

The Arab Reception of Vilayat-e-Faqih: The Counter-Model of Muhammad Mahdi Shams al-Din

By Hassan Mneimneh

IN THE EARLY 21ST CENTURY ARAB WORLD, SUPPORT FOR THE IMPORTED Khomeinist doctrine of *wilayat al-faqih* (or in Persian, *vilayat-e-faqih*, meaning the rule or guardianship of the Islamic jurist) within Shi'i communities is invariably synonymous with political allegiance to the Islamic Republic of Iran. This seemingly redundant statement—since *wilayat al-faqih* entails the recognition of the absolute worldly authority of the Islamic Republic of Iran's supreme leader (*Rahbar*), in whom the ultimate executive, legislative, and judiciary powers is supposed to reside—is meaningful once the order of allegiance is established. Indeed, it can be shown that groups and individuals within Arab Shia communities who have subscribed to this doctrine have overwhelmingly displayed their embrace of *wilayat al-faqih* retroactively. Political calculation has encouraged some Arab Shia to respond positively towards the overtures of the Islamic Republic, with adherence to the doctrine of *wilayat al-faqih* subsequently justifying their re-orientation towards their new patron. The substance of the *wilayat al-faqih* theory, its history and an-

tecedents, are thus often immaterial to the patron-client relationship. Instead, its recognized rooting in religious jurisprudence endows it with a special legitimacy in an age of receding nationalism and advancing Islamism.

However, the repeated propagation of the doctrine of *wilayat al-faqih*, even if it is circulated simply as form, has the ability to gradually imbue its host culture with content and to shape its religious and political life in important ways. This indeed appears to be what has been occurring within some Arab Shia communities as a consequence of their functional subscription to *wilayat al-faqih*: The introduction of real, severe, and potentially irreversible changes to their culture and composition. The most acute case of this may be the Shia population of Lebanon—a country that is host to Hezbollah, the Islamic Republic of Iran’s most important creation in its larger efforts to export its revolution and system as a model for all Muslims.

And yet Lebanon, which is home to a dynamic, deeply rooted, and culturally diverse Shia community, has also produced a number of counter-propositions to *wilayat al-faqih* as a slogan, a policy, and an ideology. In fact, the model delineated by the late Shiite cleric Muhammad Mahdi Shams al-Din (1936-2001) constitutes a progressive, counter-revolutionary proposition that is consciously aimed at capitalizing on the particularities of the Arab Shia communities in order to oppose what its author perceived as the destructive effect of Iran’s revolutionary discourse.

The Guardianship of the Jurisprudent as an Iranian Product

WHEN CONSIDERED IN THE CONTEXT OF ISLAMIC RELIGIOUS HISTORY, AND MORE specifically within Shiite religious history, the doctrine of “*wilayat al-faqih*”—as articulated and subsequently put into practice by the Iranian cleric and revolutionary leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini—represents a defining evolution in the thought of Ithna‘ashari Shiism. This doctrine of the rule of the jurist also reflects, however, a distinctively Iranian innovation—both in the sense that it relies on the overwhelming dominance of the Shia Ithna‘ashari branch of Islam as an underlying religio-cultural base, and in the solution it has sought to provide to the power struggles between dynastic rulers and the clerical establishment that have existed in Iran since its adoption of Shiism.

Since it was originally formulated in the 9th Century, the Shia Ithna‘ashari teaching, which is commonly known as Twelver Shiism, has accommodated and even encouraged a quietist co-existence with existing political orders. In this Shiite

perspective, political legitimacy since the death of the Prophet has resided solely in the divinely ordained line of twelve Imams that began with Ali ibn Abi Talib. With the introduction in the 9th Century of the Ithna'ashari belief that the last of these Imams, known as the Mahdi, has entered into occultation (or *ghayba*, a deliberate absence of undetermined length), legitimate political rule was relegated to the metaphysical realm. As the living (and reigning, albeit absent) Imam of all times, the Mahdi alone has the prerogative to challenge the rule of existing governments. In this way, Shia Ithna'ashari doctrine aimed (though not always successfully) to disarm the revolutionary potential of Shiism, which manifested itself through much of early Islamic history. At the same time, it invigorated the Shia clerical institution as the authoritative interpreter and custodian of the traditions of the Imams. Far from being a mere pragmatic accommodation, this formula persisted even under dynasties professing Ithna'ashari Shiism.

The adoption of Ithna'ashari Shiism by the Safavids, and their successful effort to establish Twelver Shiism as the dominant form of religious expression in Iran in the 16th Century, contributed over the following centuries to vigorous experimentation within the Shia Ithna'ashari scholastic tradition. This produced over time a new denominational configuration, claiming enhanced temporal authority for the clergy in the social and legal spheres, along with receding literalist traditionalism (*Akhbari*), a dominant rationalist fundamentalism (*Usuli*), and an emerging patriarchal ecstaticism (*Shaykhi*) as competing denominations.¹

The inherent tension in Shiite Iran between dynastic rulers and the clergy, with authority held by the former and legitimacy residing in the latter, was eventually managed through the assimilation of the clerical establishment into the state bureaucracy, as well through the revival of extra-clerical sources of legitimacy—including in particular the Iranian imperial dynastic tradition. While these methods proved largely successful, the schismatic Babi revolt in the mid-19th Century underlined the contradictions inherent to the political-religious entente for both dynasty and clergy; each camp, in fact, was severely challenged by Babi messianism.² Moreover, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Iranian constitutional thought and the movement it inspired tended to be laden with challenges to the autocratic Iranian monarchy. This movement proved as well to be a useful extra-clerical source of political legitimacy, even after it was reduced to a nominal level.

Under the Pahlavi dynasty founded in the aftermath of WWI, the partnership between Iran's political authority and the clerical establishment ended with the state taking forceful measures to subjugate and marginalize the clergy. The Islamic Revolution, which took place six decades later in 1979, was partly a backlash to this subordination of clerical power. The Pahlavi political authority, under the rubrics of constitutionalism, modernism, and/or nationalism, had sought to rationalize the

exclusion of the clerical establishment. But through the doctrine of *vilayat-e-faqih*, Khomeini responded with arguments for the *de jure* ascent of the clergy as the political authority along with the abolition of the monarchy.

In formulating his doctrine on the rule of the jurist, Khomeini built upon the discussions that Shia clerics had been engaging in since the emergence of Safavid Iran, and in turn, he was effectively able to unravel the inherent contradictions of the non-Mahdi Shia state. Political authority resides in the Mahdi, Khomeini argued, but in his absence, political authority ought to be entrusted to the clerical establishment—that is, to the trustworthy custodians of the Mahdhi’s traditions as well as those of the previous Imams. However, the model that had in the late 1970s coalesced for the Shia clergy, a non-exclusive collegial recognition of prominence for leading clerics, did not satisfy Khomeini’s vision for a centralized leadership. The alternative model that he proposed was an amalgamation of the clergy’s validation systems and of state authoritarianism. Thus it was not the clerical establishment in its totality that was designated as the vicar of the Mahdi. It was one jurisprudent “who satisfies the conditions” for custodianship. In this way, Khomeini’s “*Faqih*” is shaped by both the Mahdi of Shiism and the autocratic Shah of Iranian history.

Arab Shia Dynamics: Integration and Marginalization

ARABIC-SPEAKING SHIA SCHOLARS PLAYED A MAJOR ROLE IN BOTH THE SAFAVID conversion of Iran to Shiism as well as in shaping subsequent debates. The city of Najaf (in modern day Iraq since 1920; under Ottoman control for much of the prior three centuries) served as the central node in a network that linked local Iraqi, Iranian, Amili (from today’s Lebanon), and Bahrayni (from today’s Bahrain and the Ahsa region of Saudi Arabia) clerical families, as well as South Asian and Central Asian scholars. This “Shia International” insured that the geographically dispersed Shia Ithna’ashari communities preserved a common theological and institutional baseline.³ However, the fact that Najaf was politically not under Iranian control provided the Shia clerical institution in that city some distance from the dynasty-clergy debate that shaped modern Iranian political evolution.

The progressive aspects of the Arab Nahdah (or Awakening) of the 19th Century, and the emergence of the nation-state system in the post-WWI era, dramatically redefined the parameters of identity affecting Arab Shia clerics and laypersons alike. In the pre-Nahdah Ottoman realm, Arabic-speaking Shia communities had accommodated themselves to a life within a Sunni empire that did not explicitly recognize

their existence as a community with a distinct religious identity or jurisprudence. The Nahdah, with its call for transition from the religious to the cultural community, offered Arabic-speaking Shia the promise of an improved status approximating equality with their fellow subjects within the Ottoman realm. The nation-state system further redefined this domain by splicing it into distinct units, as well as by introducing the overarching proposition, however illusory, of a common Arab identity. The appeal of this new order to Arab Shia especially was overwhelming. With the possible exception of the Saudi Shia community, which was and remains a captive victim of discriminatory discourse and actions by the Saudi monarchy-Wahhabi clergy arrangement, Arabic-speaking Shia metamorphosed in their self-definition from Shiites simply to Arab Shia and to Shia Arabs. This age of nationalism, as well as the shorter period of experimentation in Arab countries with leftist ideas and movements, witnessed a disproportionate level of Arab Shia participation in the shaping of the Arab social and ideological spaces.

For many Arab Shia,⁴ the complex pool of identity elements in the Arab world may have, at certain times and in certain places, displaced their primary sense of identity as Shia and their affiliations with the wider Shia community. Ethnicity, class, region, clan, and ideology often rose to prominence in the context of each of the nation-states, creating demarcation lines across and with communitarian identities. Contemporary analysis may have assigned the status of primary identity to identity elements other than the community (in particular, ethnicity in the age of nationalism and class in the age of experimentation with leftist formulations). Contemporary analysis may also have relegated the community to the status of an atavistic relic, serving the interests of “parasitic” clerics and feudal lords. From the vantage point of the early 21st century, with the community having in effect been confirmed as primary, it is possible to retrospectively identify the dialectic of integration and marginalization, in different measures, as a function of the different societies. This was the principal dynamic of the history of the Arab Shia communities in the decades preceding the Islamic Revolution in Iran.

The abject discrimination against the Shia population (and other non-Sunni minorities) in the Ottoman Empire was replaced during the early period of Arab nationalism with a conceptual hierarchy of Arabian society in which the normative model is Arab, Sunni, and “modern,” which meant educated, non-tribal, and non-rural. Through the prism of this new conceptual framework, the Arab Shia fail to meet the model’s normative ideal, by virtue of their Shiism as well as well as their majority’s rural existence and culture. As a result, early Arab nationalists in both Iraq and Lebanon displayed considerable paternalism towards their respective largely rural Shia population. Meanwhile, in countries like Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, this paternalism yielded further justification for the exclusion of the Shia from autocratic state institutions.

While upward socio-economic mobility and the increasing migration of Arab Shia from the countryside to urban capital centers rendered this early model structurally obsolete, it continued to shape Arab political life at an ideological level. Therefore, at the dawn of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, the promise of integration and the threat of marginalization remained the two major factors shaping most Arab Shia in their respective societies. It was, for instance, the promise of integration that prompted many accomplished Shia intellectuals and professionals to join the ranks of the Baath party in Iraq. And it was the threat of marginalization and subjugation that pushed others to seek refuge in the Iraqi Dawah party, which was formed with an explicit Shia identity.

The Initial Arab Reception of the Islamic Republic

THE ARAB NATIONALIST NARRATIVE ENVISAGED THE ARAB HOMELAND AS fragmented on the inside, stabbed in its heart by Zionism, and surrounded by enemies that threatened both an essential Arab Nation and its eventual unification. Arab nationalist enmity was primarily directed at and defined by Israel. The modern Republic of Turkey, for instance, had abdicated much of its shared history with its former Arab subjects, espoused a Western orientation, and even “occupied” Arab land (the once-Syrian Alexandretta District ceded to Turkey by France). It wasn’t this, however, but Turkey’s diplomatic ties with Israel that raised Arabian nationalist ire, and which led to the nationalist revisionism that deemed the Turkish role in Arab Islamic history as destructive. Similarly, the primary Arab nationalist grievance against Iran was not rooted in the territorial dispute over the Iranian-held islands claimed by the UAE, but rather in Iran’s friendly relations with Israel. These relations, too, prompted a severely negative assessment by Arab revisionists of the Persian role in Arab Islamic civilization. Arab nationalist ideologues accused Iranians of *shu‘ubiyyah*—a charge that refers to a medieval Arabic literary movement of ethnic pride by various non-Arab authors but that, in Arab nationalist discourse, came to apply to those who allegedly harbored a devious and destructive anti-Arab plan.

The 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran dramatically reconfigured much of this nationalist narrative. The revolutionaries closed the Israeli Embassy in Tehran, and rechristened the building in which it was located the Embassy of Palestine. The Islamic Republic of Iran’s embrace of the Palestinian cause was greeted with enthusiasm by nationalists and leftists across the Arab world. Even as the Islamic Revolution was consuming and weakening the Iranian left, leftist groups across the Arab world

persisted in their positive assessment of it, excusing the revolution's excesses and embracing its grander scheme—including especially the dramatic realignment of powers it offered the Palestinian cause.

However, the enthusiasm associated with the new Iranian stand on the question of Palestine, and the illusion of integration of Iran into Arab concerns notwithstanding, the Khomeinist desire to export the Islamic Revolution was a project based on the elements of marginalization experienced by Shia Arabs; it was also a project premised on the perpetuation and the accentuation of these elements. The new Iranian project of regional hegemony may have intersected positively with the Arab political narrative on the subject of Palestine. But elsewhere, however, it constituted a threat to the Arab nationalist vision. Furthermore, while Iranian entrenchment in the issue of Palestine has evolved over the past three decades into an actual entrapment for Iran (that is, it is impossible for the Islamic Republic to compromise on this subject without losing much of its regional influence), of the two issues espoused by the Islamic Republic, Palestine and the nurturing of sectarian proxies, it was the latter that was intrinsically strategic.

While initiated by the Iraqi regime, the Iran-Iraq war expressed the tension between an expansionist Islamic Iran and a defensive Arab order. The Palestine-focused Arab political culture could excuse Iranian actions in much of Arabia, since the target of these actions was largely the reactionary regimes associated with Western imperialism, the primary backer of Zionism. The Iran-Iraq conflict, on the other hand, was much more problematic, since it pitted an Arab nationalist and “revolutionary” state against the Islamic Republic. The war's mere existence caused irreparable damage to the Arab nationalist narrative, which has since displayed two variants. The first values the Iranian stand on the Palestinian question and remains mostly mute on Iranian plans and actions in the rest of the Arab world. The second revives the *shu'ubiyah* accusation,⁵ and extends it to Arab Shia communities, charging them of disloyalty to their Arab homeland.

With Iran's efforts to export the Islamic revolution, two mutually reinforcing trends were set in motion within Arab political life. The first was the increasing association of dispossessed Arab Shia communities with Iran, which was enhanced through the assimilation of the doctrine of *wilayat al-faqih* and produced a detachment of these populations from the national commonwealth. The second was the intensification of an increasingly hostile post-Arab nationalist anti-Shia discourse.

In his writings and actions, the Lebanese Shia scholar Muhammad Mahdi Shams al-Din attempted to provide a model to counter these trends. He hoped to safeguard the Arab Shia communities by underlining the continuing validity of integration within their respective societies as an achievable political goal, and by questioning the soundness of *wilayat al-faqih* as an authoritative principle.

A Call for Integration: The Formula of Muhammad Mahdi Shams al-Din

SHAMS AL-DIN WAS A VOCAL AND ARDENT SUPPORTER OF THE IRANIAN REVOLUTION and of Khomeini as its leader. He was at the same time an adamant critic of the theory of *wilayat al-faqih*, which he characterized as religious authoritarianism. With Mirza Muhammad Husayn Naini's 1909 *Tanbih al-Ummah wa-Tanzih al-Millah* as a base, Shams al-Din argued that the occultation of the last Imam does not entail a right of guardianship for any jurisprudent, regardless of the jurist's qualifications. Instead, he argued, the absence of a divinely mandated authority reverts the guardianship of the umma to the umma itself.⁶ Separately, Shams al-Din additionally argued that no authoritative text or historical precedent dictates that the totality of the Muslim umma ought to be under one political power.⁷ Based on these two arguments, Shams al-Din concluded that it is the prerogative of any Muslim community to choose its form of government, whether Islamic or not, with the understanding that such a choice is freely reversible.

Shams al-Din's support for the Islamic Revolution in Iran was based on his assessment that it represented an expression of the popular will. Even though he was a determined critic of *wilayat al-faqih*, Shams al-Din extended his respect of the popular will to recognize the right of Iranians as a national community to submit to it. Outside of Iran, however, Shams al-Din argued that *wilayat al-faqih* could not be binding.

If an affinity can be identified between Khomeini's model for political authority and the Iranian imperial tradition, a similar relation may be established between Shams al-Din's counter-proposal and the idealized Lebanese model of governance. Muhammad Mahdi Shams al-Din was born in 1936 in Najaf, Iraq, where his father, a member of an established Lebanese Shia clerical family, was continuing his studies.⁸ Shams al-Din himself underwent training as a cleric in Najaf, and returned to Lebanon where in 1969 he assisted the charismatic Iranian-Lebanese religious figure, Musa al-Sadr, in establishing the Higher Shia Islamic Council. This was a community-based institution that was explicitly designed to mirror those of other communities in Lebanon. In important ways, this institution reflected an effort by the Lebanese Shia community to free itself from Sunni paternalism.

Sadr subsequently "vanished"⁹ with two companions in the course of a trip to Qadhafi's Libya in 1978, leaving Shams al-Din as the "interim" president of the Higher Shia Islamic Council. As president, Shams al-Din was faced with a primary responsibility in the task of finding a way for the Shia to integrate into the national political commonwealth without the loss of communitarian identity. This task was

not easy—especially within the context of the Lebanese civil war, which had erupted in 1975. Against a backdrop of grand narratives that envisioned the nation-state as a relic of colonialism, to be subsumed under a more encompassing entity, Shams al-Din promoted the idea that the Shia—and in fact, all Lebanese—should accept and learn to live within a unified nation-state as a final homeland. Furthermore, in the course of the 1980s, amidst rising fervor and desire for an “Islamic Republic” within many Shia circles, Shams al-Din advanced the notion of a “civil state” that had no religious affiliation.

Shams al-Din identified three layers of identity: the nation-state, the Arab nation, and the Muslim umma. According to Shams al-Din, it is incumbent on the Shia communities across the Arab world to seek complete integration in their respective nation-states, as he saw the nation state as the primary and only “complete” identity of the three identified layers: All Lebanese, whether Shia or otherwise, he argued, can, by virtue of being Lebanese, lay an unrestricted claim to and assume the responsibility for the Lebanese state, its laws, and its policies. As merely a fraction of both the Arab nation and the Muslim umma, they are neither entitled to nor should they be expected to act on behalf of the whole.

When Shams al-Din applied this reasoning to the question of armed resistance, he argued that all Shia Lebanese—as Lebanese citizens—have the inalienable right to act to free their homeland from Israeli occupation. But upon the withdrawal of Israel from Lebanese territory, this right is not extendable to the liberation of Palestine or to any continuation of hostilities with Israel, pending a collective decision and contribution to that effect by the totality of the Arab nation and/or the Muslim umma.¹⁰ Through these and similar arguments, which predated by many years the 1983 creation of Hezbollah as the party of the Islamic Revolution in Lebanon, Shams al-Din provided a non-confrontational, positive, and constructive voice within Lebanese politics. Indeed, through Husayn al-Husayni, another close associate of Musa al-Sadr, who rose to assume the speakership of the Lebanese Parliament, Shams al-Din’s formula of the nation state as a final homeland for all its citizens found its way to the Lebanese constitution in 1989 and became, as originally envisaged, part of the solution to the Lebanese civil war.

And yet, this achievement notwithstanding, until 2005 Lebanon remained under Syrian domination. The Syrian dictator, Hafiz al-Asad, had deliberately sought to divide the Lebanese state and society along religious lines, which effectively allocated the virtual totality of the Shia community to Hezbollah, which in addition to being an Iranian proxy, served as Asad’s “war option.” Shams al-Din’s articulation, even if stated softly, was a rejection of the status quo through which Hezbollah both monopolized the resistance to the Israeli occupation of Lebanese territory and posited the confrontation with Israel as existential, with Jerusalem as the ultimate prize.

Ironically, while calling for integration to be the main feature of Shia political behavior, Shams al-Din and his Higher Shia Islamic Council were increasingly marginalized by the Hezbollah stranglehold that descended onto much of the Lebanese Shia community in the 1990s. Shams al-Din survived an assassination attempt in 1990, and he was harassed and his home was attacked until his death in 2001.

While his clout in Lebanon was diminishing, Shams al-Din began outreach to Shia communities across the Arab world, seeking to spread his message of integration and national reconciliation. Above all, Shams al-Din sought to support and endorse the basic pluralism in Arab societies against the threat posed by Arab Shia being absorbed into Iran's ideological sphere. His ideas were particularly important to Bahrain's political transformation. A Shia majority country, Bahrain was ruled as an absolute emirate by the (Sunni) Al Khalifah family. Widespread mistrust between the rulers and the ruled had degenerated into sporadic strife, marking Bahrain as a prime target for Iran's efforts to export its revolution. While the Al Khalifah were relatively successful in containing Iranian influence, it became clear that some recognition of the demands made by their domestic Shiite opposition was necessary. Shams al-Din served as an intermediary between opposition figures and the government, and worked diligently from 1996 to 1999 to help shape an arrangement that was satisfactory to both parties and that satisfied his call for Shiite integration.¹¹ Shams al-Din also visited Saudi Arabia with the same message. On the subject of Iraq, Shams al-Din voiced his concern over the communitarian bent taken by many Shia political parties. In his death bed *Wasaya* (Commandments), Shams al-Din singled out Iraq's Dawah political party as an example of an erroneous effort that would both fail to achieve its political goals as well as generate a backlash against the Shia. The Dawah party's fault, according to him, was not simply in the way in which it sought to accomplish its goals, but rather in the very nature of sectarian formations.

Shams al-Din's fundamental message of Shiite integration is simple enough to have served as a consistent slogan in his endeavors. It was however complicated, upon narrative elaboration, by two seemingly contradictory propositions. Shams al-Din accepted the religious and cultural distinctions associated with Arab Shia communities, while insistently rejecting all political sectarianism or political allocations based on religious affiliation. This rejection was however normative and prescriptive; it was not a denial of the existence of such allocations or of the need for them. Having supported majority-rule democracy as a political model for Lebanon for many years, Shams al-Din withdrew his support for this model in his *Wasaya*, pointing to the fact the Christian community in Lebanon might require a fixed allocation of representation to foster a sense of security.¹²

The contrast between Shams al-Din's argument for Shiite integration and his willing allocation of special, disproportionate status for Lebanese Christians was further

confused by his rejection of the notion that Shia and Christians should be seen as minorities in the Lebanese and Arab contexts. Shams al-Din stressed that two major groups dominate the Middle East today: Arabs (including Muslim Arabs and non-Muslim Arabs), and Muslims (including Arabs and non-Arabs). The Shia are an integral part of both groups and cannot be singled out as a minority. The same applies to Christians in the context of the Arab group, he argued. Shams al-Din thus moved back and forth between the prescriptive and the descriptive. Within the context of a firmly rooted Lebanese national identity, he advocated that the primary cultural identities should strive to be Arab and Muslim—provided that “Arabness” and “Muslimness” are understood in a broad, ecumenical and non-sectarian sense, while recognizing and respecting that in the current conditions, they are indeed also Shia and Maronite, among others. But he rejected the latter designations when used in a political rather than cultural context, out of his fear that “political Shiism” and “political Maronitism” might be seduced by the idea of an “alliance of the minorities,” to the detriment of the real interest of the communities in seeking national integration.¹³

Shiite Integration After Shams al-Din

SHAMS AL-DIN PASSED AWAY IN JANUARY 2001, AND WAS EULOGIZED, AMONG OTHERS, by Hasan Nasrallah, secretary general of Hezbollah. That organization isolated, ostracized and occasionally persecuted Shams al-Din, while actively seeking the implementation of a model contrary to his ideals of integration and national cohesion.¹⁴ Nasrallah has indeed declared his and his party’s allegiance to Ali Khamenei, Khomeini’s successor as the Supreme Guide of the Islamic Republic of Iran, and the jurisprudent entrusted with guardianship under the doctrine of *wilayat al-faqih*. In the 1990s, Hezbollah mellowed its rhetoric and shelved its self-representation as the party of the “Islamic Revolution in Lebanon,” claiming that it no longer seeks an Islamic republic in Lebanon. This move was undertaken, as Nasrallah has explained, because the Supreme Guide Khamenei had determined that the conditions in Lebanon are not—for the moment at least—conducive for such an Islamic state. Hezbollah, however, is not merely waiting for a new pronouncement from its Supreme Guide. It has instead actively engaged in a generational transformation, through education, of the Shia Lebanese community upon which it exercises its paternalistic control.

It has been asserted that Hezbollah’s nominal allegiance to the doctrine of *wilayat al-faqih* is primarily utilitarian. This argument claims that Hezbollah’s declared position of subservience to Khamenei is essentially a courtesy reward for the plentiful material support and political backing that Iran has provided Hezbollah; the leadership of Hezbollah, as well as much of the Lebanese Shia community, according to this claim,

are far more moderate and pragmatic than their rhetoric. This assertion may not survive the coming of age of the next generation of Hezbollah leaders, who are thoroughly educated and socialized in sincere adherence to the wilayat al-faqih theory. A similar generational shift can be noted in other Shia Arab locales, including Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. The commemoration of Jerusalem Day (Yawm al-Quds) on the last Friday of the month of Ramadan is invariably a display of the Islamic Republic's success in utilizing the Palestinian question and in transforming the Shia communities of the Arab world. In addition to the few token images of Jerusalem's holy sites paraded about on this day, Shia Arabs (and other supporters of Iran) in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and elsewhere carry larger than life portraits of Khomeini, Khamenei, Ahmadinejad, and Nasrallah in an open display of their political allegiances.

The Shiite integration within Arab societies sought by Shams al-Din has already been denied in Lebanon, where communitarian mobilization is the principal means by which politicians build support. It also seems to be in the process of being denied elsewhere in the Arab world. At the mass culture level, Shams al-Din's merging of prescriptive and descriptive categories may even relegate his ideas to the category of formulations detached from reality.

Still, as a prolific jurist, Shams al-Din has left behind a substantial scholarly rebuttal of both the principle and practice of wilayat al-faqih. His doctrine of integration is presented not merely as a rational approach, but also as one rooted in traditional Islamic jurisprudence. Other scholar-activists in Lebanon including Ali al-Amin and Hani Fahs have built upon this call for integration to promote an understanding of Shia precepts consistent with loyalty to the nation-state. Their modest and courageous efforts are countered by Hezbollah leviathan, and by Iran's apt use of the Palestinian question to further its regional influence. Indeed, only recently, Khalid Mishal, the leader-in-exile of Hamas, paid homage to Iranian support by referring to Khamenei as the Guardian of the Affairs of all Muslims (*wali amr al-muslimin*).¹⁵ This illustrates Iranian success in inserting itself into the disjointed Arab political discourse.

It would be unrealistic to expect to reverse the tide of the influence of the Islamic Republic on Arab Shia communities and Arab political culture through a deconstructive analysis of wilayat al-faqih or through an exposition of the destructive effects that Iranian influence and support for "Islamic causes" has had on the region. Whether with regards to the marginalized Shia Arab communities of the Gulf, or on the topic of Palestine, Iran has merely stepped in to fill a void, and has done so quite skillfully and adequately. Arab political culture in general, and its Gulf versions in particular, have largely failed to accommodate local Shia communities into a political order based on equal citizenship and common nationality. The proclivity of these communities to seek alternatives is therefore to be expected. Similarly, Arab political culture has been woefully incoherent in its approach to the Palestinian question.

While not promising a future of peaceful coexistence with Israel, this political culture has sought to accommodate the official Arab governments' stand in support of the peace process, leaving two types of discourse vacant: one of peace, and one of war. Iran stepped in to fill the latter vacancy. The former seems to have no takers.

If and when the missing alternative is pursued, as a reflection of the emergence of a genuine peace formula or of the development of a new Arab political discourse that addresses the lacunae of the presently disjointed one, the counter-model of Shams al-Din may be able to provide the juristic backing for an actual reversal of the advances of the Islamic Republic.

NOTES

1. For an overview of the doctrine and evolution of the denominations of Shi'ia Islam, see Moojan Momen, *An Introduction to Shi' i Islam: The History and Doctrines of Twelver Shi'ism* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 1985).
2. The most erudite exposition of the Babi experience remains Abbas Amanat, *Resurrection and Renewal: The Making of the Babi Movement in Iran, 1844-1850* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1989).
3. For a description of the international setting in Najaf see Chibli Mallat, *The Renewal of Islamic Law: Muhammad: Baqer as-Sadr and the Shi'i International* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).
4. Smaller Shia communities have long existed in Kuwait, Qatar, the UAE, and Oman. Yemen has its own ancestral tradition of Zaydi Shiism with a dynastic history of rule of the highlands. The four primary Arab Shia communities are, however, those of Iraq, Lebanon, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia.
5. A recent example of reviving the shu'ubiyyah accusation against Iran is Sulayman ibn Salih al-Kharashi, *al-Shu'ubiyyah 'inda al-Shi'ah al-Furs* (Shu'ubiyyah amongst Persian Shi'is) (n.p.: Dar al-Muntaqa, 2009).
6. Muhammad Mahdi Shams al-Din "Majal al-Ijtihad wa-Manatiq al-Faragh al-Tashri'i" (Deductive Reasoning in Legislative Gaps) in *Minhaj* 3 (1991), [<http://www.islamicfeqh.com/al-menhaj/Al-men03/g3000001.htm>]. 6.
7. Sa'ud al-Mawla, "al-Ummah wa-l-Tajzi'ah wa-l-Wilayah al-'Ammah," "Nation, Division, and Guardianship," 15 January 2007, http://www.mettransparent.com/old/texts/saoud_mawla_mohamed_mahdi_shamsuddin_2.htm.
8. http://www.shamseddine.org/arabic/?page_id=2
9. For a personal informative account of these events, see Fouad Ajami, *The Vanished Imam: Musa Al Sadr and the Shia of Lebanon* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1986).
10. Sa'ud al-Mawla "Mashru' al-Watan wa-l-Dawlah" (The Project of Homeland and State), 11 January 2007, http://www.mettransparent.com/old/texts/saoud_mawla_mohamed_mahdi_shamsuddin_1.htm
11. See <http://www.aldaronline.com/AlDar/AlDarPortal/UI/Article.aspx?ArticleID=43611>.
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