

Current Trends in Islamist Ideology

VOLUME 8

- THE PARADOXES OF SHIISM / *Hillel Fradkin*
- THE RETURN OF POLITICAL MAHDISM / *Jean-Pierre Filiu*
- THE ARAB RECEPTION OF VILAYAT-E-FAQIH / *Hassan Mneimneh*
- HEZBOLLAH'S AGENDA IN LEBANON / *Tony Badran*
- HEZBOLLAH: A STATE WITHIN A STATE / *Hussain Abdul-Hussain*
- THE SHIITE TURN IN SYRIA / *Khalid Sindawi*
- TASHAYU IN CENTRAL ASIA AND RUSSIA / *Dina Lisnyansky*

HUDSON INSTITUTE
*Center on Islam, Democracy, and
the Future of the Muslim World*

Current Trends in Islamist Ideology

VOLUME 8

Edited by
Hillel Fradkin,
Husain Haqqani (on leave),
Eric Brown,
and Hassan Mneimneh

HUDSON INSTITUTE

Center on Islam, Democracy, and the Future of the Muslim World

© 2009 Hudson Institute, Inc. All rights reserved.
ISSN: 1940-834X

For more information about obtaining additional copies of this or other Hudson Institute publications, please visit Hudson's website at www.hudson.org/bookstore or call toll free: 1-888-554-1325.

ABOUT HUDSON INSTITUTE

Hudson Institute is a non-partisan policy research organization dedicated to innovative research and analysis that promotes global security, prosperity, and freedom. We challenge conventional thinking and help manage strategic transitions to the future through interdisciplinary and collaborative studies in defense, international relations, economics, culture, science, technology, and law. Through publications, conferences, and policy recommendations, we seek to guide global leaders in government and business.

For more information, visit www.hudson.org

ABOUT THE CENTER ON ISLAM, DEMOCRACY, AND THE FUTURE OF THE MUSLIM WORLD

Hudson Institute's Center on Islam conducts a wide-ranging program of research and analysis addressed to the political, religious, social, and other dynamics within majority Muslim countries and Muslim populations around the world. A principal focus of the Center's work is the ideological dynamic within Islam and the connected issue of how this political and religious debate impacts both Islamic radicalism and the Muslim search for moderate and democratic alternatives. Through its research, which includes collaboration with partners throughout the Muslim world and elsewhere, the Center aims to contribute to the development of effective policy options and strategies to win the worldwide struggle against radical Islam.

For more information, visit www.CurrentTrends.org

Contents

- 5 / The Paradoxes of Shiism
Hillel Fradkin
- 26 / The Return of Political Mahdism
Jean-Pierre Filiu
- 39 / The Arab Reception of Vilayat-e-Faqih
Hassan Mneimneh
- 52 / Hezbollah's Agenda in Lebanon
Tony Badran
- 68 / Hezbollah: A State within a State
Hussain Abdul-Hussain
- 82 / The Shiite Turn in Syria
Khalid Sindawi
- 108 / Tashayu in Central Asia and Russia
Dina Lisnyansky

The Paradoxes of Shiism

By Hillel Fradkin

THE 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.

The Return of Political Mahdism

By Jean-Pierre Filiu

THE MAHDI, OR “WELL-ORIENTED” IMAM, IS A CENTRAL FIGURE WITHIN Shiism and its various branches. Today, the overwhelming majority of Shiites follow what outsiders describe as “Twelver Shiism,” which is a reference to the dynasty of twelve imams initiated at the very dawn of Islam by Ali ibn Abi Talib, the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Mohammed. Within Twelver Shiite belief, the twelfth imam, whose first name is Mohammed, is still alive, although he is said to have gone into occultation after disappearing from human sight in 941 CE. It is further believed that this Mahdi or “Hidden Imam” will reappear at the end of time in order to restore justice and peace on earth before the Day of Judgment.

Echoes of the Mahdi’s powers have sounded throughout Islamic history. From time to time, movements have arisen under the banner of the Hidden Imam, claiming his support and authority to contest the rule of established religious and political rulers. Some of these mahdist movements have even succeeded in establishing their own polities.

Yet for the most part, mahdist belief has traditionally expressed itself in politically neutral, even passive, ways within Shiism. This quietist practice derives from many sources, including the fact that mahdism projects the ultimate showdown between justice and injustice into a supra-human, other-worldly dimension, thereby diminishing the relative importance of worldly political action. Moreover, by stressing that knowledge of the Mahdi and his return is beyond the reach of mere human comprehension, Twelver Shiite authorities have generally managed throughout history to rein in apocalyptic superstitions and to neutralize messianism before it becomes politically subversive.

In the contemporary era, however, a new wave of political mahdism has taken root in the Shiite world. For instance, the 2005 election in Iran of the overtly mahdist President Ahmadinejad lent unprecedented support to different, and sometimes competing, messianic tendencies both in Iran and beyond. Later in 2006, many eventually came to celebrate the 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah as a “divine victory” that was achieved with the Madhi’s help. And perhaps most importantly, in Iraq, following the U.S.-led invasion in 2003, a variety of new mahdist movements—from Moqtada al-Sadr’s Mahdi’s Army, to Ahmad al-Hassan’s apocalyptic group the Supporters of the Imam Mahdi—have emerged, challenging the authority of more traditional clerics like Ayatollah Sistani and contesting their leadership of the Shia community. In light of Shiism’s traditional quietism, these recent expressions of political mahdism require careful scrutiny.

The Roots of Mahdism

THERE IS NO MENTION OF THE MAHDI IN THE QURAN. IT IS THROUGH THE HADITH, or sayings attributed to the Prophet Mohammed and collected during the first two centuries of Islam, that the Mahdi gained prominence in the Muslim faith. According to this tradition, the Mahdi’s followers, gathered under black banners, will supposedly appear to confront *al-Masih al-Dajjal* (the false messiah) and his armies of evil at the end of time. However, according to an alternative Sunni tradition, it is Jesus (*Issa*), the eleventh envoy of Allah—rather than the Madhi—who will then come back to fight (in Syria) and ultimately kill (in Palestine) the *Dajjal* or Antichrist. In this view, the Mahdi will always defer to Jesus and let him lead the worldwide community of Muslims in collective prayer.

While Sunni traditionalists constructed this eschatological narrative, Shia scholars developed a rather different version. Devastated by their early failure to advance the cause of Imam Ali and his heirs during Islam’s early civil wars over the rightful successors to the Prophet Mohammed, Shia scholars began referring to an omnipotent Mahdi,¹ hidden at the heart of inaccessible mountains and protected by wild beasts, who would one day return to smash the enemies of Islam—including both infidels as well as deviant Muslims. With the passing of generations, and Shiism’s enduring exclusion from political power, quarrels deepened among the supporters of competing imams. As one consequence of this, Shiism itself became separated into different branches—including, for instance, Sevener Shiism, which is also known as Ismailism. But a major Shia faction retained its allegiance to Ali’s descendants until the death of the eleventh imam, Hassan al-Askari, in the Iraqi city of Samarra in 873.

Imam Hassan, as well as his father Ali al-Hadi, had been kept under house arrest

by the Sunni Abbasid Caliphs, and there were strong suspicions that the imam was murdered. After Hassan's death, Shia networks smuggled his four-year-old son Mohammed underground for his protection, and in following years the twelfth imam addressed his followers only through his *sufara* (ambassadors). It was during this period, which is known as *al-ghayba al-sughra* (the small occultation), that Imam Mohammed acquired the aura of a full-fledged Mahdi. In 941 the imam's fourth and last ambassador announced that the Mahdi had decided to disappear. This was, according to Twelver tradition, the beginning of *al-ghayba al-kubra* (the great occultation), and this remains the state in which many devout Shia believe the twelfth imam is still living today.

In the century that followed the start of the great occultation, the doctrine on mahdism within Twelver Shiism was consolidated. This monumental task was accomplished by the Baghdadi Shaykh al-Mufid, who selected and organized assorted traditional pronouncements on the mahdi attributed to the Prophet Mohammed as well as to the twelve imams in his *Kitab al-Irshad* (*Book of Guidance*). After completing this work, Shaykh Mufid even claimed to have received a letter from the Hidden Imam himself praising his work.

Shaykh Mufid describes how the Mahdi's return will be preceded by a period of natural catastrophes and human strife. The cities of Baghdad and Kufa in what is today Iraq will be struck by rains of red fire, while the Euphrates River will flow out of its bed. The shaykh didn't presume to know exactly when the imam's occultation will end, but he gives credence to the traditional idea that the Mahdi will reappear during the Ashura of an even Islamic year. (Imam Hussein, Ali's son, was martyred in 680 on the tenth day of the Muslim month of Muharram, which is annually commemorated as the Ashura by the Shia worldwide.) When the Mahdi does appear, he will annihilate all the "hypocrites" in Kufa and from Iraq he will move forth to reconquer the world for Islam. Through this re-conquest, the world will be restored to peace and justice for a period of either seven or nineteen years (the traditions are unclear as to exactly how long this will last), and then the final Day of Judgment will come.²

Subsequent Shia scholars eventually agreed that the conflagration leading to the return of the Mahdi—or, more precisely, to the return of his apparition (*zuhur*) from concealment—would be marked by a sequence of five events or signs. These signs include: an uprising led by the "Yemenite," the Mahdi's advance scout or herald; a battle with the "Sufyani," a hypocritical tyrant associated with the Sunni oppression; the murder of the "Pure Soul," the Mahdi's envoy; the "Battle of the Clamors" in which the Mahdi's followers shout from heaven in an effort to silence the yells of the evil forces from underground; and the engulfing and destruction of an evil army in the Arabian desert.³ After this, the Mahdi will arise as the "Lord of the Age" or

the “Lord of the Sword” to lead his “army of wrath” in its re-conquest of the world.

Once the Shia religious hierarchy had conceived of this eschatological narrative, it worked hard to establish a monopoly over the interpretation of the signs in an effort to suppress political mahdism. These efforts by the established Shia scholars to suppress political messianism were not always successful, however. The Safavid Shiite sect (which originally emerged out of a Sufi movement known as the Safawiyya) rose to conquer Persia at the beginning of the sixteenth century. They revered their leader, Shah Ismail, as the Mahdi himself. The defeat of Safavid forces by the Ottoman Army in 1514, however, compelled Shah Ismail to restrain his military ambitions. Subsequently, Shah Ismail came to be seen among the Shia as the representative of the Mahdi, not as the Hidden Imam himself. At the same time, Shia clerics celebrated the Safavid’s success, and they undertook to spread Shiite teachings throughout Persia. To consolidate Safavid control over Persia, these Shiite clerics, too, eventually came to repudiate political mahdism. This complex historical process led the scholar Zeev Maghen to state that “Shiism as we know it today came into being primarily as a force for anti-messianism.”⁴

The Khomeinist Deterrence

THE IRANIAN REVOLUTION OF 1979 IS SOMETIMES PORTRAYED AS REPRESENTING a break with the traditional Shiite quietism. It is true that when Iran’s revolutionary rumblings began in the fall of 1978, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini played every card in his hand to rally the masses against Shah Reza Pahlavi—including the use of subtle messianic references. Subsequently, Khomeini accepted the prestigious title of imam and even allowed his followers to indulge in messianic rhetoric. In one notorious example, Khomeini did not disavow the collective hallucination of November 27 1978, when thousands of his followers claimed to have seen Khomeini’s face in the moon.

Since coming to power, however, the leaders of the Islamic Republic of Iran have generally sought to proscribe, or to at least deter, political messianism within their realm. In fact, as a matter of principle Khomeini adamantly opposed political mahdism: His break with the traditional Shiite clergy came not on the issues of messianism, but on the question of political power. During his exile from 1966 to 1978 in Najaf, Iraq, Khomeini developed his political doctrine of *vilayat-e-faqih*, or rule of the Islamic jurist, while the Shiite clerical hierarchy based in Qom continued to advocate a centuries-old separation of religious and political authority.

After the fall of the shah in February 1979, the Islamic Republic was formed around a constitution that described its supreme leader as a representative of the

Hidden Imam. This delegation of supernatural power to the head of state was in line with the dynastical legitimacy instituted by the Safavids. While the ayatollahs in Qom resented this confusion of powers, they shared Khomeini's dislike for messianic excesses. No individual or sect had the right to challenge the occultation or decipher the signs. This was the privilege of the religious hierarchy, which prohibited any messianic attempt to "accelerate" the return of the apparition.

The man who would replace Khomeini, Ali Khamenei, was a revolutionary cleric from Mashhad, in the Khorasan, where the Islamic Republic had boosted the pilgrimage to the shrine of the eighth imam, Reza. The Foundation of the Imam Reza had helped Khamenei in his ascension to power and, after being elected President of the Islamic Republic in 1981, he was able to expand his power base outside of Khorasan. In Qom, the Ayatollah Muhammad Taqi Bahjat, along with his disciple Mesbah-Yazdi, supported him in his rivalry for power with other religious leaders. When Khomeini died in 1989, Khamenei was upgraded as an ayatollah and appointed as Iran's Supreme Leader. Ayatollah Khamenei has followed Khomeini's repudiation of political mahdism.

The next two men to succeed Khomeini as president of the Islamic Republic, Ali Akbar Hachemi Rafsanjani (1989-1997) and Muhammad Khatami (1997-2005), were even more hostile to political mahdism than their predecessors. But the 2005 election of Mahmud Ahmadinejad as President of Iran has undermined the mechanisms proscribing political mahdism within the Islamic Republic. The new president has repeatedly invoked the authority of the Mahdi in his tirades against his political opponents. And while the post-Khomeini religious establishment has continued to seek to proscribe political mahdism, Ahmadinejad has given the impression at least that he is the harbinger of the Hidden Imam, and that he is paving the way for the actual re-appearance of the apparition of the "Lord of Time."

Ahmadinejad is the first president of the Islamic Republic to not come from a clerical background, and his embrace of spiritual and political mahdism represents an effort on his part to consolidate a power base that is independent of the religious hierarchy. He has attempted to utilize political mahdism in a number of different ways. For example, he sponsored the activities of the Qom-based Bright Future Institute (BFI), whose stated mission is to "prepare scientific answers to respond to superstitions surrounding" the Mahdi.⁵ Since Ahmadinejad's election, the BFI has organized an annual international conference on Islamic messianism, which is held on the fifteenth day of the Muslim month of Chaabane, the alleged birth date of the Hidden Imam. (Ahmadinejad is also known for delivering rousing public speeches on this date.) The BFI describes the Mahdi as the "crusader of equality and world peace" and attacks the "Christian Zionist messianic project [that] represents a fundamental betrayal of the message of Jesus Christ."

Another example of the way Ahmadinejad has attempted to utilize mahdism revolves around the Mosque of Jamkaran. During his rule, Ayatollah Khomeini never felt it was appropriate to visit the Mosque of Jamkaran, which had been built in the eleventh century near Qom to commemorate the appearance of the Mahdi in a dream. President Ahmadinejad, however, has sought to dramatically enhance the prestige of the mosque. Among other things, he has used public subsidies to enlarge the sanctuary at Jamkaran, which in turn, has meant that the mosque has received increasing numbers of pilgrims. Not only has this directly undercut the pilgrimage to the Imam Reza's shrine in Mashad, the regional power base of Ayatollah Khamenei himself, but it has also challenged the traditionalist clerics in Qom who have impugned the fervor of the pilgrims to Jamkaran, the growing use of the Internet to send messages to the Mahdi, and the now widely popular belief among these pilgrims that the Hidden Imam is accessing the sanctuary on a regular basis through a tunnel. The superstitions ignited by Jamkaran clearly clash with the reigning orthodoxy of Iran's mullahs and, in many ways, is subversive of the clerical hierarchy and rule.

Supreme Leader Khamenei has been careful not to publicly support President Ahmadinejad's embrace of political mahdism, and in this regard, he has never wavered from Khomeini's original stance on messianism. However, as the scholar Mehdi Khalaji notes, "Khamenei does not hold a political messianic set of ideas, but his religious mentality, mixed with his five decades of political experience, makes him an ambiguous and ambivalent character" with respect to the issue of political mahdism.⁶

In contrast, Rafsanjani, who was defeated by Ahmadinejad in the presidential race in 2005, has been much more explicit in his rejection of political mahdism. As he has said,

Some say we have contact (with the Hidden Imam) and the harm comes when they can deceive people with this philosophy. In every juncture of history, you will see that this has always existed. This was the means by which they spread sedition. Today, due to the height of love that people feel for the Lord of the Age, this sedition is being intensified.⁷

The future of political mahdism in Iran is now very much linked to the fate of Ahmadinejad and, hence, to the outcome of the next presidential election. In the meantime, Iran's religious hierarchy and its supporters at the core of the Islamic Republic have developed deep-rooted mechanisms to proscribe opportunistic messianic tendencies that might threaten their rule. The outcome of this competition within the

Islamic Republic between messianic opportunism and the clerical establishment will shape the future of the regime and the political future of Shiism overall in important ways. Meanwhile, messianism is a political card that is also being opportunistically played, marginally but consistently, in Lebanon and Iraq.

Lebanese Ambivalence

MAHDISM HAS PLAYED A CHECKERED ROLE IN THE ISLAMIST POLITICS OF MODERN Lebanon. In 1975 the Lebanese Shaykh Musa Sadr founded the Brigades of National Resistance, the first full-fledged Shia militia that soon became known by the Arabic acronym Amal, which means “hope.” Musa Sadr was revered by some as an imam and, after he “disappeared” during a trip to Libya in 1978, his followers came to regard him as the “vanished imam.”⁸ Lebanon’s pro-Iranian Hezbollah (Party of God) movement, which was launched in 1982 and officially established three years later, pursued a revolutionary agenda of militant mobilization, but has nonetheless conventionally eschewed mahdist rhetoric and disavowed messianic expectations.

In light of this history, it came as quite a surprise when Hezbollah’s deputy secretary general, Shaykh Naïm Qassem, published a book in 2007 entitled *The Savior Mahdi*.⁹ The fact that the official ideologue of Hezbollah devoted his energy and time to write such a book was in itself remarkable: The book was published, after all, only a few months after Hezbollah’s grueling 33-day confrontation with Israel. But in the book, Qassem wrote that public longing for the Mahdi had inspired “the movement of the apparition” and he cited many signs announcing the dawning of an “era of the [Mahdi’s] apparition.” This increase in messianic activity, as Qassem sees it, is the direct consequence of “Iran’s march forward, launched by the holy Imam Khomeini and led by Imam Khamenei” (the supreme leader is very seldom called “imam” inside Iran).

Although Qassem praised this upswing in messianic fervor, he was careful not to embrace mahdism overtly and to declare himself or any other living person in possession of any special knowledge of the Mahdi’s return. This ambivalence is typical of Hezbollah’s recent attitude toward mahdism, which is still eschewed by Hezbollah officials, but is tolerated (and even encouraged) in the areas of Lebanon that Hezbollah controls. For instance, a secular publisher named Shadi (Faris) Faqih has written a series of inexpensive booklets on popular mahdism that are easily found in Beirut, southern Lebanon and the Bekaa Valley, as well as being sold at the Iranian cultural center in Damascus. One of these, *Ahmadinejad and the Next World Revolution*, claims on its front cover that “Ahmadinejad is the leader of the Mahdi’s forces that will liberate Jerusalem.”¹⁰

Faqih describes a complex sequence of seventeen signs leading to the apparition

of the Mahdi. The thirteenth of these signs is the rise of Khamenei, who is identified with the Mahdi's standard-bearer al-Khorassani. The fourteenth sign equates Ahmadinejad with Shuaib Ibn Saleh, the Mahdi's chief of staff. The remaining three signs, which involve horrendous battles and massacres, will precede the Mahdi's coming and subsequent triumph.

Faqih furthermore describes the 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah as a "divine victory" in which the Mahdi himself and his holy sword Zulfiqar took part. He portrays white-winged Hezbollah fighters flying and falling upon the Zionist enemy. He hails the missiles that hit Haifa as a "miracle," and declares the war with Israel as the opening skirmish in cycle of doomsday battles.¹¹ Convinced that we now "are in the era of the [Mahdi's] apparition," Faqih completes his apocalyptic cycle by identifying the Hezbollah secretary general, Shaykh Hassan Nasrallah, as the "Yemenite" who, according to tradition, acts as the herald of the Hidden Iman. He has furthermore announced that Saudi King Abdullah will be the last ruler of Hejaz, where the Mahdi will soon appear.¹²

Hezbollah can rightfully claim that Faqih's popular mahdist literature represents the views of an independent writer who has repeatedly acknowledged his lack of official sanction. At the same time, Qassem's book *Savior Mahdi* did not rebut this apocalyptic literature, and no one tried to stop Faqih from asserting that Nasrallah is the long-awaited Yemenite. This ambivalent attitude toward messianic expressions is even more pronounced in Moqtada Sadr's militia in Iraq. And while Iranian or Iranian-inspired mahdism has generated much debate, the importance of Iraq in contemporary messianism is of particular significance.

Moqtada's Gambles on the Mahdi

THE YEAR 1977 MARKED A WATERSHED IN RELATIONS BETWEEN IRAQ'S BAATH REGIME and its Shia community. The government's ban on the Ashura celebrations led to violent unrest in the holy cities of Najaf and Kerbala. In the same year the Hojatoleslam Muhammad Sadeq Sadr, a junior but ambitious cleric, published a treatise about the Mahdi with a foreword by his cousin and master, Ayatollah Muhammad Baqer Sadr. This fifty-page text foreword became so popular that it was sold as a booklet all over Iraq. Baqer Sadr depicted the Mahdi as a man of flesh and blood who was actually living among human beings, though they were unable to discern his presence. He claimed that modern means of communication and transport enhanced the possibility of the return of the Mahdi's apparition and the implementation of his global rule.

In this and similar ways, Baqer Sadr directly challenged the quietism represented

by traditional Iraqi clerics led by Ayatollah Abulqassem Khoi. After further being emboldened by the Islamic revolution in neighboring Iran in 1979, Sadr's open defiance of Saddam Hussein's dictatorship only escalated. Subsequently, after a Baathist death squad killed Baqer Sadr in April 1980, his followers, led by Sadeq Sadr, kept alive the legacy of this "martyred ayatollah."

When Khoi died in 1992, Sadeq Sadr, who was by then an ayatollah, advanced his claim to be the religious leader of the Shia community. And during the subsequent years of the international embargo against Iraq, and the widespread degradation of living standards, his stance became increasingly militant. In April 1998, Sadeq Sadr decided to organize Friday prayers against the wishes of the Najaf establishment, which had previously ruled in support of suspending the prayers until the Mahdi returned (or his representative was designated). Open to Sunni as well as Shia, these prayers gained in political prominence. They unsettled Saddam Hussein, and he ordered the assassination of Sadeq Sadr in February 1999.

Moqtada Sadr was a 25-year-old student in Najaf when his father Sadeq was murdered. He married a daughter of the "martyred ayatollah" Baqer Sadr, and emerged as an early leader of the so-called "embargo generation" that grew up in the horrible destitution and oppression of Iraq in the 1990s. Soon after the American invasion of March 2003, the neighborhood of Baghdad known as "Saddam City" was renamed "Sadr City" to honor the memories of the martyred Ayatollahs Baqer and Sadeq Sadr. Moqtada, however, was unable to capitalize on this Shiite revival, and he quickly learned that he lacked the personal authority to organize and to lead the Shia community. As eminent Shia clerics began returning to Iraq from exile (mainly from Iran), Moqtada sought a new way to supplant their authority and to establish himself as a leader within the Shia community. He did so by appealing to a source of authority that was higher than the clerical establishment, and by branding the militia that he had formed the "Mahdi's Army."

Moqtada's appeal to the Mahdi was a stroke of political genius. While the Badr Brigade, the military arm of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), and other Shia factions were much better organized and equipped, the Mahdi's Army gained such political momentum that it was able to sustain a weeks-long confrontation with American forces in the spring and the summer of 2004. Moqtada never directly indulged in messianic rhetoric, but his often underpaid and undertrained militiamen found in the mahdist pretense a welcome compensation for their misery—as well as a justification for their violent actions.

After al-Qaeda bombed the shrines of the tenth and the eleventh imams in Samarra in February 2006, the Mahdi's Army was at the forefront of battles against "Baathists" and "terrorists" that often ended in anti-Sunni ethnic cleansing, especially in Baghdad. In August 2007 Moqtada's followers chose the Mahdi's alleged birth date, the fifteenth

day of the Muslim month of Chaabane, to confront their Shi'a rivals and the security forces in Kerbala. Though the resulting popular outrage led Moqtada to suspend his militia's military activity, the Mahdi's Army did not disband, and its networks continued to challenge any gestures by Shia leaders to reconcile with American "infidels."

Moqtada Sadr moved to Iran to complete his religious studies and escape the hostility in Najaf. (The excesses of his militia did nothing to win "hearts and minds" in Shia seminaries there). In August 2008 he publicly commemorated the Mahdi's supposed birthday and asked his followers to renew their pledges of allegiance to the Mahdi—not to himself—with their own blood. This request was anything but orthodox, mixing rites of tribal loyalty with centuries-old superstitions. In this way, Moqtada indicated that he was still trying to tap into popular mahdism to help himself stage a political comeback.

The Doomsday Militia in Southern Iraq

MOQTADA'S INVOCATION OF THE MAHDI WAS NOT UNIQUE WITHIN IRAQ, HOWEVER. As early as 1998, long before Moqtada launched the Mahdi's Army in the wake of the American invasion, Ahmad al-Hassan claimed that he was appointed to rule the Shia (*wassi*) by the Hidden Imam. Not surprisingly, Hassan came from Basra in southern Iraq, which for a number of reasons, has historically been a fertile area for mahdist movements. Some of the main southern Iraqi tribes converted to Shiism as late as the nineteenth century¹³ (which meant that they were less influenced by Twelver quietism), and the *sheykha* version of Shiism, which denies the moral guidance of the ayatollahs, remains to this day an influential teaching among them. Moreover, a vibrant nationalism, with hints of xenophobia, also nurtures the popular defiance of "Persian" clerics, whether they preach in Qom or Najaf.

In the late 1990s Ahmad al-Hassan organized his followers into a movement known as Ansar al-Imam al-Mahdi (Supporters of the Imam Madhi). While his early followers were no doubt zealous believers, some accused Hassan of being an agent of the Baathist regime that had executed Moqtada Sadr's father. After the U.S. led invasion of 2003, Hassan began railing against the "American Satan," asserting that the occupation of Iraq by infidel forces was the prelude to the end of time. Hassan's followers then began to refer to him as the herald of the Mahdi, or as the "Yemenite"—a title that Hassan willingly accepted. Hassan furthermore branded the United States the Antichrist that was to be defeated in the doomsday confrontation,¹⁴ and he publicly demanded that Ayatollahs Sistani (of Iraq) and Khamenei (of Iran) pledge their allegiance to him on the basis of his messianic mission.

Ayatollah Kazem Haeri, who is the heir to Baqer Sadr as well as a supporter of

Moqtada Sadr, attacked Hassan from Qom and repudiated his pronouncements.¹⁵ But Hassan, the self-appointed harbinger of the Mahdi's return, was not deterred by this condemnation; in fact, he claimed that the doomsday angels Gabriel, Michael and Asrafil were supporting him.¹⁶ His followers credited Hassan with such "miracles" as the mystical uncovering of the real tomb of Fatima, daughter of the Prophet Muhammad and wife of the Imam Ali. The movement's declarations were sealed with the Star of David, with Hassan's name glowing at its center.¹⁷ His devotees furthermore staged marches and organized ceremonies marking the holiest occasions of the Shia calendar, during which they vilified established Shiite clerics in Iraq and Iran for not believing in the end of the Mahdi's great occultation.

Hassan developed his doctrine and networks for disseminating his propaganda. His movement launched its own newspaper, *Al-Sirat al-Mustaqim (The Straight Path)*—a name that refers to the opening lines of the Quran. It also began an Arabic website, www.almahdyoon.org, as well as websites in Persian and English. The English site asserts that in the Book of Revelation, "Babylon refers to Iraq, as it was the capital of Iraq at that time. And all massacres and riots will happen in Iraq and on Iraqi land." The "lamb," which is not mentioned anywhere in the group's Arabic pamphlets, gains prominence on the website's English pages: Those "invited to the feast of the lamb," the site states, "are the comrades of the first Mahdi, the Yemenite." Furthermore, the site claims that Saint John is supposed to have prophesied Hassan's mission in southern Iraq.

Some of the most radical members of the Supporters of the Imam Mahdi established a camp with their families in the city of Zarga, not far from Najaf, where they became known as the "Soldiers of Heaven." In late January 2007, during the Ashura of the Islamic year 1428, the Iraqi government warned that the Soldiers of Heaven was planning an armed uprising in Najaf, and further accused Hassan of plotting to murder Ayatollah Sistani (as well as other major Shia religious figures). The Iraqi government then moved to crush the Soldiers of Heaven, and hundreds of people were killed in the ensuing bloodbath, including many women and children trapped in the besieged camp.

Baghdad claimed that the "rebels" wanted to take over Najaf during the 1428th Ashura in a bid to fulfill the prophecy that the Mahdi's apparition would return during the Ashura of an even year. The Iraqi army led the assault against the Soldiers of Heaven, but U.S. forces were involved as well. (Two American soldiers died when their helicopter crashed.) Tehran, incidentally, wholeheartedly supported this campaign against the mahdist movement, backing the Iraqi government's claim that the Soldiers of Heaven represented a messianic insurgency with murderous designs.¹⁸

Hassan himself denied any responsibility for the bloodbath at Zarga, which may have helped him shed some of his most extremist followers.¹⁹ Yet the Supporters of the Imam Mahdi have continued to recruit new members, and now claim to number

five thousand all over the southern provinces. The group's newspaper announced that many local commanders previously loyal to Moqtada Sadr had, in fact, defected from the Mahdi's Army and subsequently pledged their allegiance to the "Yemenite" Hassan. And, during the following Ashura in January 2008, the movement deployed an aggressive militia that humiliated the security forces in Basra. Dozens of people were killed in two days. Hassan ordered his fighters to withdraw to their safe houses, but he declared that the blood of the "martyrs" would be revenged.

Iraq is now home to a full-fledged madhist militia movement. It is extremely difficult to assess the real dimensions of the phenomenon because of the disparity between the accounts of the Iraqi government and Hassan's disciples. The Supporters of the Imam Mahdi might be seen as just one more Shiite militia in an insecure country where tribal groups and criminal networks have produced numerous similar groups. But among these movements, the messianic message of Hassan's movement is quite unique, and the fact that it has been able to attract new recruits—including from Sadr's Mahdi Army—makes it difficult to treat this particular madhist movement as insignificant.

Indeed, in many ways, southern Iraq is now the main arena for the evolution of militant mahdism. Whether Moqtada's followers come to adopt a more genuine and active form of messianism is likely to be critical. And the very existence of a self-proclaimed Yemenite and his apocalyptic militia adds an ominous dimension to this new reality. These developments must be carefully studied.

More generally, the return of political mahdism in Iran, Lebanon, and Iraq has sent shockwaves throughout the Shiite world, where it has challenged the traditional quietism and authority of the highest ayatollahs. Engaging in eschatological rhetoric and playing to popular messianism has thus far proven to be a convenient and effective way for radical Shiite leaders to increase their political power. This has been especially the case for ambitious men like Mahmud Ahmadinejad, Moqtada al-Sadr and Hassan Nasrallah, who cannot realistically hope to reach the top levels of the clerical hierarchy. The forthcoming Iranian elections (in which Ahmadinejad will be running for re-election) will likely shed some light on whether political mahdism will remain an asset or become a liability for these men as well as other aspirants to leadership of the radical Shia movement.

NOTES

1. Moshe Sharon, *Black Banners from the East* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1983), p.117.
2. Sheikh al-Mufid, *Kitab al-Irshad* (London: Balagha Books, 1981), pp.541-54.

3. Jassim M. Hussein, *The Occultation of the Twelfth Imam* (London: Muhammadi Trust, 1982), pp.26-7.
4. Zeev Maghen, "Occultation in Perpetuum, Shi'ite messianism and the policies of the Islamic Republic," *Middle East Journal*, 62 (Spring 2008): 242.
5. For this quote and the following ones, see the BFI website www.mahdaviat-conference.com.
6. Mehdi Khalaji, "Apocalyptic Politics," Washington Institute for Near East Policy (WINEP), *Policy Focus*, 79 (January 2008): 20.
7. Interview of Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani by the Iranian state TV, 31 October 2008.
8. Fuad Ajami, *The Vanished Imam* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986).
9. Naïm Qassem, *Al-Mahdi al-mukhlaess* (Beirut: Dar al-Hadi, 2007).
10. Shadi Faqih, *Ahmadinejad wa al-thawra al-alamiyya al-muqabila* (Beirut: Dar al-Ilm, 2006).
11. Shadi Faqih, *Al wa'ad al-sadiq and Al-Imam al-Mahdi wa-al intisar* (Beirut: Dar al-Ilm, 2006).
12. Shadi Faqih, *Anta al-an fi 'asr al-zuhur* (Beirut: Dar al-Ilm, 2006).
13. Yitzhak Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), pp. 25-48.
14. Ahmad al-Hassan's statement, 22 May 2004.
15. www.alhaeri.org/iraq/right-iraq.html.
16. Ahmad al-Hassan's statement, 29 November 2003.
17. Hussein al-Mansouri's declaration on behalf of the Supporters of the Imam Mahdi, 21 July 2005.
18. On 31 October 2008, in an interview on Iranian state TV, the former president Rafsanjani still recalled with disgust how "in Iraq, those who claim to be disciples of the Lord of the Age wanted to destroy the sanctuary in Najaf."
19. Ahmad al-Hassan's statement, 28 September 2006.

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'ubiyyah* 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>.
12. Muhammad Mahdi Shams al-Din, *al-Wasaya: Last Will and Testament*, (Beirut: Dar al-Nahar, 2002), pg 19.
13. "'An al-harakah al-Islamiyyah wa-Indimaj al-Shi'ah (On the Islamic Movement and the Integration of the Shi'is)," interview in *al-Safir* newspaper, 29 October 1999.
14. <http://www.shamseddine.org/arabic/?p=137>
15. www.alarabiya.net/views/2009/02/08/65954.html

Hezbollah's Agenda in Lebanon

by Tony Badran

IN RECENT YEARS, FROM THE LATE 1990S UNTIL THE PRESENT, IT HAS BECOME commonplace to read and hear arguments and speculation about what Hezbollah's agenda is in Lebanon. The broad lines of the narrative, which have become conventional wisdom for many reporters and experts, roughly revolve around points that can be broadly classified under the following categories:

Hezbollah's Evolution: Hezbollah has “evolved” from what was an “Iranian-backed militia” in the 1980s, into a “nationalist insurgency/resistance group” in the 1990s, and finally into a “mainstream political party.”¹

Hezbollah's “Lebanonization:” The evolutionary argument is directly related to the theory of “Lebanonization,” offered by Augustus Richard Norton in the late 1990s.² The gist of the argument is that, during the 1990s, Hezbollah began a process of “integrating” into the Lebanese parliamentary democracy and political process, by adopting the policy of *infitah* (“openness”). This presumably paved the way to Hezbollah's eschewing of broader regional agendas and ties. As Norton put it in 1998: Hezbollah “has been transforming itself, preparing for life after resistance.”³ All this was premised on the unproved notion that an organization created, built and financed by a particular state simply “moves away” from all that and becomes a normal, unarmed domestic political force. This view did, however, fit with a widespread passive conception of resistance and the politics of grievance, whereby the resistance would simply end once the grievance had been addressed.

Rejecting or understating Hezbollah's Global Reach and Terrorism: In promoting the “Lebanonized” view of Hezbollah, it was important to the proponents of this theory to distance Hezbollah from regional and international associations. It was especially important to reject or heavily qualify the party's terrorist label as well as to deny its

capacity for global reach. As such, academic literature systematically, and with very few exceptions, adopted the official Hezbollah party line in denying or underplaying the party membership of terror mastermind, Imad Mughniyeh, as that would have undermined the entire argument.

After Mughniyeh's assassination on February 12, 2008, Hezbollah came out in the open about the extent of Mughniyeh's ties to the organization. In fact, Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah enshrined him as one of the Party's triumvirate of venerable martyrs alongside cofounder Ragheb Harb and former Sec. Gen. Abbas Musawi (both of whom were also killed on the same day in February, the 16th, in 1984 and 1992 respectively).⁴ In so doing, Hezbollah exposed an entire trend in Hezbollah scholarship, which had kowtowed to the Party's official line and had, up to that point, denied or minimized any organizational ties to Mughniyeh, at times even questioning his actual existence.⁵

The dissociation of Mughniyeh from Hezbollah had allowed some experts to place the blame for terrorist activities exclusively on Mughniyeh as an "individual"—as an agent working for the Iranians and not part of Hezbollah. At best, Mughniyeh was depicted as an individual working independently, as part of Hezbollah's allegedly "autonomous" External Security Organization.⁶ This made it possible to distance Hezbollah from the terror attacks with global reach—for example, in Argentina in 1992 and 1994, and in Saudi Arabia (Khobar Towers) in 1996. This distancing was all the more necessary since these attacks occurred after Hezbollah's alleged "Lebanonization" process had begun.

Hezbollah and the Islamic State agenda: Lastly, the Lebanonization theory had to deal with the dilemma of Hezbollah's Islamic agenda. The main proponent of the Lebanonization theory at the time, Augustus Richard Norton, confidently declared that Hezbollah had "jettisoned its commitment to establishing a system of Islamic rule in the country."⁷ Norton even dismissed any skeptical view of this assertion:

Cynics may argue that the Islamic state model has been put aside tactically in a multicomunal Lebanon, but the strategic objectives remain both unchanged and closer to achievement with Hizballah's penetration of the state. Such doubts may be understandable, but many leading Lebanese politicians who have dealt with Hizballah in parliament argue that the movement is, in fact, being co-opted into the system.⁸

Other more recent proponents of shifts in Hezbollah's ideology have phrased things more cautiously, positing a distinction between the Party's political ideology and its political program:

The aura and stereotyped notion of Hizbullah's advocacy of an Islamic state seems to hamper or, at least, downplay, Hizbullah's political program of *infatih* or integration in the Lebanese public sphere. ... It has been demonstrated that, in stages one and two, Hizbullah pursued the establishment of an Islamic state both from a political ideology and a political program perspective through a top-down process. However, as has been already clarified in stage three, Hizbullah's Islamic state remained a political ideology, rather than a political program.⁹

Elsewhere, the author of the above quote, Joseph Alagha, introduced yet another category in classifying Hezbollah's supposed endorsement of democratic principles; a "reformed *vilayat-e-faqih*."

The party defends democratic principles within an Islamic framework, such as political pluralism or the concept of Shura, that is to say, a consultative council.

There is no contradiction between a somehow reformed *vilayat-e-faqih* and a pluralistic and multi-confessional society like Lebanon, in the sense that the Iranian version of this principle cannot be applied in this environment.¹⁰

And yet, without a hint of irony, in the same interview, Alagha noted that in the event "the disappearance of a direct threat from Israel proves to be lasting, it is most likely that Hizbullah will turn its jihad inwards, seeking to control the Lebanese public sphere." Indeed, Alagha went on to say that Hezbollah's "clear long-term agenda" was "to dominate the Lebanese public sphere and national political arena."¹¹

A quick perusal of this brief and rough rundown of the main theories that have dominated the literature about Hezbollah in recent years reveals that these premises, which for the most part, neatly dovetailed with official Hezbollah propaganda, have essentially collapsed despite what I call "the Great Cover-Up of the 1990s."

Hezbollah's organic ties with Iran, which obviously never went away, are once again as clear as day, being explicitly proclaimed by its party leadership. For example, Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah made sure, in a speech on May 26, 2008 commemorating the Israeli withdrawal from south Lebanon, to make the following point: "They imagine that when they say about us that we are the Party of the *vilayat-e-faqih* that they are insulting us. Never! I declare today, and it is

nothing new, that I am proud to be a member of the Party of vilayat-e-faqih; the just, the scholarly, the wise, the courageous, the honest, and the loyal faqih.”¹²

With regards to ties to terrorism and global reach, Hezbollah’s public apotheosis of Imad Mughniyeh (to whom Nasrallah referred as “the martyred commander” (*al-shahid al-qa’id*) embarrassed the compliant expert literature. Meanwhile, news of Hezbollah’s involvement in Iraq, its networks in Latin America and Africa, intelligence monitoring of its cells in places like Germany and Canada, and its tentacles in the Gulf States, such as Kuwait and Bahrain, all shattered the claim that Hezbollah has no global reach. Similarly, as evident, e.g., from Nasrallah’s May 26, 2008 speech, Hezbollah sees itself as directly involved in operations in Iraq and the Palestinian territories, in contrast to the theory that it is merely a “nationalist insurgency/resistance movement” strictly confined to efforts to force Israel from southern Lebanon. The most recent, and perhaps most devastating, exposure of the fallacy of this position came when the leader of a Hezbollah cell was arrested by the Egyptian authorities and accused of a host of plots from arms smuggling into Gaza, to spying, monitoring targets and planning terrorist operations inside Egypt itself. The cell’s leader’s membership in Hezbollah was openly acknowledged by Nasrallah himself on April 10, 2009, two days after the Egyptians made their accusations public.

As for the widely-held notion that Hezbollah was “integrating” into Lebanese parliamentary politics and adopting “democratic principles,” it was exposed for the sham that it always was when Hezbollah militia attacked Lebanese civilians in their homes (in response to a government decision pertaining to Hezbollah’s illegal parallel fiber optic telecommunication network). For months before that, the Party had paralyzed the political process through mobilized intimidation, making a mockery of the concept of democracy. As for its voluntary disarmament after the Israeli withdrawal, in reality, it was precisely *after* the Israeli withdrawal in 2000, and within the Syrians’ warm embrace (*contra* the theory that free-rein for Syria in Lebanon would “check” Hezbollah), that Hezbollah secretly built the massive bunker infrastructure in Lebanon’s border villages and acquired the rocket arsenal that was displayed in the summer of 2006.

Some voices have criticized the split, introduced by proponents of the “Lebanonization” theory, between the Party’s political and social activities and its military agenda, even while applauding the supposed merits of “moving beyond the terrorism label” that has allegedly “hampered the production of knowledge” about Hezbollah. Mona Harb and Reinoud Leenders represented that position in a 2005 essay:

Hizbullah views its military activities as an integral part of its *raison d’être*. Even if the party is not actually engaged in combat, it still reserves the *right* to use armed force for ‘prevention and defense;’ a right, which,

in turn is constantly reiterated and disseminated through the party's social and political activities. This further explains why Hezbollah refuses to participate in the Lebanese government.

...

Consequently, the literature dealing with the transformation and the accommodation of Hezbollah into Lebanese politics has contributed to presenting it as 'a fixture of Lebanese politics, not simply an armed and violent faction.' This way, it has moved beyond the 'terrorism' label and contributed to producing knowledge about Hezbollah: the 'lebanonisation' literature acknowledged and described the functioning of the party's social activities. However, it has incorrectly situated these social activities as separate from Hezbollah's other functions, whereas Hezbollah leaders conceive resistance as much as a military undertaking as a social and political one. 'A close inspection of the party's internal dynamics reveals that it is virtually impossible to extricate the military from the political or vice versa.'¹³

Of course, it was scholars' aversion to ascribing the "terrorist" label to Hezbollah—noted at the beginning of this essay and which Harb and Leenders paradoxically share with the "Lebanonization" theorists—that was precisely at the heart of "the Great Cover-Up of the 1990s." It was that position, ironically, that prevented a proper understanding of Hezbollah, made evident, for example, as the literature proved to be almost unanimously wrong on Mughniyeh's ties to the organization.

Moreover, this aversion served a specific purpose for Hezbollah, as it kept it off the European Union's list of terrorist groups. The artificial dichotomy still works to this day, and is evident even in the recent decision by the British government to blacklist only Hezbollah's "military wing,"¹⁴ and the British Foreign Ministry's subsequent decision to begin talks with the Party's so-called "political wing." However, Hezbollah's leadership dismissed the existence of this alleged division. The Party's second in command, Naim Qassem told the *Los Angeles Times*: "All political, social and jihad work is tied to the decisions of this leadership" ... "The same leadership that directs the parliamentary and government work also leads jihad actions in the struggle against Israel."¹⁵

This "holistic"¹⁶ nature of Hezbollah's conceptual framework and its networks was correctly identified by Harb and Leenders. They missed the mark, however, about Hezbollah's willingness to participate in the cabinet, which it did shortly after the publication of their article. However, Hezbollah's participation in the cabinet specifically took place in order to protect its autonomous armed status.

An October 2007 report by the International Crisis Group made that point well:

The presumed dichotomy between politics and resistance is misconceived. Far from being a substitute for armed resistance, Hizbollah's political involvement has become its necessary corollary.

...

It follows that the movement's relation to the central state has always been assessed in terms of its impact on the resistance... with an eye toward safeguarding its weapons and special status.... Hizbollah participated in the 1992 legislative elections in order to protect its weapons.¹⁷

However, the purpose of this so-called "integration into Lebanese institutions" was far from just "safeguarding." It also served to subordinate official Lebanese institutions to serve Hezbollah's external military operations. The most recent, and most blatant, evidence comes from the episode of the Hezbollah cell in Egypt. After arresting the cell's leader, the Egyptian government charged that official institutions deeply infiltrated by Hezbollah and headed by officials with close ties to the Party, such as the General Security division and the Foreign Ministry, were complicit in forging official documents used by the cell's leader to enter Egypt and later by his defense lawyer.¹⁸

As such, the idea that Hezbollah was "preparing for life after resistance," put forward by Norton, has not only been shown to be empirically baseless, but the premise itself has been exposed as being utterly flawed.

In fact, Norton got Hezbollah's agenda exactly backwards. "The Islamic Resistance," which was intentionally put forward to replace the overtly Khomeinist "Islamic Revolution" logo, encompasses a much larger and more ambitious program. Once that is understood, all of Hezbollah's decisions in the 1990s, which were interpreted as linear and evolutionary by some, would be seen in a different light entirely and would help us understand what Hezbollah has in mind for the future.

The Resistant Society

IN JUNE OF 2007, NAIM QASSEM PENNED A VERY IMPORTANT ARTICLE IN LEBANON'S leading newspaper, *An-Nahar*. The title of the article said it all: "How Does the Rest of Society Integrate into the Resistance?"¹⁹ "The question," Qassem wrote, "no longer was whether the Resistance will remain or not." Rather, "the question is, how does the rest of society integrate into the Resistance, and for the sake of what project do some not want it to continue?"

Qassem went on to lay out what this vision of a "Resistant Society" (*al-mujtama' al-*

muqawim) entails. It is worth noting that in his description of the Party's vision for a Lebanese state, the word "democracy" never once appeared in the entire article—not even the term "consensual democracy," sometimes used to describe the Lebanese system:

Resistance for us is a societal vision in all its dimensions, for it is a military, cultural, political and media resistance. It is the resistance of the people and the *mujahidin*, it is the resistance of the ruler (*al-hakim*) and the *umma*... We have always called for building the society (*mu-jtama'*) of resistance, and we never settled for a band (*majmu'a*) of resistance... So those who would be chasing the band of resistance would tire greatly, because they would be facing the society of resistance.

In other words, this was a totalitarian vision encompassing society on every level. While Harb and Leenders had touched on the Resistance Society in the course of their treatment of Hezbollah's "holistic" vision and networks,²⁰ they seem to have confined it to the Shiite community, when it is clearly of a much broader scope.

Qassem also made sure to impart timelessness to the Resistance, emphasizing repeatedly that it was not a "passing" (*ani*) or "temporary/circumstantial" (*dharfi*) and "reactive" (*radd fi'l*) reality. Rather, the historical context he placed it in extended back, in his words, to "the prophets and the apostles," acquiring an eternal religious mandate and a sacredness—something that Nasrallah and other Hezbollah figures regularly emphasize. It was all, as Qassem laid out, part of the "project of the path of God (*mashru' sabil Allah*)," which is "far more total (*ashmal*) than mere fighting."

A year later Qassem repeated this synthesis that effectively undercuts the passive grievance argument:

The Resistance is not an armed group (*majmu'a musallaha*) that wants to liberate a piece of land, nor is it a temporary/circumstantial performance (*ada'an dharfiyan*) that ends when the pretext disappears. Rather, the Resistance is a vision and a method (*ru'ya wa manhaj*), and not merely a military reaction (*raddat fi'l*)... The building of the Society of Resistance (*mujtama' al-muqawama*) provides strength for Lebanon and enhances its independence and sovereignty in the manner that we want, not in the manner they want to impose on us."²¹

A couple of days later, Hezbollah's "Loyalty to the Resistance" parliamentary bloc issued a statement making the same point: "The Resistance is a belief (*i'tiqad*), a *jihad*, a national belonging (*intima' watani*) and a religious responsibility (*mas'uliya shar'iya*)."²²

These concepts were laid out in Qassem's book on Hezbollah where he wrote, using identical terminology, "The Party is Islamic ... and carries a methodology for life in its totality (*manhajan li l-hayat bi shumuliyatiha*)."²³

As such, the Party's current vision and mission remains as totalitarian as ever. Moreover, Resistance, in Hezbollah's conceptual universe, is its own *raison d'être*. It is an absolute, circular concept. Or as Nasrallah alternately put it in his May 8, 2008 address, as his militiamen invaded civilian neighborhoods in Beirut, "the weapons will be used to protect the weapons."²⁴

Both Qassem and Nasrallah—indeed this is a standard talking point for all Hezbollah officials—posit the Resistance as standing "at the side of" (*ila janib*) the state. Or, if you like, it stands parallel to the state, both inside and above the state, where—and this too has been a standard talking point—the state would "coordinate" (*tansiq*) with the Resistance.

That, ultimately, is Hezbollah's vision of the defense strategy and the "Resistance project" and everyone is "invited" to join in and accept this state of affairs.²⁵ This was summarized succinctly by Hezbollah politburo official, Mahmoud Qomati:

What we want from the national dialogue is not to negotiate over whether the weapons [of Hezbollah] remain or not, nor is it to negotiate over whether the Resistance integrates into the Armed Forces or not. Rather, what we want is the completion of this strategy on which we were established, and for the official Lebanese decision making to join us, side by side (*janban ila janb*) in order to fortify Lebanon.²⁶

The Resistance Project

IT IS ESSENTIAL FOR US TO RECOGNIZE THIS CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AS AN integral part of Hezbollah's Islamic state agenda. The Islamic state, in Hezbollah's understanding, always was conceived as a clone of the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary regime, as it stands under the command of the Supreme Guide and its vilayat-e-faqih doctrine.

The Islamic Republic, after all, has elections and affords its religious minorities representation in parliament. It even has a regular army. But it also has an entirely parallel structure in the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps,²⁷ Hezbollah's parent organization, and the paramilitary *Basij* who ensure, as Hezbollah did in May 2008, that the revolutionary agenda is secure and that society remains in check behind it.

This agenda is precisely what is meant by the "Resistance project." This is what

Qassem referred to as “the project of the path of God” (*mashru‘ sabil Allah*), which he lays out in detail in his book in a chapter entitled “Jihad in the Path of God” (*al-jihad fi sabil Allah*). This comprehensive concept of jihad is, as Harb and Leenders put it, “essential in building a resistance society unified around specific meanings with which it identifies.”²⁸

But in Qassem’s formulation, jihad for Hezbollah is directly tied to the leadership and the decision of the jurist (*al-wali al-faqih*), which once again organically binds the Islamic Resistance to the Islamic Revolution in Iran.²⁹

The resistance in Lebanon encompasses the Islamic Revolutionary paradigm and structure. Just because “the Islamic Revolution in Lebanon” was altered to “the Islamic Resistance in Lebanon,” it does not mean the agenda has changed. By seeing Hezbollah in this broader sense of cloning the Islamic Revolutionary structure, one can appreciate the steady steps it continues to take towards its declared goal.

In the socio-economic, educational and cultural realms of this “holistic network,” as Harb and Leenders dub it, the various institutions are not just organs to disseminate the principles of the Islamic Revolution. They are organic clones of their Iranian counterparts.³⁰

As for the inseparable religious element, it permeates the areas that Hezbollah controls in the Shiite community,³¹ and is integrated into the institutions, from boy scouts, to various charities, to book fairs and publishing houses and so on. These are all part of “redefining the structure of society (*i’adat siyaghat tarkibat al-mujtama*).”³² A recent report by Robert Worth in the *New York Times* exposed this process well:

There is a network of schools—some of them run by Hezbollah, others affiliated with or controlled by it—largely shielded from outsiders. There is a nationwide network of clerics who provide weekly religious lessons to young people on a neighborhood basis. There is a group for students at unaffiliated schools and colleges that presents Hezbollah to a wider audience. ... “It’s like a complete system, from primary school to university,” said Talal Atrissi, a political analyst at Lebanese University who has been studying Hezbollah for decades. “The goal is to prepare a generation that has deep religious faith and is also close to Hezbollah.”³³

Worth also captured the “holistic” integration of the religious, the social, the educational and the military, in Hezbollah’s networks, such as the Mahdi Scouts.

Integrating Society into the Resistance

SEEN IN THIS LIGHT, THE PARTY'S *infatih* (OPENNESS) POLICY SHOULD NO LONGER be understood as Hezbollah's becoming integrated into the Lebanese political system like everyone else. Rather, as shown above, it is about integrating others into its project. This reverse integration echoes the conclusion reached by Patrick Haenni: "Hezbollah has a real interest in making the state part of its global project."³⁴

This is where people like the Christian politician Michel Aoun fit in, along with his "Memorandum of Understanding with Hezbollah" signed in February 2006. It is important for the Party, and for Iran, to showcase multi-sectarian window dressing for its agenda, using them to lend cross-religious cover and social legitimacy to the Resistance agenda. As Saeed Jalili, Secretary of the Iranian Supreme National Security Council, explains, Lebanon offers a good example of resistance and coexistence between different religions and ethnic groups.³⁵

In a recent session of the roundtable "National Dialogue," discussing which defense strategy Lebanon should adopt, Aoun presented a proposal that was effectively a carbon copy of Qassem's 2007 article.³⁶ Aoun's proposal, like Qassem's, essentially establishes a *Basij* order in Lebanon. As I have suggested, it advances an essential aspect of Hezbollah's Islamic state redefined as the Resistant Society.

More important to Hezbollah and Iran, however, is the cooptation of Sunnis. The benefits of this process are multiple, bestowing cross-sectarian Muslim legitimacy, especially in the so-called "Arab street." This is useful since both the Iranians and Hezbollah consistently maintain a strict separation between "peoples" and "state;" they pose as the champion of the former against the weakness, corruption and illegitimacy of the latter. The cooptation of Sunnis affords Iran an entry point to undermine leadership in the regional Sunni states, especially in the Gulf and Egypt, and allows it to position itself as the leader of Islamic "dignity," and of militancy as the defender of the Arab Muslim cause of Palestine.

Hezbollah is an integral part of this policy, especially as it has acquired great popularity across the (Sunnī) Arab world. The term "Islamic Resistance" (as opposed to the overtly Khomeinist "Islamic Revolution") has allowed Hezbollah (and behind it Iran and Syria) to project an Islamic pan-Arab message. Here its television station, *Al-Manar*, has played a central role.³⁷ And in many respects, this narrative is further propagated by the Qatari *Al-Jazeera*, in part reflecting Qatar's alliance with the Iran-Syria-Hezbollah-Hamas axis.

In Lebanon, Hezbollah and Iran's policy has long sought to reach understandings

with Sunnis that would coopt and neutralize them by securing their support for the Resistance agenda. Under the Syrians this was easy, as the Sunni leaders were emasculated and simply served as cheerleaders for Hezbollah's program. After Rafiq Hariri's 2005 assassination, the subsequent Syrian withdrawal, and especially after the May 2008 attack on the Sunni neighborhoods in Beirut, Hezbollah's standing among the Sunnis plummeted dramatically.³⁸ It became a liability for even pro-Syrian Sunnis, like Tripoli politician Omar Karami, to take an unqualified pro-Hezbollah stand, especially during the summer 2008 clashes in Tripoli between Hezbollah- and Syria-allied Alawite factions and Sunni factions. Soon thereafter, Hezbollah tried to forge an understanding with a minor group of Salafis, but the pressure from the other Salafi and mainstream Sunni circles to abrogate it was too strong. Hassan Shahhal, the Salafi figure who signed it, had to back away from it.

But Hezbollah and Iran have cultivated ties with militant Islamists like the Islamic Action Front's Fathi Yakan, who is at once an open Bin Laden and Zawahiri supporter, an ally of the Syrians, and a benefactor of Iranian largesse. He was officially received in Iran in March 2007 and his fighters train with Hezbollah.³⁹ Twenty-one of his men were recently arrested where they told the authorities that they were en route to training with Hezbollah. Hezbollah intervened on their behalf as comrades and supporters of the Resistance. It has also done the same with marginal Druze figures, such as Wi'am Wahhab, who now openly boasts of being a client of Iran along with his other status as Syrian messenger.⁴⁰ Hezbollah also has longstanding ties with militant Sunni Islamist groups based in Palestinian camps.⁴¹

Aside from its strategic purpose, this "Sunni policy" has a tactical element as well—to squeeze and emasculate the most prominent Sunni political figure, Saad Hariri, with the elections looming in June 2009. Ultimately, however, Hezbollah would like to force Hariri to get with the program, as his father was forced to in the '90s under the Syrians.

In his May 26, 2008 address, Nasrallah laid forth his offer to Hariri, which he also did, tellingly, in his press conference after the cross-border operation on July 12, 2006. He proposed a return to the status quo of the 1990s—specifically the framework of the 1996 April Understanding with Israel. That agreement offered Hezbollah legitimacy not just as a Resistance but also as a recognized interlocutor (while the state was not allowed to negotiate with Israel, directly or indirectly), and provided a cover for its military activity, with Syria as the local guarantor, much to Syria's delight, as it eliminated Lebanon entirely as an actor.⁴² This is what both Hezbollah and the Syrians seek to restore today, after its termination in 2006 and its replacement with UNSCR 1701.

Nasrallah's offer was euphemistically presented as a marriage between the agendas of development (Hariri) and resistance (Hezbollah): Rafiq Hariri "was able to

combine the project of development (*i'mar*) and the state and the project of Resistance (*mashru' al-muqawama*) ... [Lebanon] with the Resistance beside it (*ila janibihi*)." Then, using very sensitive language taken from the lexicon of Lebanon's national pact of communal *convivance*, Nasrallah added, "This was the formula (*sigha*) which we lived and through which we coexisted (*ta'ayashna*) as a Resistance." The terms "formula" and "coexistence" are common code words for the Lebanese political system, and thus Nasrallah's words could be read as an ultimatum: Hezbollah can "co-exist" with the Lebanese state only if it adopts its "project" and allows it to continue operating parallel to (*ila janib*) the state.

In other words, Hariri's money and connections would be allowed to play around, but Lebanon's security and foreign policy would be in Hezbollah's (and its patrons') hands. In essence, this was a reformulation of the pre-2005 order, which dovetails precisely with Syria's objectives and interests. The "March 14" parliamentary majority has rejected this proposal.

Nasrallah also made sure to introduce an additional caveat to ensure that his militia is not tied down, even rhetorically, to a strictly "defensive" strategy, which would imply an end to offensive operations. He thus added a "liberation strategy" alongside it, leaving the door open for future operations. Hezbollah's recurring statements rejecting the Blue Line as an international border could be read in this light,⁴³ as could the Party's adamant rejection of any proposal for indirect negotiations between the Lebanese government and the Israeli government in order to settle their territorial dispute. Hezbollah also rejects the clause in the Taef Accord regarding the Armistice Agreement with Israel, something on which March 14 insists.

All of this functions to preserve Hezbollah's margin for offensive maneuverability, as well as to affirm Hezbollah's doctrinal rejection of any accommodation with the state of Israel. Moreover, the dichotomy of "defensive" and "liberation" (hence, "offensive") strategies is a reflection of the doctrinal duality of "defensive jihad" and "initiated jihad," which are both linked to the ultimate decision-making of the jurist (*al-wali al-faqih*) who has exclusive authority in this matter.⁴⁴ Nasrallah, from a doctrinal point of view, cannot accept a government decision to forgo jihad against Israel, nor can he submit the "defense strategy" to the sole authority of the Lebanese central government.

However, given the Israeli government's declarations regarding how it would respond to any provocation from Hezbollah, one ought to consider what the domestic repercussions would be to another Hezbollah adventure. This is especially true in the post-May 2008 environment, with sectarian tensions running extremely high. The consequences for inter-sectarian relations, in the estimation of several astute observers, could be dire and violent.

Conclusion

Everything for Hezbollah—society, culture, economy, politics, alliances, media—is in the service of the totalitarian vision of the “Resistant Society.” That conceptual universe is tied to *vilayat-e-faqih* and the Islamic Revolution. Hezbollah uses the ambiguity of its hybrid nature to tactically navigate towards its strategic goals without having to abandon any of its options. This is what the Syrians managed to do in Lebanon in the 1990s—to have their cake and eat it too, affording Hezbollah the same.

If we are to believe Naim Qassem, Hezbollah cannot be anything else and remain Hezbollah. As such, the Iranian-sponsored group will continue to pose a challenge to Israel, although Israel is well equipped to deal with it. The challenge is far more severe, and perhaps fatal for Lebanon. Lebanon’s system—dysfunctional as it may be—has prevented the rise of an indigenous totalitarian regime. But the challenge Hezbollah poses is new in certain key respects. The experience of the Palestinian “Fateh Land,” parallel state of resistance in the 1970s led to war. This may well be in store once again for Lebanon. Hezbollah, by its very nature and platform, will prevent the rise of a normal, independent, peaceful state in Lebanon and will continue to be a source of instability for its security, its system, and its citizenry—all talk of “Lebanonization” notwithstanding.

NOTES

1. See, e.g., Andrew Exum, “Imad Mughniyah is dead,” *Middle East Strategy at Harvard*, February 13, 2008. http://blogs.law.harvard.edu/mesh/2008/02/imad_mughniyah_is_dead/
2. See Norton, “Hizballah: from Radicalism to Pragmatism?” *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 5, 1998. See also Norton’s “Hizballah of Lebanon: Extremist Ideals vs. Mundane Politics,” (A Paper for the Muslim Politics Project), Council on Foreign Relations, 1999.
3. “Hizballah: from Radicalism to Pragmatism?” <http://almashriq.hiof.no/lebanon/300/320/324/324.2/hizballah/norton.html>
See also, “Hizballah of Lebanon: Extremist Ideals vs. Mundane Politics,” p. 3. “Hizballah has been transforming itself into a political party. In short, it has been preparing for life after resistance, while simultaneously exploiting its commitment to liberate the south in order to sustain its impressive political constituency whose loyalty is by no means irrevocable.”
4. See David Schenker, “Beyond Rhetoric: Hizballah Threats after the Mughniyeh Assassination,” *PolicyWatch* #1347, February 28, 2008. <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=2723>
5. I provided a rundown of the literature in an online essay, “Paging Norton and Other Hezbollah

- Experts,” *Across the Bay*, February 15, 2008. <http://beirut2bayside.blogspot.com/2008/02/paging-norton-and-other-hezbollah.html>
- See also, Martin Kramer, “Imad who?” *Middle East Strategy at Harvard*, February 14, 2008. http://blogs.law.harvard.edu/mesh/2008/02/imad_mughniyah_who/
- Virtually all the authors with recent books on Hezbollah, spanning a decade between 1997 and 2007, endorsed the Party line one way or another on Mughniyeh. Those include Hala Jaber, Amal Saad-Ghorayeb, Judith Palmer Harik, Ahmad Nizar Hamzeh, and Augustus Richard Norton. One exception is Magnus Ranstorp, who had detailed Mughniyeh’s membership in the Party in his book, *Hizb’allah in Lebanon: The Politics of the Western Hostage Crisis*, (London: Macmillan, 1997).
6. See, e.g., Norton, *Hezbollah: A Short History*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), p. 78.
 7. “Hizballah: From Radicalism to Pragmatism?”
 8. “Hizballah of Lebanon: Extremist Ideals vs. Mundane Politics,” p. 21.
 9. Joseph Alagha, *The Shifts in Hizbullah’s Ideology: Religious Ideology, Political Ideology, And Political Program*, ISIM Dissertations, (Leiden: Amsterdam University Press, 2006) pp. 209-210.
In a recent article, Bilal Saab made a somewhat similar distinction between “Hezbollah’s Islamic order in theory” and “in practice.” But Saab also made a categorical statement regarding Hezbollah’s ambition: “[T]he Party of God is first and foremost a Lebanese Shia Islamist group whose *raison d’être* is to pursue its ideal of establishing an Islamic order in Lebanon, whether by force or by persuasion, as dictated by circumstances.” See “Rethinking Hezbollah’s Disarmament,” *Middle East Policy*, Vol. XV, No. 3, Fall 2008, pp. 94-98.
 10. “Lebanon: Hizbullah, a progressive Islamic party? - Interview with Joseph Alagha,” *Religioscope*, 17 May 2007. http://religion.info/english/interviews/article_317.shtml
 11. *Ibid.*
 12. *Al-Nour* radio. Translation by this author.
 13. “Know thy enemy: Hizbullah, ‘terrorism’ and the politics of perception,” *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 26, No. 1, 2005, p. 186.
 14. “UK ban on Hezbollah military arm,” BBC News, July 2, 2008.
 15. “Lebanon’s Hezbollah savors increasing legitimacy,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 13, 2009. <http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/world/la-fg-lebanon-hezbollah13-2009apr13,0,5664917.story>
 16. This is somewhat parallel to what Dany Badran has termed “hybridity” in analyzing Hassan Nasrallah’s speeches, noting how Nasrallah blends political, religious and military discourses and produces a “hybrid genre” which “helps construct constantly shifting audience roles with varying effective power.” “The Discourse of Conflict or the Reader of Conflict: A Pragmatics of Rhetoric,” a paper presented at the PALA International Conference, Sheffield, UK, July, 2008.
 17. “Hizbollah and the Lebanese Crisis,” *Crisis Group Middle East Report N°69*, 10 October 2007, p. 15. The report goes on to provide a quote from the vice president of Hezbollah’s research center which perfectly summarizes the Party’s position and strongly discredits the “Lebanonization” and “integration” argument: “[P]aradoxically, some want us to get involved in the political process in order to neutralize us. In fact, we intend to get involved—but precisely in order to protect the strategic choice of resistance and political participation.” *Ibid.*
 18. See, *Al-Hayat*, April 21, 2009. http://www.alhayat.com/arab_news/nafrica_news/04-2009/Item-20090420-c50d61d4-c0a8-10ed-00fa-e78fc131003a/story.html and *Al-Hayat*, April 22, 2009. http://www.alhayat.com/arab_news/nafrica_news/04-2009/Item-20090421-ca4195b6-c0a8-10ed-00fa-e78f8c145a5a/story.html
 19. “*Kayfa yankharit baqi l-mujtama’ fi l-muqawama?*” *An-Nahar*, June 8, 2007.

20. "Know thy enemy: Hizbullah, 'terrorism' and the politics of perception," pp. 189-191.
21. NOW Lebanon, June 22, 2008. <http://nowlebanon.com/Arabic/NewsArticleDetails.aspx?ID=48252>
22. NOW Lebanon, June 25, 2008.
<http://www.nowlebanon.com/Arabic/NewsArticleDetails.aspx?ID=48705>
- Cf. Harb and Leenders, pp. 189-191.
23. Naim Qassem, *Hizbullah: al-manhaj, al-tajriba, al-mustaqbal*, (Beirut: Dar al-Hadi, 2002.)p. 364. Harb and Leenders also note this quote, but offer a slightly different translation. See p. 189.
24. *Ash-Sharq al-Awsat*, May 9, 2008. <http://www.asharqalawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&is-sueno=10755&article=470025&feature=>
25. See Nasrallah's address on May 26, 2008.
26. NOW Lebanon, February 16, 2009. <http://nowlebanon.com/Arabic/NewsArticleDetails.aspx?ID=80152>
27. Cf. Mehdi Khalaji, "Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps, Inc.," *PolicyWatch* #1273, August 17, 2007. <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=2649>
28. "Know thy enemy," p. 189. In this sense, Ahmad Nizar Hamzeh had it right when he defined Hezbollah as "first and foremost a *jihadi* movement that engages in politics, and not a political party that conducts *jihad*." See his *In the Path of Hizbullah*, Syracuse: (Syracuse University Press, 2004), p. 44.
29. *Hizbullah*, p. 51. "The decision of Jihad is tied to *al-wali al-faqih* ... who determines the rules and restrictions of confrontation (*qarar al-jihad murtabit bil-wali l-faqih ... alladhi yuhaddid qawa'id al-muwajaha wa dawabitaha*)."
30. See Mehdi Khalaji, "Iran's Shadow Government in Lebanon," *PolicyWatch* #1124, July 19, 2006. <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=2489>
 Overviews of these institutions can be found in a number of works, including Qassem's *Hizbullah*, Hamzeh's *In the Path of Hezbollah*, as well as Harb and Leenders' essay. See also the recent study, "Exporting the Iranian revolution to Lebanon," published by the Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center at the Israel Intelligence Heritage & Commemoration Center (IICC), December 8, 2008. http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/malam_multimedia/English/eng_n/html/iran_e003.htm
 For a layout of the organizational structure, see Robert Rabil, "Hezbollah: Lebanon's Power Broker," *The Journal of International Security Affairs*, Fall 2008-Number 15. <http://www.securityaffairs.org/issues/2008/15/rabil.php>. See also Magnus Ranstorp's *Hizb'allah in Lebanon*.
31. Where, for example, Hezbollah has been taking over traditional Shiite shrines and "Iranianizing" them. Noted in Hussain Abdul-Hussain's presentation for the panel, "Hezbollah and Iran: Destabilizing Lebanon and Israel." *The Hudson Institute*, November 19, 2008.
32. Harb and Leenders, p. 190. Authors' interview with the vice-president of Hezbollah's Islamic Institute for Teaching and Education.
33. Robert F. Worth, "Hezbollah Seeks to Marshal the Piety of the Young," *The New York Times*, November 20, 2008.
http://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/21/world/middleeast/21lebanon.html?_r=1&hp=&pagewanted=all. For more on the Mahdi Scouts, see "Hezbollah's Shi'ite youth movement, 'The Imam al-Mahdi Scouts'," Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center at the Center for Special Studies (CSS), September 11, 2006. http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/malam_multimedia/English/eng_n/html/hezbollah_scouts_e.htm
34. "Talking To: Patrick Haenni," NOW Lebanon, October 12, 2007. <http://www.nowlebanon.com/NewsArticleDetails.aspx?ID=16115>
35. "Jalili says Iran wants cooperation and information exchanges with Lebanon," NOW Lebanon, November 25, 2008. <http://nowlebanon.com/NewsArticleDetails.aspx?ID=68515>

36. “*bayna su’al Qasim wa tasawwur ‘Awn.. fariq zamani la akthar*,” NOW Magazine (electronic supplement), November 13, 2008. The report laid out Aoun’s paper parallel to Qassem’s 2007 article, highlighting their similarities. See also, Hanin Ghaddar, “A community of resistance,” NOW Lebanon, November 13, 2008. <http://www.nowlebanon.com/NewsArticleDetails.aspx?ID=66884>
37. The former Iranian ambassador to Syria, Mohammad Hossein Akhtari, told *Asharq Al-Awsat* that Iran and Syria both interfered directly to assist Hezbollah establish *Al-Manar*. *Asharq Al-Awsat*, May 15, 2008. <http://asharqalawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&issueno=10761&article=470798>
38. See Patrick Haenni’s assessment already in October 2007: “Hezbollah can no longer recruit the Sunnis at the same level as its main-stream competitors. Basically they lost influence.” “Talking To: Patrick Haenni,” NOW Lebanon, October 12, 2007. <http://www.nowlebanon.com/NewsArticleDetails.aspx?ID=16115>
39. See MEMRI Special Dispatch—No. 1518, March 23, 2007. <http://www.memri.org/bin/articles.cgi?Area=sd&ID=SP151807&Page=archives>
See also, Zahra Hankir, “Degrees of Separation,” NOW Lebanon, March 26, 2008. <http://www.nowlebanon.com/NewsArticleDetails.aspx?ID=35876>
40. NOW Lebanon, October 24, 2008. <http://www.nowlebanon.com/Arabic/NewsArticleDetails.aspx?ID=64189>
41. For a historical look at Iran’s and Hezbollah’s outreach efforts with Lebanese and Palestinian Sunni groups, see Bernard Rougier, *Everyday Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam Among Palestinians in Lebanon*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007) pp. 27-69. More currently, see Nidaa Qabalan, “A call to arms: three Palestinian militant groups,” NOW Lebanon, November 6, 2007.
42. Naim Qassem reflects Hezbollah’s delight in the April Understanding in his book, where he describes it as “tailored to the Resistance’s demands.” He also notes Iran’s role, alongside Syria, in the formulation of the Understanding. *Hizbullah*, pp. 166-167.
43. “Hezbollah disputes the legitimacy of the Israel-Lebanon international border,” Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center at the Israel Intelligence Heritage & Commemoration Center (IICC), November 19, 2008. http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/malam_multimedia/English/eng_n/html/hezbollah_e005.htm
44. Since Hezbollah abides by the doctrine of al-wali al-faqih, it cannot submit to the position, advocated by the “March 14” parliamentary majority in Lebanon, that the Lebanese central government alone should control the decision of war and peace (*qarar al-harb wa as-silm*). Naim Qassem specifically states in his book that the al-wali al-faqih alone possesses the authority to decide war and peace (*huwa lladhi yamtalik salahiyat qarar al-harb wa as-silm*), along with the authority “to make the major political decisions related to the interests of the *umma*” (*ittikhadh al-qararat as-siyasiya al-kubra allati tartabit bi masalih al-umma*), even when operational application “does not require daily follow-up by al-wali al-faqih.” *Hizbullah*, pp. 72, 76. Also, see Shmuel Bar, “Iranian Terrorist Policy and ‘Export of Revolution,’” pp. 14-17. Paper distributed at a conference hosted by *The Hudson Institute*, entitled “Iran, Hezbollah, and Hamas: Tehran’s War against the West by Proxy?” November 19, 2008. Bar incorporates instructional material captured by the IDF during the Second Lebanon War in 2006.

An earlier version of this paper was presented at a conference sponsored by Hudson Institute's Center for Middle East Policy.

Hezbollah: A State within a State

By Hussain Abdul-Hussain

ACCORDING TO THE MOST COMMONLY ACCEPTED VERSION OF ITS history, Hezbollah is a resistance movement. Yet that description fails to capture the true nature of this militant group. Hezbollah, in fact, wears three hats today. First, in its own words, it is a resistance movement. Second, it is also an Islamist political movement that engages in rounds of political bickering with rival non-Shiite parties within Lebanon. And third, it is a revolutionary movement formed around a special Shiite school of thought that seeks to establish an Islamic state based on the radical ideology of the Islamic Republic of Iran: *Wilayat al-Faqih* or “rule of the jurist.”

Since its inception in 1982, Hezbollah has undergone several changes, metamorphosing from an Islamic resistance movement to a “state within a state” in Lebanon, committed to “liberation.” After the Israeli withdrawal from southern Lebanon in 2000, the now-irrelevant resistance movement struggled to maintain its self-identity and ideological agenda. It did so by launching random attacks within a disputed sliver of land along the Lebanese-Israeli border, as well as by abducting Israeli soldiers for prisoner swap deals. But after the Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon in 2005, Hezbollah lost a vital political sponsor and was forced to deal with domestic politics in order to maintain both its regional agenda and its autonomy within Lebanon. Most important of all, Hezbollah still struggles to spread and impose an Islamic state based on the theory of *wilayat al-faqih* (or *vilayat-e-faqih* in Persian).

The Revolution within Shiism

IN THE SUMMER OF 1982, DOZENS OF PERSIAN-SPEAKING, BEARDED MEN wearing khaki uniforms, many of them mounted on motorbikes, could be seen roaming the streets and unpaved roadways in the foothills of Baalbek, in eastern Lebanon. Those men were members of the Iranian Revolution Guards, commonly known as the *Pasdaran*, and they had come to spread the Iranian revolution in Lebanon. Baalbek, a predominantly Shiite town surrounded by dozens of Shiite villages, proved to be a fertile ground for such an undertaking.

The original idea behind Iran's involvement in Baalbek was to create a Shiite movement that could emulate the Iranian revolution of 1979. This movement would struggle to replace the political order in Lebanon with an Islamic republic.

As had been done in Iran three years earlier, activists organized massive rallies in Baalbek to protest what they decried as the injustices of the Lebanese state. But in actuality, the "state" in war-torn Lebanon was, in those days, virtually nonexistent. This made the *Pasdaran*'s project of fomenting a revolution in Baalbek a relatively easy task. The *Pasdaran*'s Lebanese followers quickly seized the Lebanese Armed Forces' largest barracks in the country, which were located at the top of Baalbek's Sheikh Abdullah Hill. The revolutionaries also occupied the state-owned Teachers' House, situated in the upscale neighborhood of Rass al-Ein, and transformed it into the Imam Khomeini Hospital. They then invaded one of Baalbek's three hotels, al-Khawwam, also situated in Rass al-Ein, and turned it into their headquarters.

Since revolutions usually require propaganda machines and armies, the *Pasdaran* supervised the establishment of a radio station, calling it the "Voice of the Downtrodden." It also started training young men and organizing them in paramilitary groups.

Murals praising Ruhollah Khomeini, the leader of the Islamic revolution in Iran, and banners with revolutionary Islamic slogans, could be seen on virtually every corner. The most important of the slogans summarized the new movement's vision for a united Lebanon. At the time, Lebanon was divided into East and West, and the movement's motto was: "No Eastern, No Western, an Islamic Republic." All banners were signed by a group, whose name was previously unknown to ordinary Lebanese: "Hezbollah," or the "Party of God."

This new Shiite movement did not perceive itself to be an independent political group or militia, but rather an extension of the Iranian revolution. In particular, the revolutionaries conceived of themselves as being the "Hezbollahis"—the same name given to activists who had formed a quasi-religious police force in Iran during the early days of the revolution.¹ Thus Hezbollah, a Lebanese Shiite movement modeled on Iran's revolutionaries, was born.

In September 1982, Ibrahim Amin al-Sayyed—a cleric and a Hezbollah recruit—presented the group’s earliest platform. The objective of Hezbollah, Sayyed said during a rally, was similar to that of the Iranian revolution: side with the world’s downtrodden against the oppressors. The movement’s stated enemies were America, Israel, Britain, France and the Lebanese Phalanges Party.

In other predominantly Shiite areas of Lebanon, and especially among the shanties in Beirut’s southern suburbs, an aggressively militant movement was being formed around the fiery, anti-imperial teachings of Lebanese cleric Mohamed Hussein Fadlallah. The young Shiite men who comprised Fadlallah’s movement had been trained by Yasser Arafat’s Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), which had previously been ejected from Lebanon in the aftermath of the 1982 Israeli invasion.

The PLO leadership such as Khalil al-Wazir, known by his *nom de guerre* Abu Jihad, and his apprentice, the Sunni Lebanese Anis al-Naqqash, mentored the young Shiite fighters. The most prominent of these young fighters was Imad Mughniyah, who would later emerge as Hezbollah’s incognito military strategist. Mughniyah was assassinated in Damascus in February 2008.

Anis al-Naqqash was imprisoned in France between 1980 and 1990 for his attempt to assassinate the former Iranian Prime Minister Shahbour Bakhtiar, and was additionally famous, along with Ilich Ramírez Sánchez (aka “Carlos the Jackal”), for his participation in the 1975 kidnapping of OPEC ministers in Vienna. In a 2000 interview, Naqqash said that the PLO enjoyed strong ties with the anti-Shah Iranian opposition. Naqqash argued that the formation of the Iranian paramilitary group, the Pasdaran, was his idea. This claim indicates that the partnership between those who formed the Hezbollah leadership in the 1980s and Iran’s revolutionary leaders actually predated the 1979 revolution. That partnership continues to this day.

While the PLO leadership, including Abu Jihad, made their exodus from Beirut to Tunisia in 1982, Mughniyah and like-minded militants stayed behind and organized themselves into militias that joined the fight against the Israelis in Beirut. It is widely believed that these militias were behind the attacks on the U.S. Marine barracks in Beirut and against the French forces in 1983.

Also joining the fight in Beirut and southern Lebanon were militants from the Amal movement, another Shiite militia formed in 1975. By 1982, the Amal movement, under the leadership of Nabih Berri, had essentially become a Syrian proxy force and a number of its cadres, including men such Hassan Nasrallah and Hussein al-Moussawi, broke off and either formed small splinter groups or joined Hezbollah. By 1985, Baalbek’s Hezbollah merged with the Beirut militias and the combined movement announced its re-birth, with a slightly modified ideological platform and agenda.

Unlike Amal and other pro-Syrian militias, Hezbollah, in its earliest years, was not involved in anti-Israeli activities. In fact, the date for Hezbollah’s “resistance” against

Israel can be traced to 1989. This makes the group a latecomer to anti-Israeli operations, which were first launched by Palestinian militias and other Lebanese groups, such as the Lebanese Communist Party, following Israel's initial invasion of Lebanon in 1978.

Even though Hezbollah had not taken a stance on internal Lebanese politics, as opposed to the more domesticated Amal, clashes broke out between the two groups almost instantly. This was probably due to Syrian instigation, for Damascus strived to maintain the upper hand over Lebanon's Shiites through Amal. Fighting between the two groups continued even after the end of the Lebanese civil war in 1990. It went on until Tehran and Damascus reached an arrangement, toward the mid-1990s, over the status of Iran's satellite group, Hezbollah, in a country where Syrian influence reigned supreme. By the time Lebanon's warring factions arrived at an agreement to end the civil war in 1990, Hezbollah had not yet become involved with the country's domestic politics. The movement's main focus was on its anti-Israel operations in southern Lebanon and the consolidation of its mini-state within Lebanon.

The Islamic Resistance in Lebanon

MAINTAINING THIS MINI-STATE WITHIN LEBANON IN PEACE TIME PROVED TO BE a difficult task for Hezbollah, which increasingly began to style itself exclusively as a resistance movement against the Israeli occupation in the south. By the end of Lebanon's civil war, Hezbollah had seemingly abandoned its dream of creating an Islamic state, and it began to concede to the government some of the facilities that it had occupied a decade earlier.

In 1992, following a complicated internal debate over its stance toward the Lebanese state, Hezbollah decided to form a political party and participated in elections in Lebanon. It managed to win a dozen seats in parliament, thereby forming a parliamentary bloc that was dedicated to supporting the group's military operations in the south. Hezbollah's literature also underwent a significant change during this period. On its yellow flag and underneath its AK-47 emblem, Hezbollah replaced its original motto of the "Islamic Revolution in Lebanon" with the motto "Islamic Resistance in Lebanon."

Through its allies in Lebanon's cabinet and parliament, Syria guaranteed Hezbollah's smooth operation, helping it to maintain security zones that were inaccessible to government forces, constantly replenishing its arms caches, and circumventing state laws as the group expanded its network of social services. With the Syrians watching its back in Lebanon's domestic politics, Hezbollah transformed itself into a purely anti-Israel force.

By focusing on Israel only, Hezbollah won enormous popularity with Sunnis throughout the Arab world, including in Lebanon, since the Palestinian cause had been traditionally a Sunni one. Meanwhile, Hezbollah's rival, the Amal movement, managed to thrive in Lebanese politics, presenting itself as the representative of the Shiites.

This Syrian-Iranian, Amal-Hezbollah state-resistance dichotomy lasted until 2000, when Israel withdrew from southern Lebanon. If Hezbollah was purely a resistance movement until 2000, it found itself unemployed thereafter.

Another loser in 2000 was the Syrian regime. After Hezbollah was placed on the U.S. State Department's list of terrorist organizations, Damascus discovered a new role for itself, playing mediator between the world and the group. Had Hezbollah gone out of business, Damascus would similarly have found itself increasingly irrelevant.

In order to keep Hezbollah's resistance scheme alive, the Syrians cunningly devised the so-called "Shebaa Farms excuse," which refers to a sliver of land on the foothills of the Golan Heights with undecided sovereignty between Syria and Lebanon. Syria invented the Shebaa Farms excuse to justify Hezbollah's continued fight against Israel. Without the Shebaa Farms, Hezbollah would have had no territorial claims against Israel and would have gone out of business as a militant organization. Likewise, the Syrians would have lost leverage; Damascus is only relevant in the region as long as it is able to cause trouble.

Between 2000 and 2006, Hezbollah executed random, small-scale attacks on Israeli outposts in the Shebaa Farms area. In 2000, it abducted three Israeli soldiers in the area, and kidnapped an Israeli businessman in 2001. The group then negotiated a prisoner swap deal with Israel through a third party. Hezbollah emerged victorious after this exchange in early 2004, but once again it also found itself irrelevant and unemployed. Without prisoner swaps or territorial claims, Hezbollah has little to do as a resistance group.

In 1998 Syrian President Hafez Assad started grooming his son Bashar for succession by commissioning him to run "the Lebanon file." After Hafez's death in 2000, politics in Lebanon took a different path. Bashar gradually phased out his father's old guard in both Syria and Lebanon and replaced them with his own people. In Lebanon, he launched a systematic process to undermine traditional popular heavyweights, such as Sunni Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, Druze leader Walid Jumblatt, and even Syria's staunch ally and leader of the Shiite Amal Movement Nabih Berri. Instead, Bashar chose previously unknown officers from the Lebanese intelligence service and the army.

In the eyes of Lebanon's traditional politicians, Bashar was cloning his autocratic Syrian system in Lebanon, and doing so against their will and best interests. It was only a matter of time before Hariri and Jumblatt broke with Syria. The breakup

happened toward the end of 2004, when Assad insisted on extending the mandate of his Lebanese puppet president, Emile Lahoud, a retired army general.

Meanwhile, through his international networks, Rafik Hariri lobbied for the approval of U.N. Security Council Resolution 1559. In a short-sighted move, Washington and Paris led the council to approve the resolution, thus linking the fates of the Syrian occupation of Lebanon with that of Hezbollah's arms. Resolution 1559 stipulated the withdrawal of foreign troops from Lebanon, and the disarmament of all Lebanese and non-Lebanese militias. A strong case can be made that the resolution should have been split into two, one resolution forcing Syria to withdraw, the other demanding Hezbollah's disarmament. By lumping them in one resolution, the international community unintentionally strengthened the alliance between Damascus and Hezbollah, making it harder to deal with either one of them at a time. Hezbollah took Syria's side not only because Resolution 1559 linked their fates, but because with Syria out, Hezbollah lost a sponsor that had protected its interests in domestic politics.

The Lebanese Shiite Party

WITH SYRIAN INFLUENCE WANING IN LEBANON, HEZBOLLAH WAS FORCED TO STEP up to maintain the status quo. However, the party, which is trained for guerilla warfare and propaganda, proved to be ill-prepared for participating in Lebanese politics. Then, Sunni Prime Minister Rafik Hariri was assassinated. In February 2005, the majority of the nation's Sunni population took to the streets to protest his death and widely accused Damascus of murdering him. Hezbollah, for its part, defended the Syrian regime. On March 8, 2005, Hezbollah rallied close to half a million of its supporters and those of its allies in downtown Beirut. The theme of the rally, in which Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah delivered one of his provocative speeches, was "Thank you, Syria."

This profession of gratitude for Syria did not go down well with Lebanon's Sunnis, or for that matter, with other Lebanese sects. On March 14, provoked by Hezbollah's bullying and arrogance, more than one million Christian, Sunni and Druze Lebanese gathered in downtown Beirut, demanding the withdrawal of Syrian troops. Coupled with growing international pressure, Damascus was forced to comply with UNSC 1559 and, after 29 years of occupying Lebanon, it withdrew in April 2005. Hezbollah could do nothing to prevent the Syrian withdrawal. Its rally had alienated the Sunnis, the Druze and the Christians, whose leaders isolated Hezbollah and created a new parliament along with their allies.

Before 2005, Syria had ruled Lebanon and backed Hezbollah, so there was no

reason for the party to get involved in domestic Lebanese affairs. In 2005, Syria was forced out, and Hezbollah had to take responsibility for itself. The 2005 withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon brought Hezbollah back, not into the resistance business, but into domestic Lebanese politics. Should Syria regain its influence over Lebanon, Hezbollah could then refocus its energy on anti-Israel activities alone.

In the meantime, since Hezbollah and pro-Syrian forces controlled the 2000 parliament, elections in 2005 would have been inconceivable without Hezbollah's consent. Therefore, to convince Hezbollah to enter the elections in spring 2005, the Sunni leader Saad Hariri, son of the slain prime minister, and the Druze leader Jumblatt, struck an alliance with Hezbollah and Amal. Hariri and Jumblatt and their allies won a majority in parliament and formed a cabinet giving Hezbollah one third of the seats. But with the Hariri tribunal processing, Hezbollah's alliance with Hariri and Jumblatt soon collapsed and Hezbollah was again isolated. This time, Damascus managed to maneuver its former opponent, Christian leader and former Army General Michel Aoun, to its side. Hezbollah found an ally in Aoun, who provided cover for the party's anti-state behavior and continuous armed bullying of political foes.

Hezbollah, however, still had to regain its support among the Sunnis. To do so, it played one of its anti-Israel cards. On July 12, 2006, the group launched a cross border attack into Israel, killing a few Israeli soldiers and abducting two others. Hezbollah's attack on Israel was unprecedented in its geographic location since, for the first time in six years, the group attacked outside of the Shebaa Farms region. Nonetheless, Hezbollah did not anticipate the full scale war with Israel that would follow.

On the day of the abductions, Hezbollah's Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah "advised" the Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and his Defense Minister Amir Peretz to act wisely and avoid war. The only way to retrieve the abducted sentries was through indirect negotiations, Nasrallah said. Not heeding Nasrallah's advice, the Olmert government launched a war against Lebanon which, despite its widespread destruction, failed to retrieve the kidnapped soldiers.

In the war's aftermath, Nasrallah said during a television interview that if he had known the war would be so devastating, he would not have ordered his party to abduct the Israeli troops. Nasrallah's statements indicate that the Hezbollah leadership did not foresee a full scale war with Israel in 2006. Hezbollah miscalculated, assuming that by abducting troops and forcing Tel Aviv to accept a prisoner swap, they could boost their floundering popularity among the Sunnis of Lebanon and the Arab world as they had successfully done in 2002.

Absent a prisoner exchange, and with the predominantly Shiite areas massively devastated, Hezbollah's popularity plummeted among both Shiites and Sunnis in Lebanon. A majority of the Shiites had lost not only loved ones, but their houses, their schools and their businesses, and for reasons that were unclear to them.

Hezbollah was losing ground with the Shiites and it had to find a way to regain their support. For this purpose, the ministers of Hezbollah and their allies walked out of the cabinet by the end of the summer of 2006, allegedly to dispute a cabinet vote endorsing the tribunal for the Hariri murder.

Not only did Hezbollah's ministers submit their resignations, but their supporters organized a massive rally in downtown Beirut and behaved as if they intended to invade the headquarters of Sunni Prime Minister Fouad Siniora and to forcefully unseat him. While Hezbollah's bullying escalated tension with the Sunnis, it won Hezbollah fame for emerging as the sole defender of Shiite interests in Lebanon for the first time in its history.

Nonetheless, Hezbollah's anti-government show still proved politically inadequate. While Nasrallah had promised his Shiite supporters a conclusive victory over the Sunni-led cabinet, Siniora stood his ground. He remained entrenched in his headquarters while Hezbollah's supporters spent months in tents outside his balcony. Meanwhile, Lebanon's Shiites were growing restless. Just as Nasrallah could not deliver on defeating Israel, despite all his later speeches claiming otherwise, Hezbollah was also unable to dislodge its domestic enemies.

By October 2007, the term of Lebanese President Emile Lahoud had ended. As he walked out of the presidential palace, his seat remained vacant. Hezbollah and its Syrian sponsors were determined to obstruct the anti-Syrian parliamentary majority from electing a president of its choosing. Yet Hezbollah, Syria and Iran combined were unable to force the election of a president of their own choosing.

The presidential vacancy and political stalemate persisted until May 7, 2008, when Hezbollah's fighters stormed the streets of predominantly Sunni Beirut and of the Druze in southern Mount Lebanon. Hezbollah's move was presumably in retaliation for earlier cabinet decisions to dismantle Hezbollah's private communication network and to replace the pro-Hezbollah Security Chief at Beirut International Airport. Yet the Hezbollah operation went far beyond forcing a government resignation. Its fighters invaded and torched the offices of the pro-Hariri TV station, Future TV, and newspaper, Al-Mustaqbal.

In Mount Lebanon, the Druze lived up to their reputation of being fierce fighters. They not only contained the Hezbollah attack, but also inflicted heavy casualties on the Shiite militia.

As time elapsed, Hezbollah's operation hit a political ceiling. The group stopped short of forcing its terms on its opponents and accepted a refereeing initiative by the League of Arab Countries. The parties met in Doha and signed an accord stipulating the election of Army Commander Michel Suleiman as president, the division of electoral districts along the lines of an old law drafted in the 1960s, and the end of offensive media campaigns against each other. The accord also mandated that the

parties re-launch national dialogue to debate, among other issues, the future of the Hezbollah militia's weapons.

The 2006 war with Israel had ended with UN Resolution 1701, which mandated the deployment of the Lebanese Army, along with a beefed up UN Interim Force in (southern) Lebanon (UNIFIL). Although the UN and a number of watchdog groups have reported that Hezbollah has replenished its arm caches under the nose of the UN force, many believe that Hezbollah's Shiite constituency has so far served as its first deterrence line against war with Israel. This was evident as Hezbollah practiced self-restraint during the Israel war on Hamas, in Gaza, in late 2008 and early 2009. Since the end of the 2006 War, Hezbollah has repeatedly sent envoys to Shiite villages to assure its supporters that war was behind them, and that the time has come for rebuilding.

The 2007 invasion of Beirut and Mount Lebanon ended with Hezbollah unable to force its political terms, despite its military advantage, over other Lebanese non-Shiite groups. With no resistance credentials to present to the Sunnis and no conclusive victories to present to the Shiites, Hezbollah has been domesticated and transformed from a pan-Arab movement into a Lebanese Shiite party pre-occupied with endless Lebanese political bickering.

Hezbollah's War within the Shiite World

SINCE ITS INCEPTION, HEZBOLLAH HAS SOUGHT TO EMULATE THE IRANIAN revolution and to implement the radical Shiite doctrine of *wilayat al-faqih*. The theory is based on a series of lectures that the Ayatollah Khomeini delivered while exiled in southern Iraq in the mid 1970s. The lectures highlighted the different aspects of an Islamic (Shiite) government envisaged by Khomeini. His new vision undermined centuries of Shiite perspective on public life.

To the Shiites of the world—also known as the Twelver Shiites after their 12 successive imams who presumably ruled after the death of the prophet of Islam Mohamed in 632 CE—an imam is the shadow of God on earth, without which the believers cannot survive. The 12th Shiite Imam, Mohamed al-Mahdi, went into occultation in 941 CE. Since the disappearance of this Messiah-like figure, the Shiites have devised a system to deal with public life in his absence and until his return.

Shiites believe their infallible imams were, and al-Mahdi remains, the guide of the believers over both religious and worldly affairs. However in his absence, guidance on religious issues was delegated to Shiite scholars, who took the liberty of issuing edicts on various matters previously not addressed in the Shiite creed. Different interpretations by different scholars are known as *ijtihad*. A single scholar practicing such a prerogative is known as a *mujtahid*.

Believers are expected to follow one mujtahid only, of the several available ones, and are not to switch from one scholar to another until the original scholar dies. According to Shiite tradition, a mujtahid cannot claim monopoly over religious guidance, nor is he to become involved in worldly affairs, and most notably, he is not to engage in politics. Over centuries of their history Shiite believers have tried to minimize their dealings with the states that governed them, refraining from politics as much as possible. Instead, they await the Mahdi's imminent arrival to set all things right. In fact, until the mid-20th century, it was customary for a number of practicing Shiites in Iraq to bury what they believed to be the sum of their annual tax money in their gardens. They did so because they believed that the Mahdi could return from occultation at any time and ask for his taxes.

In another social practice, in both Iraq and Lebanon, every household was to have in its possession a quantity of swords equal to the number of able-bodied males, so that whenever the Mahdi returns, the Shiites will be equipped to fight at his side in his battle to "fill the earth with fairness and justice after it was filled with oppression and injustice." The custom of burying taxes has mostly faded away now, but visitors still might notice swords hanging on the walls inside Shiite houses, even though the sword custom has lost its religious significance and has simply become a matter of house décor.

Since the disappearance of the 12th imam, al-Mahdi, the Shiite perspective on religion, society and state was developed around the hope of his return. The dominating rule of the Sunni majority, which frequently oppressed the Shiites, forced them from time to time to conceal their beliefs and go underground. For centuries, the Shiites of the world endured oppression in the hope that there would come a time when their Imam would return and redress the injustices that had befallen them. The long periods of Shiite frustration produced a culture known for its melancholic practices, such as the processions of Ashura that commemorate the murder of the Third Imam, Hussain bin Ali, in 680 CE.

For a millennium of their history, the Shiites practiced patience and stayed out of public life and the quest for political power. By the mid 20th century, communism had already made its mark in several Arab countries and had found supporters among the masses, especially in Iraq. Meanwhile ultra-nationalist pan-Arab ideologies, imported from fascist Europe and adapted by native Arabs, were also winning popular grounds. These two ideologies and their supporters struggled for power several times in Iraq, Syria, Egypt and Yemen.

Like other minorities in the region, such as the Christians, the Shiites found in the secular parties a vehicle for upward social mobility, especially when deprivation pushed rural residents to relocate in cities. Shiites dominated the leadership and the rank and file of the Baath Party in Syria and Iraq during its early days, and

even today still form the main bulk of the communist parties in Iraq and Lebanon.

Shiite mobilization along secular lines has marked a departure from their tradition of passivism. It has also undermined the influence of Shiite religious scholars, who until then had been the believers' sole leaders. Najaf in Iraq and Qom in Iran, known for their Shiite shrines and religious scholarship, suffered a decline in the numbers of their students, who had begun to enroll in modern schools and to join secular parties.

To live up to the challenges of the age, a few Shiite scholars sought to introduce a Shiite ideology with a platform capable of competing with other groups. Mohamed Baqer al-Sadr, an Iraqi Shiite scholar in Najaf, embarked on an ambitious project in which he outlined a platform for governance from a Shiite perspective. He authored two books, *Our Economy* and *Our Philosophy*. Al-Sadr founded the Islamic Daawa (Proselytism) Party in the late 1950s. Among al-Sadr's comrades was Lebanon's Sayyed Mohomad Hussein Fadlallah, who was a student in Najaf.

In the early 1960s, Khomeini and his firebrand speeches were making a mark in Qom, provoking Iranian authorities to send him into exile in Najaf. By the mid 1970s, Khomeini and al-Sadr were in accord over the principles of mobilizing the Shiites around the world along new religious lines, despite some differences in their understanding of the concept of the Islamic Government under a single leader-scholar (*wali faqih*).

Feeling threatened by his political aspirations, Sunni Saddam Hussein and his secular Baath Party deported Khomeini to Paris. A few years later, in 1979, Khomeini returned to Iran to preside over a victorious revolution that was executed by both secular and religious Shiites. Through his Hezbollah supporters and the Pasdaran, Khomeini was able to twist some secular arms and impose an Islamic government by 1980. Before fully consolidating his rule in Iran, Khomeini was already exporting his new brand of Shiism to Shiite communities across the region. Iraq, where the Shiites form a majority of the population, and Lebanon, where the Shiites accounted for at least one quarter of the Lebanese, topped the list of Khomeini's favorite destinations.

In Iraq, Saddam was quickly alerted to the new Shiite militancy, and accordingly executed al-Sadr and hunted down his followers, who took refuge in Iran. Saddam, however, found it easy to coexist with the Shiite spiritual leadership in Najaf, as long as this leadership upheld the traditional Shiite practice of maintaining its distance away from politics. While Qom saw a surge in importance worldwide, with Iran's resources at the disposal of its mullahs, Najaf was eclipsed by Saddam's tyranny. Khomeini believed he could knock out Saddam and extend his revolution into Iraq, but his scheme never materialized, even after eight years of a brutal war between Iraq and Iran that started in 1980.

In lawless Lebanon, the situation was different. Another scholar of the al-Sadr

family, Mussa, had been proclaiming the end of the Shiite political marginalization in the country. However, Mussa al-Sadr mysteriously vanished during a trip to Libya in 1978. His successors at the top of his Amal Movement, lawmaker Hussein Husseini and young lawyer Nabih Berri, were too secular for Khomeini's taste and thus were deemed unworthy of preaching the new Iranian ideology. Iran instead formed a new Shiite movement in Lebanon that would endorse the wilayat al-faqih principle.

Fadlallah emerged as a potential disciple of Khomeini and a new leader for Lebanon's Shiites. During the stages of Hezbollah's infancy, Fadlallah was perceived as its spiritual leader. But Fadlallah proved to be an independent thinker and scholar and he repeatedly refused Iran's diktats in religion and politics. He and Iran parted ways, and even today Fadlallah's relationship with Hezbollah remains tense, though it is never publicly discussed. Fadlallah opposes the concept of wilayat al-faqih, and rather subscribes to the more traditional Shiite view of ijhtihad, having become himself a recognized mujtahid over the course of the past three decades. Yet due to his distance from his natural allies in Najaf, Fadlallah became disconnected from them and stood out as an ijhtihad voice in the wilderness of wilayat al-faqih, despite his considerable following among the non-militant Shiites of Lebanon.

With the downfall of the Saddam regime in 2003, Najaf slowly started coming back into the fold of Shiite leadership. Ali al-Sistani, the most senior Shiite scholar there, maintained his distance from politics and undermined, to Iran's dismay, the concept of wilayat al-faqih. Iran, for its part, saw in the downfall of Saddam a good opportunity not only to instigate, train and fund Shiite insurgents in Iraq, but also to export its revolution and ideology to Iraqi Shiites. By the time of this writing, the warfare between the pro-Iran Iraqi Shiites and the anti-Iran Iraqi Shiites has not yet been resolved.

Also by 2003, Iran and its Lebanese proxy Hezbollah had lost interest in spreading their ideology because they had become totally immersed in regional politics. Iran at first feared the toppling of Saddam, and it was even reported that it sent Washington messages offering cooperation. Echoing Iranian policy, during the buildup of the US war in Iraq, Nasrallah called for Iraqi national reconciliation between the opposition and Saddam Hussein, a call that would have been inconceivable among the Shiites of the world during the first decade of the Islamic revolution in Iran.

Almost three decades after Khomeini's success in revolutionizing traditionally Shiite quietism in Iran, his ideology has made significant strides in Lebanon. Yet Khomeini's view of religion and the world still teeters in Iraq without any significant following, perhaps due to the seemingly unbridgeable gap between Najaf and Qom, who remain historic rivals over the leadership of the Shiites.

Today Lebanon remains lawless, and has proven malleable as most of its Shiites seem to have succumbed to Hezbollah and its Iranian masters. The party and its

Iranian sponsors have invested massively in social programs such as health care and education, seeking to outbid their Shiite opponents, the supporters of the more traditional version of Shiism and *ijtihad*, over whom a now-elderly Fadlallah stands alone.

Where carrots have proved unyielding among Lebanese Shiites, Hezbollah has employed coercion. With an unmatched paramilitary arsenal, Hezbollah has bullied its Shiite opponents, especially the notable traditional leaders. In Baalbek, for instance, Hezbollah and Iran confiscated a previously unnoticeable Shiite shrine, against the will of its historic and rightful custodians.

Sit Khawla was believed to be the daughter of the third Shiite Imam, Hussein. After the murder of her father in the battle of Karbala in 680 CE, she was taken alongside the other women of the imam, to the Damascus court of the Umayyad Caliph Yazid bin Muawiya. According to the common myth, the little girl (other versions say unborn) died on the way and was buried in Baalbek.

No shrine ever marked this little saint's tomb. However, a couple of centuries ago, a member of one of the notable families of Baalbek—the Mortada family that claims descent from the prophet—saw Khawla in a dream and marked her tombstone accordingly. Ever since, the spot has been a minor holy place for local residents under the custody of a certain Mortada and his male line. The last of the Mortada custodians died a few years ago and was buried in the backyard of the shrine in observance of a Shiite practice of honoring shrine custodians for their service.

After the last Mortada's death, Hezbollah interrupted the old custody tradition, confiscated the shrine and transformed it into a grand mosque, featuring noticeably Persian architecture and colors. They even paved the shrine's backyard with tiles that covered the Mortada tombs, a symbolic simile to Iran and Hezbollah's effort to bury the Shiite past and replace it with a newer version of their own.

The Khawla shrine's confiscation exemplifies one of the many tactics Hezbollah has employed in its quest to undermine traditional Arab Shiite passivism in favor of Persian Shiite militancy. While funds and arms play a central role in Hezbollah's transformation of Lebanese Shiites, mobilization through Hezbollah-owned media and new religious and cultural practices have also been weapons of choice in Hezbollah's bid to fundamentally alter the Shiite heritage in Lebanon.

The struggle between the imported Persian theory of *wilayat al-faqih* and the traditional Arab *ijtihad* has reached a climax in Iraq and Lebanon. Iran and Hezbollah are using social networks, funds, weapons and propaganda, and against this radical assault, its Shiite opponents are clearly at a disadvantage. They remain unable to match Hezbollah's programs or to defend themselves against Hezbollah's harassment, which is protected by the regional power, Iran, and its nuclear ambitions.

Conclusion

Since its creation in 1982, Hezbollah has evolved and has played different roles at different times. With its previous assignments fulfilled, such as anti-Israeli resistance, the party is now left to play a role of defender of Lebanon's Shiites and as an Iranian pawn in the region.

But not all Shiites subscribe to Iran's and Hezbollah's militant agenda. And any effort to undermine Hezbollah's role as an Iranian proxy in the region ought to take into consideration the variations of Shiism. Should the world ever commit the mistake of lumping together all Shiites, vis-à-vis the Sunni world, they would further undercut the moderate Shiites, forcing them to tie their destiny to that of the radicalized Shiites of Iran and Hezbollah.

NOTES

1. It could be that the Iranian police force's title was originally meant to rhyme with the name of Iran's revolutionary leader Ruhollah Khomeini. In a chant that was imported to Lebanon from Iran, young men in Baalbek performed paramilitary marches during which their leader would shout: "Who are you?" The response of the revolutionary cadres would be, "Hezbollah [Party of God]!" The leader would then shout: "Who is your leader?" And the marching men would respond: "Ruhollah!" or the "Spirit of God."

An earlier version of this paper was presented at a conference sponsored by Hudson Institute's Center for Middle East Policy.

The Shiite Turn in Syria

By Khalid Sindawi

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Alawite Factor

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

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

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

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

Survey Results

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Syria's Shiite Shrines

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Prior History of Shiism in Syria

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Increasing Iranian Influence in Syria

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Role of Education

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Charges and Countercharges

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Conversion in Deir al-Zor

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Shiism in the Province of Dar'a⁵⁵

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Conversion to Shiism in the Province of al-Hasaka⁵⁹

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

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

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

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

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

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

Conversion to Shiism in Latakia

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

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

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

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

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

Conversion to Shiism in Aleppo

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

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

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

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

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

Conversion to Shiism in Idlib

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

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

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

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

Conversion to Shiism in Hims and the Coast

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

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

Looking Ahead

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

NOTES

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Tashayu (Conversion to Shiism) in Central Asia and Russia

By Dina Lisnyansky

WHEN THE SOVIET UNION DISINTEGRATED, THE MUSLIMS OF Russia and the Central Asian republics began to rediscover their religious identity.¹ But decades of anti-religious Soviet policies had shattered and nearly eradicated the Islamic traditions of those regions. The Sunni religious establishments had been either co-opted by communist rulers—and thus de-legitimized in the eyes of ordinary believers—or suppressed. The local syncretistic and relatively moderate traditions, generally linked to the historically strong Sufi presence in Central Asia and Russia, had faded into oblivion. After seventy years of living under a regime that prohibited any demonstration of religion, Tatars, Bashkirs, Uzbeks, Tajiks and other nationalities, traditionally identified as moderate Sunni Muslims, were left almost totally ignorant of the basic tenets of the Islamic faith. Russian and Central Asian Muslims thus found themselves in the throes of an ethnic and religious identity crisis, without the benefit of indigenous religious traditions or leaders to see them through. As one consequence of this, many of these Muslims began looking to the outside world for religious guidance.

This was the background of the well-documented Wahhabi penetration into Central Asia that began after the breakup of the Soviet Union. The Saudi religious establishment, along with the Egyptian Islamic establishment of al-Azhar, moved swiftly to revive Islam in those lands. In Central Asia, Saudi and Egyptian scholars from the

Muslim world's heartland held claim to an uninterrupted Islamic tradition and faced almost no organized indigenous challenge to their hard-line interpretation of Islam. In any clash between indigenous traditions and "the real Islam," imported from the Middle East, the former were clearly handicapped. Sunni Islamist movements took advantage of ex-Soviet Muslims' religious ignorance as well as their desire to fill the spiritual vacuum in their lives. Wahhabi proselytizers were thus able to establish and maintain numerous mosques, Islamic clubs and societies that provided people with Islamic-oriented activities. And, ultimately, they also managed to inject a new element of Islamist ideology into the national struggle in Chechnya.

For much of the 1990s, this Sunni missionary activity was seen in many Western capitals as a positive and effective antidote to the threat posed by Iran, which was also seeking to enhance its own political position in Central Asia. Radical Shiite religious infiltration into the former Soviet Union began in the early 1990s, as Iran dispatched religious agents first into Azerbaijan, because of its large Shia community, and Tajikistan, because the Tajik language is akin to Farsi. Later, it set its sights on other Central Asian republics and on Russia itself. In these countries the Iranians launched a campaign to convert Sunnis into Shia—that is, "to bring them into the light" (*istibsar*).² Compared with the Sunni movements, however, these early Iranian efforts were not very successful, mainly because the Wahhabi movements were better organized and financed. As such, Iranian missionary activity in Central Asia remained relatively limited in the 1990s.

In recent times, however, Iranian ideology has become increasingly influential in Central Asia and Russia. This has been due to many factors—from the Iranian regime's new assertiveness to the pressures that regional governments have brought to bear on Wahhabi revivalist movements in the wake of the 2004 Beslan massacre and other terrorist incidents. Certainly since 9/11, there's been heightened awareness around the world of the dangers of Sunni radicalism. Iran, meanwhile, has not been idle. It has succeeded in activating a Shia revivalist movement in both Central Asia and Russia. Though the Iranians have generally been more discrete than the Wahhabis, their impact on Muslims and even non-Muslims in these areas is now considerable.

Ahli Beit Reaches Moscow

THE MUSLIM POPULATIONS UNDER SOVIET RULE WERE PREDOMINATELY SUNNI. When the communist era came to an end, Shia were found only in Azerbaijan (about four million) and Dagastan (a few thousand). By the mid-90s, however, Shia organizations began to gain strength. Most Shia proselytizers in Central Asia were dedicated Iranian missionaries affiliated with the Iranian regime. Such preachers

attracted followers particularly among Azerbaijani immigrants in the Ural region and Moscow, who had left their homes in search of work but often found themselves impecunious and unemployed. Not unlike their Middle Eastern counterparts in the West, these immigrants tended to be driven closer to Islam and radicalization by their expatriate status. And for them, any position in an Iran-funded Shia mosque or club—from lowly cleaner to religious clerk or preacher—was a godsend.

In 1996 a Shia society called Ahli Beit opened in Russia, its first branch headed by Musa Kurbanov. The organization already boasts a membership of thousands of Muslims, many of them Sunni by birth. It advocates unifying all Sunni and Shia *madhhabs*, or schools of thought, everywhere but particularly in the Russian Federation. On its website's "about us" page, Kurbanov claims that his organization will "struggle with religious extremism and terrorism." He writes, "The main aim of Ahli Beit is to command people to good and prohibit them from evil."³ In its formal writings, the organization gives no indication of its relationship to Ahul Beit in Iran or of its Iranian orientation.

Ahli Beit has since grown and become highly active in Muslim communities in Russia. The organization founded a youth community, Sahib az-Zaman (The Lord of Time—an allusion to the "Hidden Imam"), and a women's association, Fatima-Zahra, named for the Prophet's daughter and Imam Ali's wife. Kurbanov's efforts also led to dozens of "Husseiniya" parades—which commemorate Imam Hussein ibn Ali, the first and foremost Shia martyr and grandson of Mohammed—being organized in Moscow.⁴ To avoid unnecessary attention from the government, these parades were kept modest and did not include the violent and bloody special effects that usually accompany Ashura⁵ parades in such Muslim states as Lebanon.

But Ahli Beit in Russia and Central Asia is not, in essence, a local organization. Rather, it is a branch of the Iranian government organization Ahul Beit. Shortly after the Islamic revolution, the new Iranian regime formed organizations to promote the idea of unifying all Islamic madhhabs and legitimizing the Shia Jafari school within a generic Islam that encompassed both Sunni and Shia. The *raison d'être* behind these efforts was clear: because a Sunni Muslim may accept the authority of any Sunni shaykh, whatever school he subscribes to, a Sunni could follow the authority of a Shia scholar if the Jafari school were considered just another school. And he could do so without having to cross the line and become a Shia.

There are two main organizations operating under the Iranian regime in this spirit. One is Majm-e jahani-ye ahl-e beit (Ahli Beit), which was headed by Ali al-Taskhiri until 1999, then by Ali Akbar Velayati, and since October 2002 by Mohammad Mahdi Assefi. The other is Majma-e Jahani Baraye Taqrib-e Bein-e Mazaheb-e Eslami (Society for Reconciliation Among the Schools) under Mohammad Va'ez-Zadeh Khorasani. Both organizations convene conferences of Sunni and Shia

Muslims and arrange studies for Sunni Muslims in the madrasas of Qom. Much of this activity targets non-Arab Muslims, many of whom have later been accused in their home countries of operating for the Iranian intelligence.⁶

Unwitting Shia

NOT CONTENT WITH SIMPLY LEADING EXISTING SHIA COMMUNITIES, AHLI BEIT devotes considerable energy to istibsar. As noted above, one of Ahli Beit's main goals is the unification of all Muslim madhhabs, but it does not indicate how this might be achieved. The modus operandi of the organization can be deduced from its activities in Yekaterinburg, home to the largest Shia community in the Russian Federation. Daniyal Tulencov, a 29-year-old Tatar convert to Shiism, is the leader of that community and founder of its Ahli Beit branch. He gave a speech on the day of Ashura in which he related how the celebration of Iman Hussein's martyrdom has become more and more central in this community over the last eight years:

In the past we used to gather in my office and in people's houses and apartments. Today, in the new democratic Russia, where there is freedom of faith and the government supports the believers and helps them to celebrate their holidays, we have gathered here. It's the first time in the history of Russia, that LRMO (Local Religious Muslim Organization) Ahli Beit has been officially registered.... We invited and will invite everybody, no matter what their confessions are and what they believe in. Our guests have heard, witnessed and understood today what Imam Hussein died for. They understood that Hussein was willing to give up his life for his family's sake. He was beheaded by his worst enemies when he was only 58 years old.... Imam Hussein has witnessed by his own blood that people should worship only Allah and no one but him, especially not Yazid.⁷ ...we have guests from Azerbaijan and the Islamic Republic of Iran: Karbalai Tahir Shirvani, Karbalai Sakit and Karbalai Zulfigar.⁸

The Russian government's support of the Yekaterinburg branch of Ahli Beit is indicative of the growing strength and legitimization of the organization. It is not clear, however, to what extent Russian authorities are aware of Ahli Beit's true nature. While the Russian government is concerned about the growing number of immigrants from the Central Asian republics, it does not show any specific interest in the increasing number of Russian and Tatar converts to Shiism. Russia's policy of

supporting Muslims in the Russian Federation who are ostensibly anti-Wahhabi facilitates the activity of such organizations as Ahli Beit, which prosper by hiding their real identity under the neutral label of “local religious Muslim organization.”

In his Ashura address, Tulencov did not refer even once to the Shia. This was not an oversight. The strategy of Ahli Beit is to obfuscate the differences between Sunnis and Shia, and thus to bring Sunnis unwittingly into the Shia fold. While there is no official count of Shia converts in Russia or the Central Asia republics, the number of actual converts is certainly much greater than the number of “declared” converts. Many “neo-Shia” simply do not realize that they have crossed the line and accepted religious tenets that have, in fact, converted them. If asked, they would probably describe themselves, in the spirit of Ahli Beit, as plain Muslims.

This trend of de facto *tashayu* (Shiitization) is evident in other areas of the Russian Federation as well. Bulat Yuldashiv, editor of the Sunni Islamic journal *Risalat*, which is published in Ufa, Bashkortostan,⁹ revealed in an interview that nobody knows how many Shia there are among the 400,000 Muslims living in Ufa. He noted, however, that the Sunnis in the city are following “a new tradition.” For the last few years, they have been celebrating Nouruz (the Iranian New Year, Nouruz meaning “new day” or “new life”) by visiting one of Ufa’s renowned mosques and holding special prayers. Though this holiday is indeed known among Central Asian Muslims, it was marked more in the breach than in the observance during the Soviet era. And it seems that its revival is related more to Iranian influence than to this community’s own ancient traditions.

The “neo-Nouruz” celebration is distinguished from older local customs by elements apparently imported from Iran.¹⁰ Previously, Nouruz-Bayram was observed mostly in Azerbaijan as a national holiday unencumbered by religious or symbolic features. The festival begins on March 20th or 21st, following the vernal equinox, and lasts thirteen days. The new customs involving the mosque facilitate Iranian influence. Because most of the prayers are in Arabic, many people do not understand the words. The Friday sermon (*khutba*) is in Azeri or the Tatar language, however, making it quite easy for the Shia organizers of these festivals to infuse unwitting Sunni Muslims with Shia doctrine.

Muslims all over Russia, mostly in the Ural region (Ufa, Chelyabinsk, Yekaterinburg), visit “Islamic clubs” and mosques without knowing they belong to the Shia movement in Russia or are being subsidized by Iran. Russians who want to convert to Islam and come to these mosques and clubs are, moreover, being automatically converted to Shiism after saying the Shahada. They learn about Shia principles that do not exist in Sunni Islam, such as *mut’a* marriage,¹¹ recite stories about the life of Khomeini and read interviews with Moqtada a-Sadr. They hear that such men are Muslim or Islamic leaders—but not Shia.

Religion as Politics

DESPITE ITS OSTENSIBLY INNOCUOUS AIMS, AHLI BEIT IS ESSENTIALLY AN IRANIAN political organization that fosters a Shia revival throughout the world. Hezbollah provides a particularly successful instance of this revival, and many of Russia's new Shia are eager to demonstrate their political alignment with it by flaunting a militant, anti-American and anti-Israeli ideology. The Russian journalist Anastasia Fatima Ezhova, who converted to Shiism, is a prime example. A loyal supporter of Ahli Beit, she signs most of her articles under the pseudonym Fatima Hizbulla and maintains a blog on the internet called "The Black Banners of Khorasan."¹² Her slogan, which appears at the end of all her articles, is: "Every day is Ashura, all the World is Karbala."¹³ But none of this has prevented Fatima Hizbulla from having a column on the official Russian-Islamic website www.islam.ru, even though this website is Sunni and quotes those of the Prophet's companions (the *Sahaba*) who are maligned in Shia historiography. Fatima's positions are brazenly anti-Semitic and anti-Western. She openly declares, "I hate Jews. They are filthy creatures, as written in the Quran."

Since the beginning of 2008, Fatima has changed her pro-Hezbollah pseudonym to the more neutral Sister Fatima because of her current unofficial duties as Ahli Beit envoy in the Czech Republic. But she is also waging a virtual war against Israel in her internet community, http://community.livejournal.com/ru_intifada/, where she publishes articles about "Zionists' crimes against humanity"¹⁴ and "Hezbollah's heroic Jihad against Israel."¹⁵ She contributes to her community blog as well under the title "Fight for al-Qods."¹⁶

In one of the articles about the "demonic deeds of Zionists against Palestinians," Fatima recycles information from the official Hamas website www.palestine-info.info to relate a spurious story about "the youngest Palestinian prisoner in Israeli jails"—a baby named Bara, who was born to a Palestinian prisoner in an Israeli prison. Fatima quotes the Hamas source: "Samar Sabih, who was arrested and imprisoned by the Zionists, gave birth to a baby while her hands were cuffed." According to Fatima, Samar remained in handcuffs, even during her Caesarian section, and wasn't able to hold her child after his birth. "Samar's husband, who is also a prisoner in a different Zionist jail, was not allowed to be with her in the delivery room during the most significant moments of their lives." Fatima goes on:

Bara became the third baby imprisoned by Zionists. These babies will never have a proper childhood because they are living in horrible sanitary conditions and without nutritious food. They are constantly

exposed to humiliations because they were born to prisoners and live in jails.¹⁷

Fatima is only one of a growing number of young Muslim converts who have “found the light” while reading the pages of Ahli Beit’s websites. People attract attention because they are ideologically active, but it is the movement’s more discrete members who make the most significant contributions. Two prominent “new Shia” are Fatima’s friends and colleagues Tulencov, of Yekaterinburg, and Taras Chernienko. Tulencov moderates the Shia website www.ek-shia.org, where he publishes articles about Shia rituals, traditions and leaders, such as Musa al-Sadr (a prominent Iranian-born Lebanese Shia religious leader, who disappeared in 1978 at the age of 50) and Hussein Boroujerdi (A prominent Shiite shaykh who died in Qom in 1961). He also publishes biographies of such important religious historical figures as Fatima al-Zahra and the twelve Shia imams.

Of equal if not greater distinction is Taras Chernienko, a Russian convert who uses the pseudonym Abdulkarim Chernienko and apparently writes most of the texts for Ahli Beit’s websites. He is a well-educated polyglot in his early thirties who also translates books and manuscripts of Shia leaders from Farsi into Russian. Chernienko kept a relatively low profile in the Shia community in Russia, although he was their silent companion and head of the Institute of Dialog Between Civilizations in Prague, until the January 2009 Ashura celebrations in St. Petersburg, when his passionate speech to 1500 Muslims made him an Eastern European Shia celebrity.

In many ways he appears to be a Russian-version of Tariq Ramadan, the Swiss scholar-provocateur popular among Muslim youth in Western Europe.¹⁸ Like his Swiss counterpart, Chernienko talks about a new kind of Islam—European Islam (as opposed to the imported Islam that Muslim immigrants brought with them to France, Britain, etc.). Chernienko claims that there is a Russian Islam that traditionally existed in Russia and is now experiencing a renaissance. In an interview on Russian radio’s Muslim program “Saut al-Islam” (“The Voice of Islam”), Chernienko responded to a question about “Russian Muslims” as follows:

Why does this combination of words still sound exotic to people in our country? Because of this exact reason many of my brothers to faith thought about immigrating to an Arab state or at least to a place, where they will be understood. Nowadays, most of these problems are solved due to the growing knowledge of the Russian population about Islam.¹⁹

Chernienko talks a lot about the peaceful and universal nature of Islam, but he never

mentions, either on the radio or in his official publications, that the Islam he practices and offers to new converts is Shiism. He reveals his true attitudes about Shiism and its Islamic competitors only in the relative privacy of his friend Sister Fatima's blog: "Shiites are on a much higher level of Islam than Wahhabis. The difference between the two confessions is similar to the difference between prophets mentioned in the Bible and American preachers that preach in stadiums."²⁰ His opinion about Sufism, which has traditionally had a strong influence on Muslims in Russia, is a little more positive: "Vovchiks²¹ transformed into robots long ago, but the Sufis are still searching for Truth, even though they're on the wrong way.... Sufism is more dangerous than Wahhabism, because it draws intellectuals...."²² Chernienko clearly believes that the Shia must fight the Wahhabis and the Sufis for the soul of every Muslim.

Conclusions

TASHAYU OF EX-SOVIET MUSLIMS IS A PHENOMENON OF ONLY THE LAST DECADE—though it is not unique to Russia and Central Asia. The Arab Sunni world has become increasingly aware of the frequency of tashayu among Muslims elsewhere. In 2006 in traditionally Sunni Egypt, for example, more than a million citizens were registered as Shia. This trend has evoked strong responses from Sunni public figures, including such "ecumenists" as Shaykh Yusuf Qaradawi. Other Sunni states—such as Jordan, Tunisia and Syria—have also shown concern over the number of Sunnis who convert to Shiism. While the situation in Central Asia, and particularly Russia, is different because the majority population is not Muslim, most new converts are nevertheless ex-Sunni Muslims; only a small number are Russians, Ukrainians and the like.

As Iran gains status in the political arena, especially if the Muslim world perceives it as a new nuclear power, tashayu in the Sunni world—including the former Soviet Union—will probably grow even faster. It has been observed that a religion's demonstration of power often attracts converts. After the 9/11 terror attacks, for example, Muslim clerics claimed (and perhaps also exaggerated) that conversion rates to Islam within the United State increased fourfold.²³ And in Russia more than 30,000 new Muslim converts were added to the registration lists after the Chechen terror attack in Beslan.²⁴

During the last two years Ahli Beit has been sending activists and envoys throughout Europe. The movement has a large and growing branch in Germany²⁵ and has expanded its work in Italy. Today Ahli Beit seems intent on reaching every major city in Europe. One of the biggest Ashura celebrations, which was organized by Ahli Beit, took place in London.²⁶

As for Russia, the number of Shia converts appears to be increasing every year, though reliable statistics are lacking. In the absence of these statistics, the observance of and growing participation in Ashura is indicative of where Ahli Beit has become active in Russia. In January 2009, for instance, Ashura meetings and parades were held in numerous Russian cities. Joining Moscow and Yekaterinburg, where the death of Imam Hussein has been commemorated for the last few years, many new cities like Omsk, Chelyabinsk, Nizhniy Novgorod and even St. Petersburg hosted Ashura celebrations. Participants lifted the black banners of Khorasan while calling it a Muslim rather than a Shia tradition. This makes one wonder what kind of Islam will win the battle over the yet non-Muslim Russian minds in the next decade—Sunni or Shite.

The full picture regarding tashayu in Russia and Central Asia remains sketchy, and it is very difficult to estimate the actual number of Shia converts in the region. But it is quite possible that, in addition to Ahli Beit, there are other Shia or Iranian organizations operating in Russia and Central Asia under the harmless label of “local Muslim organization.” It remains to be seen whether the Russian government is truly unaware of the Iranian activity inside its borders or perceives it as a useful counterweight to Wahhabi penetration. It is also uncertain whether it will continue to accept such significant Iranian intervention in the social and religious lives of Russian citizens.

NOTES

1. I would like to thank Dr. Shmuel Bar for his enormous contribution to this work, for his advice, his consultation and support.
2. Shia call Sunnis who become Shia *mustabsirun* (the ones who saw the light).
3. www.ahlibeyt.ru, the official site of Ahli Beit in Russia. This is a paraphrase of the famous verse from the Quran: “You are the best nation that ever existed among humanity. You command people to good and prohibit them from evil, and you believe in God. Had the People of the Book accepted the faith (Islam), it would certainly have been better for them. Some of them have faith, but most of them are evil doers.” (3;110) The obligation to enjoin that which is good and forbid the evil (*amr al-ma’arouf wa-nahi ‘an al-munkar*) is how groups in Saudi Arabia (*moutawa*) justify imposing Islamic norms as they see them. The tradition regarding this obligation is that a Muslim must “command good” and prevent evil, first by his tongue but by the sword if necessary.
4. www.ahlibeyt.ru.
5. <http://www.ashura.com/>.
6. See Shmuel Bar, “Sunnis and Shiites: Between Rapprochement and Conflict,” *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*, Hudson Institute, vol. 2 (September 2005): 87-96. See also Wilfrid Buchta, “Teheran Ecumenical Society (Majma‘ al-taqrib): A veritable ecumenical revival or a Trojan horse of Iran?,” in *The*

- Twelver Shia in Modern Times: Religious, Culture and Political History*, ed. R. Brunner and W. Ende (Leiden: Brill, 2001), p. 349. The use of the concept *ahl al-Bayt* (the household of the Prophet) derives from the hadith al-Thaqalayn in which the Prophet is said to have told the believers that he leaves them two precious things: the Quran and his household. <http://rafed.net/aalulbayt/>.
7. Yazid ibn Muawiyah ibn Abu Sufyan was the second Caliph of the Umayyad dynasty. He ruled from 680-683. He is also notable as an object of Shia Muslim animosity. They reject his legitimacy and condemn his role in the Battle of Karbala, which resulted in the death of Hussein ibn Ali.
 8. Yekaterinburg belongs to the Sverdlovsk oblast (region).
 9. Bashkortostan is an autonomic Muslim republic within the Russian Federation. Ufa is the capital of Bashkortostan. Ufa's population is more than a million; about 400,000 of the population is Muslim.
 10. The "neo-Nouruz" involves Iranian New Year customs: A *haft seen* table is set with seven foods that begin with the same letter in Farsi: *samanoo* (wheat pudding), *sumac* (berries), *serkeh* (vinegar), *seeb* (apple), *sekkkeh* (gold coin), *sombol* (flower), and *sear* (garlic). The Quran, pictures of relatives, pomegranates, colored eggs, 94 pennies, and a bowl of goldfish are placed on the table. Noodle soup is eaten. During the festival the holiday meal is usually held in the local mosques. Other symbolic Iranian features almost never appear in the "neo-Nouruz" celebrations in Russian cities.
 11. A marriage that is established by a signed contract for limited time. This kind of marriage can last for a year or an hour, depending on the will of both sides. *Mut'a* marriages are sometimes used in Shia states such as Iran as a kind of legalized prostitution.
 12. An allusion to the banner of Shia Islam.
 13. <http://fatima-hizbulla.livejournal.com/profile>.
 14. http://community.livejournal.com/ru_intifada/472.html.
 15. <http://www.islam.ru/pressclub/analitika/hizbulla/>.
 16. Quds in Arabic or Qods in Farsi is Jerusalem. It is noteworthy that Fatima uses the Persian version of the name. That is because most of her knowledge about Islam and Islamic issues comes from a Shia-Iranian sources, and particularly from Ahli Beit.
 17. http://community.livejournal.com/ru_intifada/472.html.
 18. <http://www.enlightennext.org/magazine/bios/tariq-ramadan.asp>.
 19. <http://www.sektam.net/modules.php?name=News&file=categories&op=newindex&catid=2840>.
 20. <http://sestra-fatima.livejournal.com/137364.html>.
 21. Russian slang for Wahhabis (an insult).
 22. <http://sestra-fatima.livejournal.com/137364.html>.
 23. *New York Times*, 7 January 2002.
 24. www.islam.ru/newmuslim.
 25. <http://www.muslim-markt.de/wtc/ulfkotte/ulfkotte18.html>.
 26. <http://deyerler.avantajprim.com/ru/texts/articles/currently/30410-mesjac-mukharram-v-londone-video.html>.

Authors

HUSSAIN ABDUL-HUSSAIN

is a visiting fellow at Chatham House in London.

TONY BADRAN

is a research fellow with the Center for Terrorism Research at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies.

DINA LISNYANSKY

is a research fellow at the Institute for Policy and Strategy.

JEAN-PIERRE FILIU

is a professor at the Institut d'Etudes Politiques de Paris.

HILLEL FRADKIN

is senior fellow and director of the Center on Islam, Democracy and the Future of the Muslim World, Hudson Institute.

HASSAN MNEIMNEH

is a senior fellow at Hudson Institute.

KHALID SINDAWI

is a senior lecturer in the Department of Multidisciplinary Studies at the Max Stern Academic College of Emek Yezreel.

\$12.95



CENTER ON ISLAM, DEMOCRACY, AND
THE FUTURE OF THE MUSLIM WORLD
www.CurrentTrends.org

HUDSON
INSTITUTE