the Hidden Imam.

It was with this final restraint that Khomeini's doctrine appeared to break, and indeed, this still appears to be the case to many quietist Shiites. On the other hand, however, if we are to leave aside other motives, the Khomeinist doctrine may also appear as a more or less natural response to the paradox that Shiism seems to present—that is, that it is a deeply political theological doctrine that lacked a direct political expression. In this light, the elevation of the status of the Shiite jurists to quasi-independent authority, which occurred in the 10th through 12th centuries, may be seen also as a response to Shiism's paradox, and one that in turn laid some ground for, if it did not prescribe, Khomeini's innovation.

This paradox within Shiism itself was the product of the tortured early experience of Ali and his partisans, and of the theological and political tensions to which this experience gave rise. This experience brought forth, in relatively equal measures,

radicalism on the one hand and quietism on the other. Twelver Shiism, which for long periods would strive to place the emphasis on quietism, could not and did not become a fully articulated doctrine and sect until roughly the 10th and 11th Centuries. For it was only at that point that the line of Twelve Imams was established with the disappearance of the final or Hidden Imam. Twelver Shiism was in part a product of the crisis produced by this final Imam's disappearance—a crisis that represented a kind of culmination of more than 200 hundred years of travail for the partisans of Ali. Indeed, Twelver Shiism's embrace of the doctrine of the Hidden Imam had itself a paradoxical character: in part it led, and was meant to lead practically, to quietist politics; on the other hand, the doctrine of the Hidden Imam itself had been previously rejected as too radical by some of the Imams themselves. Thus, Twelver Shiism represented from its inception an uneasy mixture of both radicalism and quietism, and because of this, it was a mixture potentially capable of disruption. In that respect, it was one expression of the dynamic tension of Shiism as it emerged in the first centuries of Islam. To better explain that tension it is necessary to consider briefly that early history, and the origins of Shiism.

## Shiism's Origins and Distinctiveness

THE ORIGINS OF SHIISM'S DISTINCTIVE VIEWS AND CLAIMS LIE IN THE IMMEDIATE aftermath of the death in 632 of Prophet Muhammad, the founder of Islam, and the questions his death posed. Who was to succeed him as the new head of the Muslim polity? How was he to be selected and what would be his status?

From a purely historical and non-religious perspective, the issue of Muhammad's succession as well as the dispute—indeed, civil war—among early Muslims to which it gave rise may appear to be in essence a political dispute about office. This analysis would, however, be misleading. This is because the character of the Muslim founding stressed the unity of human affairs—including both political and religious affairs—in the light of the unity of God. Due to Muhammad's role within the community he founded and ruled, and because this community did not distinguish between political and religious office, the dispute that ensued following the prophet's death could easily, and eventually did, produce theological as well as political differences.

Taken as a whole, Shiites believe that the only rightful heir of Muhammad as ruler or caliph of the Muslim polity was the prophet's cousin and son-in-law Ali ibn Abu Talib. This right is believed to derive partially from a specific designation said to have been conferred upon Ali by Muhammad himself. But since this right was subsequently understood also to belong to Ali's descendants, it pointed to the notion that there was something qualitatively different about Ali and at least some of his

descendants, just as there had been something unique about Muhammad himself as prophet. Whether or not Ali and his immediate partisans, the *Shiat Ali*, understood things in this fashion remains an open question. However, a tendency to regard Ali and the subsequent Imams as the continuation of prophecy, and as Muhammad's near equals in this regard, subsequently emerged among the adherents of Ali. In time, this was more formally articulated in one of Shiism's central tenets mentioned above: the belief in the perfect wisdom and moral infallibility of the Imams.

The remaining difference between the Muhammad's prophecy and the "prophecy" of Ali and his rightful heirs was held to consist in the fact that, unlike Muhammad, Ali and his descendants were not the promulgators of a new law and thus not the founders of a new religion. However, it is believed among Shia that Ali and his heirs did enjoy the same privileged access to wisdom and understanding that Muhammad had, including the privileged understanding of the law. This understanding of the status of Ali and his rightful heirs appears to have been first directly articulated by the Sixth Imam, Jaafar as-Sadik, who died in 765.

In the course of general Shiite history—though not Twelver Shiite history—even the remaining distinction between Muhammad and the Imams was sometimes breached. At certain times, for instance, radical Shiite groups emerged and attributed to the Imam that they recognized the right of the lawgiver. The leaders of these movements were thus capable of promulgating a new law, as well as of rescinding the old law.

At all events, all forms of Shiism in effect affirm not only Ali's unique right to rule but tend to understand rightful Islamic rule as a kind of continuation of prophetic rule. Sunni legal doctrine concerning caliphal or political rule understands the matter otherwise: the ruler should, in principle, certainly have superior qualities, but they do not transcend ordinary human excellences; the ruler's selection, as such, only requires the consensus of peers of similar distinction. But as has been frequently said, Shiism involves not only a different political doctrine but a different religious sensibility, which receives powerful expression in its distinctive rites such as Ashura. This is, in part, a reflection of the unhappy experience of Ali's partisans in adhering to and advancing their distinctive view of political and religious leadership.

In the aftermath of Muhammad's death, and during roughly the first century of the new Islamic empire, Ali's unique claim to the caliphate did not achieve political success. His partisans necessarily regarded the rulers of the early Muslim empire as illegitimate. Moreover, they mounted relatively frequent attempts to overturn these rulers, all of which ultimately ended in defeat. The experience of these defeats served to aggravate Shiite indignation with the principled injustice of the denial of Alid rule. This provided Shiism with a sensibility of grievance and the longing for a redress of the series of injustices to which the Alids had been victims.

These injustices began with the fate of Ali himself, and with the circumstances surrounding his rule as caliph. For Ali did in fact become caliph, though only after three other men held that office—Abu Bakr, Omar and Uthman. Ali succeeded them as the 4th caliph in 656. If by strict Shiite principle even this delay was an injustice, it was the sad fate of Ali and his caliphate which, historically speaking, launched and inflamed Shiite sensibility. These circumstances, and the historical aftermath of the 1st century of Islam, thus require a brief elaboration.

Although today all Sunni and Shiite Muslims recognize Ali as a rightful caliph, this was not the case at the time he assumed office as caliph. In fact, he faced opposition from several different quarters, and this led almost immediately to a civil war known to Muslim history as the “Great Fitna.” This war, in fact, comprised three separate civil wars. The most crucial of these wars for subsequent Muslim history was the war between Ali and Muawiyah, who was then governor of Syria as well as kinsman to Uthman, the 3rd caliph, who had been murdered by Muslims who were discontented with his administration. Among the causes of this war and its ostensible pretext was Muawiyah’s demand, as near kinsman to Uthman, that justice be done in the case of his murder. Another factor was Muawiyah’s desire to be maintained in his office and, in general, for his clan’s interests to be preserved.

During this war Ali was murdered. Although this murder was not at Muawiyah’s hand, he was the main beneficiary. It permitted him, in fact, to assert a claim to the caliphate and to maintain it. In the event, it led to the establishment of the caliphate as a familial dynasty, known historically as the Umayyad dynasty, which ruled the Muslim empire from 661 to 750.

This familial usurpation of the right to rule only compounded the sense of injustice felt by the partisans of Ali, as did the fate of some of Ali’s heirs and their partisans who resisted the Umayyad ascendancy. Beginning in 680 and until the end of Umayyad rule, several revolts were mounted, all of which were ultimately defeated. The most consequential for later Shiite—especially Twelver—sensibilities was the revolt of 680 mounted by Ali’s son Hussain, which as mentioned earlier, ended in his murder near Karbala. But other revolts were also important, as they produced new understandings of the Alid claimants and their fates. The most important of these understandings for subsequent history as a whole was the doctrine of the Mahdi or Hidden Imam, which first emerged in connection with a revolt that took place in 683. According to this doctrinal perspective, the Alid claimant who had apparently been defeated, had in fact gone in to occultation and would shortly return as the Mahdi or redeemer.

It appears that this continually renewed experience of new hope and defeat produced two abiding, related though sometimes conflicting Shiite sensibilities. The first was a utopian and often politically quite radical sensibility whose guiding motto

was the ambition to “fill all the earth with justice and equity as it is now filled with injustice and corruption.” This remains the motto of Shiism today. But while some in these early years continued to work toward that end as an immediate goal through renewed revolts, the experience of defeat led others to defer its anticipated realization to some future unspecified time. This was especially true of the most important Shiite figure of the Eighth Century—the Sixth Imam, Jaafar As Sadik, who rejected the course of immediate revolt as well as the doctrine of the Hidden Imam. As one consequence of this Jaafari teaching, a living and visible person was necessarily the “regnant” Imam, even if that “rule” was incomplete.

What this produced, in effect, was that in addition to the division between Sunnis and Shiites, a division within Shiism itself began to emerge. Some Shiites persisted, and continued to work toward the establishment of Shiite rule. In the process, different views emerged concerning the rightful succession from Ali himself. Other Shia, however, accepted Jaafar’s counsel of political quietism.

The tension between these two Shiite tendencies came to a head and a crisis during the first century and a half of the rule of the Abbasids, the second major Islamic dynasty that came to power in a revolution of 750. The ultimate outcome of this clash was the crystallization of a divide within the Shiite world between two approaches. On the one hand, there was a radical and political approach that led to the founding of the first durable and powerful Shiite state—the Fatimid Ismaili Caliphate, which represented, ostensibly, the fulfillment of Shiite ambitions. On the other hand, the intra-Shiite clash also led to the consolidation of a quietist approach in the form of Twelver Shiism. In light of the enduring importance of Twelver Shiism and the intermittent temptation of radicalism, a brief account of this history will be useful.

The Abbasid revolution had, in its origins, important Shiite overtones. It had arisen as a result of growing dissatisfaction with the rule of the Umayyads, and was facilitated by internal Umayyad conflict. It was mounted on behalf of an unspecified claimant, described generally as the “one who would be acceptable” from the *Ahl al-Bayt*—or from the “People of the House [family] of the Prophet.” The family of Ali had a claim to preeminence within this house, and many Shiite sympathizers supported the revolution in the expectation that it would lead to the rule of the Alids. In fact, one of the important leaders of the revolution approached Jaafar As Sadik to proclaim him as caliph. He, however, declined to accept the office, which thus apparently confirmed the quietist approach and placed the achievement of Shiite rule into the realm of the miraculous. Instead, the Abbasids’ descendants of Muhammad’s paternal uncle were elevated to the caliphate.

When the Abbasids came to power, they had the ambition to reunite the disparate elements of the Muslim world and to restore, under their leadership, the original

Islamic unity—both political and theological—that had been sundered after Muhammad’s death. They thus invested heavily in intellectual and religious efforts that aimed at the promulgation and establishment of a religious perspective to which all Muslims would adhere. In this undertaking, the Abbasids ultimately failed. Although non-Shiites or proto-Sunnis were generally supportive of Abbasid rule, they rejected the most ambitious Abbasid attempts to reformulate Islamic doctrine. The Shiites or proto-Shiite community rejected the Abbasids as usurpers. Thus the divide between Sunnis and Shiites that had arisen in the course of Umayyad rule—or perhaps more accurately, the emergent divide between proto-Sunnis and proto-Shiites—became more crystallized and eventually bequeathed the Sunni and Shiite divide of today.

In the long run, the Abbasids weren’t politically successful either. In fact, the Muslim Empire that they founded in the 7th Century fragmented in the course of the 9th and 10th Centuries. In these circumstances, the Shiite community was thrown into a severe crisis. Shiism had already developed a tendency to splinter into different sects, including ones espousing very radical views. But for Shiism, the formative problem, when it came, was the immediate result of a crisis within the quietist camp that was a direct result of the disappearance of the 12th Imam in the year 874.

The absence of a living, visible Imam accessible to Shiite adherents presented itself as a violation of the expectations created by the teachings of Jaafar As Sadik and the quietist approach that he had originally espoused. Two general possibilities for resolving this conflict presented themselves, each of which required a substantial modification of Jaafar’s teaching. The first was to embrace a teaching—the aforementioned doctrine of the Hidden Imam—that Jaafar and his disciples had heretofore rejected. As a practical matter, embracing this doctrine permitted the maintenance of the quietist approach. Many within the Shiite community ultimately did embrace this solution, and this led, in the course of time, to the full formulation of the tradition of Twelver Shiism.

On the other hand, this solution continued in part to contradict Jaafar As Sadik’s own intellectual legacy, which in turn caused the subsequent period in Shiite thought to be known as the “era of perplexity.” The alternative solution was to attach the Imamate to another still-living descendant of Ali—and, as it happened, to another descendant of Jaafar As Sadik via one of his sons named Ismail. This, too, was combined with the idea of the Mahdi—except that in this case the Mahdi was expected to reveal himself soon if not immediately, and to establish a Shiite state that would rule throughout the Muslim world. This belief was further joined to other radical doctrines, which ultimately produced the movement known today as Ismailism.

The Ismaili movement achieved astounding success in its early years. Starting as an underground faction in Shiite centers in Iraq, it rapidly spread its influence in

many parts of the Muslim world. Most spectacularly it managed, within approximately 25 years, to establish a Shiite state—in fact three: one in the Gulf region, one in Yemen, and one in North Africa. This political achievement was partially the result of the religious zeal as well as organizational and propagandistic skill of its leaders. It was also partially the result of the political fragmentation of the Abbasid Empire. The latter made it possible to find places within the Muslim world where the empire's rule was weak to nonexistent, and thus, places where new political regimes could be founded.

Over the longer term, the most consequential of the Ismaili states proved to be the one founded in North Africa, headed by the “Family of Ismail.” By 909 it had established itself with a new capital in modern day Tunisia, and some 60 years later it had conquered Egypt and founded a new capital—the modern day city of Cairo. This, plus other developments favorable to Shiism, placed the Abbasid caliphate and Sunnism generally on the defensive and has led the 10th Century to be known as the “Shiite Century.”

Because a full account of these developments lies beyond the scope of this essay, it must suffice to say that this high water mark of Shiite political success eventually came to an end with the revival of Sunni political forces and the ultimate demise of the Fatimid Caliphate at the hands of the great military commander Saladin in 1171. The political demise of Ismaili Shiism left, on balance, Twelver Shiism as the dominant form of Shiism. Paradoxically, its place in the Shiite world was reinforced by one other great eruption and success of a form of radical political Shiism: the founding of the Safavid Empire of Persia in 1501.

The Safavid movement which lay behind this empire emerged in Azerbaijan in the 15th Century and espoused a mixture of Sufi and Shiite views. Its followers believed the head of the movement to be the incarnation of God. The founder of the Safavid state, Shah Ismail, did not reject the views of his most zealous followers. Nonetheless, at the founding of the state, he proclaimed an alternative doctrine—in fact that of Twelver Shiism—as the official religion of his new Persian domains, which had been heretofore largely Sunni.

Shah Ismail and his successors thus undertook the forcible conversion of their subjects to Twelver Shiism, and in this project, they were assisted by Shiite clerics whom they were obliged to import from ancient centers of the Shiite community. This effort was ultimately successful, as today the vast majority of Iranians are Shiite. Moreover, the Safavid Shahs incorporated the Shiite clergy into the constitution and bureaucracy of the state, making them parties to its rule. This, too, was consequential in the long run. When the Safavid state came to an end in the early 18th Century, the Twelver Shiite clergy continued to exercise important authority over the increasingly integrated and culturally homogeneous Shiite population. The clergy remained, so

to speak, “sub-political,” but nonetheless powerful, as became clear during various Iranian political crises of the 19th and 20th centuries. During those crises, Shiite clerics sometimes played an important and even decisive role. Such was the religious state of affairs bequeathed to Ayatollah Khomeini on the eve of his revolution.

## The Khomeinist Revolution and its Aftermath

AS THE PRECEDING ACCOUNT SERVES TO INDICATE, SHIISM AS A WHOLE HAS HAD a certain tendency to produce political movements, including movements that have sought radical reform of existing political orders. This is, in a way, hardly surprising, given the fact that Shiism’s most fundamental and distinctive teaching concerns the issue of legitimate Muslim political rule.

It must be noted that such radical religio-political reform movements are not unknown within Sunni history—for example, the North African Almohad movement and “caliphate” of the 12th Century. But these Sunni movements have generally been more limited in scope and power than their Shiite counterparts, in part because they have had to contend, from the 9th Century onward, with a Sunni legal tradition that sanctified in law—both in letter and in spirit—the quietist submission to whomever happened to achieve rule. This was, in part, the consequence of the great horror and trauma that the Sunni tradition had experienced during the Great Fitna.

In fact, following the Great Fitna, Sunni jurists professed a willingness to accept, albeit with regret, illegitimate and even despotic rule, if the cost of an alternative form of rule promised to be intra-Muslim disunity and bloodshed. It is partially for this reason that the modern Sunni Islamist movement, which has sought to radically transform the existing order of nation-states in the Muslim world, has felt itself obliged to go outside of the tradition and its traditional leaders—the Sunni jurists—in elaborating and pursuing its political program. (It is also for this reason that the Sunni Islamist movement has sought to revive the teachings of Ibn Taymiyyah, the 13th Century scholar mentioned earlier who was one of the few medieval jurists to have dissented from elements of classical Sunni political theory to articulate a radical new understanding of Islamic politics.)

By contrast, at least some in the medieval Shiite community appear to have been less repelled than their Sunni counterparts by the prospect of civil war and were willing to undergo its risks. At the same time, however, and as has been indicated, Shiism also developed a quietist analogue that eventually came to be embodied in Twelver Shiism. Shiism—or rather Twelver Shiism—may not be revolutionary,

especially in the modern sense. But even that Twelver tradition contained within itself a certain potential for an activist, revolutionary politics.

That potential was liberated by Ayatollah Khomeini. To be sure, Khomeini had some help in the achievement of his goals, as well as in the formulation of his doctrine. It has been argued with good reason that the success of Khomeini's revolution owed much to the particular circumstances of Iran in the 1970s—including the great public resentment that had arisen to the Shah's government and his Western reforms and allies, as well as to the non-clerical and particularly modern leftist ideologies and political constituencies.

Of particular importance were Jalal Al-e Ahmad and his student Ali Shariati. Both were moved by a deep antipathy toward the modern West: Al-e Ahmad coined the term "Westoxification"—a term still used by Iran's rulers—as the definition of Iran's ailments. Both of these thinkers had roots in religious families and education, but were also much influenced by Western leftist authors and movements. They formulated an ideology—sometimes referred to as Red Shiism—which combined elements of both Shiism and socialism. The traditional Shiite longing for justice and lament at its absence was both embraced and transformed by being redefined in modern revolutionary terms. This led to the famous formula: "Karbala is everywhere; every month is Muharram; every day is Ashura." (Muharram is the Muslim month during which Ashura falls.) This reformulation of Shiite tradition in the hands of men like Al-e Ahmad and Shariati implied that the entire body of downtrodden and oppressed people was the representative of the Imam and the instruments of the redemption.

Khomeini is known to have been impressed by the work of Al-e Ahmad, and when circumstances arose favorable to a revolution, that end was successfully pursued through a coalition of leftists and his own religious adherents. Nevertheless, after the Shah was overthrown Khomeini was relatively quickly able to seize control of the revolution, and thus was able to give it his more distinctively religious interpretation and direction. Perhaps most crucially, he propagated his doctrine of the rule of the jurist and brought about its formal institutionalization. Even though a "republican" constitution was promulgated, the powers of the government were concentrated in the hands of the Supreme Leader and other governmental bodies whose membership was largely clerical. In this way, Khomeini not only settled the definition of the revolution; he also redefined Shiism—or more precisely, he redefined the institutions of Shiism.

A number of factors contributed to Khomeini's success as the leader of the revolution and his transformation of Shiism. One was his lengthy career as the most prominent clerical critic of the Pahlavi regime. This criticism emerged during WWII and continued in the 1950s, culminating in Khomeini's leadership of protests

against the Shah's government in 1963 and 1964. As a result of this dissent, he was exiled from Iran and eventually took up residence in the Shiite center of Najaf in Iraq.

A second important factor was that, in the course of his exile, he had the opportunity to develop his ideas concerning Islamic governance. Since he had already begun to consider this issue during WWII, he could draw upon some twenty years of reflection and development. Originally, his vision of the reform that was necessary was relatively modest and reflected the mainstream views and labors of earlier Iranian clerics.

During a political crisis in the early years of the 20th Century, at a time when Iran was still under the rule of the Qajar dynasty, Shiite clerics had been supporters of the constitutional movement that had secured the adoption of the constitution of 1906. However, they had insisted that the constitution enshrine the superiority of Shiite law through establishing a council of jurists that would review all laws the government might pass, to ensure conformity with Shiite law. The issue of what that might mean was rendered moot by the subsequent suspension of the constitution. From that time on, clerical as well as lay opposition to the government—whether under the Qajars or the Pahlavis who succeeded them—often expressed itself by demands to restore the constitution of 1906. In the early 1940s this was also how Khomeini expressed his discontent.

However, Khomeini's reflections and views broadened over time to become a wholesale reconsideration of the issues. The result was a series of lectures subsequently collected and published as a book in 1970 entitled *Islamic Governance*. It was here that he first laid out in full his prescriptions for the government he was eventually to found, including his doctrine of the rule of the jurist. His arguments for Islamic governance reflected two negative poles: the illegitimacy of monarchy as such (which had been a theme of Shiite thought in general for centuries) and the negative example of the West and its political arrangements, particularly the separation of religion and politics. The modern critique of the latter—which was both shared and, to some extent, pioneered by Sunni Islamist thought—led in Khomeini's view to the affirmation of a new Islamic politics in which religion would take the leading and governing role.

Khomeini asserted that the achievement of the goals of Islamic governance implied a duty on the part of those competent and able—that is the jurists—to direct and pursue this end. This new Islamic politics, or rule of the jurist, could be embraced either by a group of jurists or by a single one if, in the circumstances, the latter was most practically speaking efficacious. In the event of the 1979 revolution it was Khomeini himself who was to play this role.

(Khomeini himself actively paved the way for his own ascendancy through the

dissemination of his views within Iran through publications and taped speeches. By this means he had created a considerable body of supporters to assist him upon his return from exile.)

Khomeini's success not only revolutionized the Iranian state. In fact, the capture of the state and its new organization amounted to a proposal to revolutionize Shiism itself. In a manner of speaking, the state and its requirements came to embody Shiism. As such, the rule of the jurist could entail and very often did require additional radical innovations. An important reason for this was the exigencies that the state faced in seeking to establish and maintain itself, especially in the face of the long war that Iraq initiated upon Iran soon after its revolution. Under these circumstances, Khomeini declared that the survival of the state superseded all else—including even, if necessary, the various prescriptions of Shiite law. Khomeini went so far as to enshrine this principle—the principle of expediency—in the state itself through the establishment of the Expediency Council.

All of this was justified through the absolute independence of authority that, on the basis of the principle of the rule of the jurist, was conferred upon the newly created office of the *Rahbar* or Supreme Leader. Some of Khomeini's supporters went further by suggesting the possibility that Khomeini was himself the Imam—which meant, among other things, that he was morally and politically infallible. At all events, even after Khomeini's death, his prestige became the basis for further innovations in Shiism. Most noteworthy was the status of his *fatwas*, or legal rulings. Traditionally, Shiite legal doctrine had affirmed the view that a jurist's rulings lapsed with his death. That principle was declared to be inapplicable to Khomeini's jurisprudence. (The most famous example was the fatwa Khomeini pronounced against the author Salman Rushdie, which is still in principle in effect to this day.)

But Khomeini's most general and important legacy was that the Islamic Republic and its requirements were to be definitive to Shiite Islamism's future. Of course, in the aftermath of Khomeini's death, the most important issue was who was to succeed him as Supreme Leader. Khomeini himself had made provision for that by designating Ali Khamenei as his successor. The significance of this appointment lay in the fact that Khamenei, while a jurist, was unlike Khomeini in that he was not an ayatollah—or for that matter, not even an acknowledged jurist of the first rank. Notwithstanding this, Khomeini chose Khamenei as the person he considered most trustworthy to continue his governance. It appears, therefore, that even the definition of the “jurist” and his “rule” could breach the limits of Shiite tradition and its institutions.

The net result of this is that Shiism—or rather, Shiite Islamism—is now, in principle, a function of Iran's politics, both domestic and foreign, and is somewhat indeterminate. One powerful expression of this was the election and rule of the first

non-cleric—Mahmud Ahmadinejad—as Iran’s president in 2005. Lacking clerical credentials, Ahmadinejad in pursuit of various political ends has invoked the only authority that might trump the rule of the jurist—that of the Hidden Imam itself. Of course the president remains subject to the authority of Khamenei as Supreme Leader, as well as to various clerical bodies enshrined in the constitution. He is also opposed by other important figures and groups within Iran’s political-religious establishment. Nevertheless, all this points to the fact that the definition of Shiite Islamism is an evolving phenomenon; one might say Shiite Islamism is now what Shiite Islamism does—or will do. What it has been doing is the subject of the articles in this volume.