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Iraqi Shi'is and the Pressure of Religious Identity: An Attempt to Determine the Meaning of Shi'i Identity[1]

Haider Saeed[2]

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Shi'i Identity in Time and Place

The concept of a "Shi'i identity" seems like a given that many take for granted; Shi'i s are one of the two major sects of the modern Islamic era, and much of the literature defines Islam as a tree with two branches, one Sunni and one Shi'i. But such reductionism is not and never has been appropriate to the subject. On the contrary, the nature of Shi'i identity is difficult to define. That is, what is the connection, or the bond, that allows individuals scattered around different parts of the world to feel the same? Subsequently, does being Shi'i amount to an expression of a belief? Or is it a political claim? Is it an affiliation to a religious doctrine? Is it a denomination? Or a large demographic group somehow tied together? Or something else altogether?

The terms "Shi'i" and then "Shi'ism" underwent many shifts over the centuries before they reached what linguists call semantic narrowing i.e., the reference to a specific group, the Twelver Imamism, among several divergent groups to which the term refers.

The term "Shi'i" has not only been adapted and transformed over the centuries, but also across fields. It is a political expression of the belief in Imam Ali's right to succession. It is also a social/political expression, referring to the space that contained the marginalized and opposition movements. It is also an expression of doctrine (theological) referring a catalogue of beliefs, such as the imamate, the *Maʿād* (Resurrection), *Ghaybah* (occultation) and *Mahdism* (Belief in return of the Mahdi), is an expression of a doctrinal doctrine that has been linked to a juristic institution that has expanded since at least the 7th and 8th centuries AH.

A number of scholars agree that the term "Shi'i" used its conventional form, not long after the death of Imam Hussein (61 AH), referred to the descendants of Imam Ali and his supporters.[3] However, these researchers do not go further in this definition. While it is clear that Shi'ism is a political position, it is not clear whether this took an organized form or not. Whether this organization forms a closed group or a large sect, or something else, has it become a form of collective bonding? Has Shi'ism developed from being a political position to becoming a religious doctrine?

These two elements (Shi'ism essentially being a political movement and an opposition force challenging the rights of usurpers) dominate the Shi'i imaginary, and even the method of understanding Shi'ism and Shi'i movements throughout history, which have been written as a space to oppose authority. Rather, this is what made Shi'ism a protest space or a framework for opposition movements, marginalized groups and so on. Thus, it can be said with certainty

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2 Associate researcher at ACRPS, and editor in chief of the bimonthly peer-reviewed academic journal Siyasat Arabiya, which covers political science and international relations.

3 Kamil Mustafa al-Shaybi, "al-Shīʾah fī al-Lughah wa al-Tārīkh," in: Hasan Al-Amīn (ed.), *Dāʾirat al-Maʿārif al-ʿIslāmiyyah al-Shīʾiyyah* (Islamic Shiʾi Encyclopaedia), 6th print (Beirut: al-Taʿāruf Printing House, 2001), 19 - 21.

that the historical development of Shi'ism was associated with political more than religious factors. The formulation of Shi'ism as a political current and organisation within the framework of theology and jurisprudence, factors that distinguish it from other doctrines, occurred later than other Islamic doctrines.

Shi'i theological doctrine only began to develop in the 4th and 5th centuries AH. The leading foundational writings of the Shi'i faith began only in the second half of the fourth century AH, when the Buyid Dynasty in Baghdad provided a political cover for the growth of this knowledge, which began to mature with that generation of scholars. These included Muhammad ibn Ya'qūb al-Kulayni (died 329 AH), Ibn Bābawayh (380 AH), Al-Mufīd (413 AH), Sharīf al-Murtazā (436 AH) and Shaykh Tūsi (460 AH). However, the major works on different religious sects, schools of thought, creeds and confessions, especially the four canons written by Al-Ash'ari (died 324 AH), Abu Mansūr al-Baghdādi (429 AH), Ibn Hazm (456 AH) and Al-Shahrastāni (548 AH) almost unanimously defined Shi'ism as one of the four main Islamic sects along with the Qadariyyah, the Sifatiyyah and the Khawārij.

In my estimation, this paradox (counting Shi'ism as one of four major Islamic groups without a clear theological theory or standpoint) suggests that the basis for the inclusion of Shi'ism in this context is its political nature. Despite Shi'ism being a political framework, it actually generated several Shi'i sects. This partly explains why the first classifications of Shi'i (and, to a lesser extent, Muʿtazila) authors in the field of sects, schools of thought, and confessions, such as Sa'd b. 'Abd Allah al-Ash'ari al-Qummi (died 299 AH), Al-Hasan b. Musa an-Nawbakhti (died 310 AH), and Abu al-Qāsim al-Balkhi (died 319 AH). In other words, classifying the Shi'i as a sect-like group was a result of the fragmentation or multiplicity of Shi'i sects, all of which stemmed from one political stance and were not a result of Shi'i expansiveness. Notably, the term "Shi'i" at that time did not indicate any kind of communitarian identity. Rather, it alluded to a framework of sects; that is, the general framework under which many sects met. This is what the Encyclopaedia of Islam means by its assertion that the term Shi'i is a broad description for different sects, some of which are conflicting.[4]

Shi'i Identity as a Modern Identity: Articulations the Historical in the Present

The semantic development of the term "Shi'i" and its specific application to the Twelver Imamism coincided with a transformation in their nature, from a small splinter sect to a wider community. The meaning of "Shi'i" underwent deep changes in the centuries leading up to modernity (defined as the establishment of the modern state in the Arab Mashreq). This was due to a number of factors including the disintegration of different Shi'i sects in favour of Twelverism, which acted as the integrative nucleus and the expansion of the Safavid state. Iraq saw extensive Shi'i growth in the 19th century, becoming one of the great — if not the greatest —Shi'i hubs of the modern era.[5] In my estimation, the earliest form of Shi'i identity forming a collective bond dates back to the modern era, and not before.

This study, which is part of a wider work, attempts to understand the dynamics and development of the "Shi'i identity" which has appeared with modernity. This modernity that was born in the West but conquered the world, however incompletely, closed the lid on the past and signalled a new era. Modernity introduced new methods of interaction and introduced a different system of relations.

The concept "Shi'i identity" is put in quotation marks in reference to its novelty and its inclusion in a new system of relations, and most importantly to indicate that it is not an old or organic identity, since it is linked to an *Usuli* jurisprudental school of thought (*madhhab*) and to historical claims of a political nature. Removing the antiquity from the Shi'i identity is important because it enables the exploration of how this identity was re-defined and

4 W. Madelung, "Shi'a," in: C.E. Bosworth et al. (eds.), *The Encyclopaedia of Islam: The New Edition* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), p. 420.

5 Yitzhak Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994).

given substance and how it gained (and still gains) new functions in various contexts. This does not mean that Shi'ism is a new phenomenon without any pre-modern presence, but rather that the "historical" aspect of it has been reformulated and adapted to the new system. The Shi'i identity is a new identity, at odds with Shi'ism, with no meaning in the past. However, its many manifestations gathered under the umbrella of a modern socio-political identity. By "modern", I mean that it is defined by the encounter or conflict with the fabric of emerging identities, national identity or the nation state system, and its movement through that system.

Perhaps some Shi'i individuals, and some institutions, still engage with the "historical", both in doctrinal and jurisprudential debates, but this is not a continuation of the traditions of a historical field. It functions to draw the distinctions of Shi'i identity. More generally, and more importantly, the socio-political nature of the modern Shi'i identity has gradually made it possible to express the historical content of Shi'ism. This means that what can be called the "Shi'i community" is not necessarily determined by a set of beliefs, such as the imamate, the *Maʿād*, *Ghaybah* and *Mahdism* and so on.

Certainly, the relations and connections between the historical and modern identities requires deep theoretical study, but it cannot be said here that history no longer defines or controls the dynamics of modern identity. Rather, the current context and needs call for and use history. Modern identity, the social definition of which is still being drawn, is gradually moving away from its "historical determinants" except where they contribute to the consolidation of modern social and political boundaries.

The areas studied are those with a high concentration of the population expressing Shi'i identity (the Arab Mashreq specifically). Many believe that it is a religious identity with deep holy roots and has not been invented in modern times but has a long history – that it is in fact Islamic history itself.

Shi'ism was a part of the web of identities pouring out of the Arab Mashreq. In Iraq for example, all the political documents related to the establishment of the modern Iraqi state, whether from the British occupation, political actors, the emerging state, used the expression "Shi'i" in abundance to indicate the societal component that embraced one of the main Islamic schools of thought (madhhab) and represented the demographic majority in the country.

In general, however, within these documents the epithet "Shi'is" did not refer to a closed religious group, nor to a group resembling a sect or religious minority, but to a large demographic group whose members saw Shi'ism as a classification and part of their identity. The Shi'is of the Levant define themselves as "Muslims" and "Arabs", and some of their elites were involved in the earliest Arab nationalist organizations. In some cases, the Shi'is, or at least segments of them, were described through regional identities, such as the 1920 revolution in Iraq, in which Shi'is played the largest role. This was known as a "Euphratean" revolution, in reference to the Middle Euphrates region where it had started. Additionally, they were described with what can be called "class identity". The literature of that foundational era talked about poor Shi'i areas and lack of education, and then the incapacity of a significant segment of the Shi'i people to secure political and administrative positions.

The dynamic that was launched by the transformation the meaning of "Shi'ism" and "Shi'i identity" and its position within the web of identities in the region prevail. The meaning of "Shi'i identity" has not been definitively drawn, especially with the emergence of a new feature; the relationship of the Shi'i identity to the nation state and its own identity. This means that there is still a struggle to define the meaning of Shi'i identity in the context of modern transformations, especially given the ongoing attempt, which started in the middle of the twentieth century, to rekindle the religious dimension of Shi'i identity. The main part of this study describes this dynamic and seeks to answer two questions: How did the religious determinant remain fundamental to the Shi'i identity? And why did it remain so, despite all the progress made in constructing a socio-political identity? That is to say that the religious factor in the Shi'i identity is not necessary and axiomatic. Nor is it explained by the fact that Shi'ism is an *Usuli* jurisprudential doctrine. It is rather a path that was imposed by specific choices.

Religious Elites and the Struggle to Define the Shi'i Identity

The authorities of the British occupation and the forces active in establishing the modern Iraqi state established the Shi'i identity as a representative, institutional and key framework for one of the religious and ethnic components to be incorporated into a modern national identity and from there included in building a single (or unified) people based on their belonging to that identity. This division was the first obstacle to integration, according to King Faisal I, who stated: "there is no Iraqi people inside Iraq. There are only diverse groups with no patriotic sentiments. They are filled with superstitious and false religious traditions […] It is our responsibility to form out of this mass one people that we would then guide, train and educate."[6]

Since the term "Shi'i" referred to a social component, the Shi'i elites who were negotiating and managing the Shi'i relationship with the emerging political system at that time were not only religious elites. In fact, the clerics or scholars or *marja's* were, according to Shi'i literature, just one segment of these elites. In general, the Shi'i elites of that stage can be divided into three categories: sheikhs and tribal leaders, elites of cities (elders, a fledgling bourgeoisie, merchants, the middle class, intellectuals and senior officials), and the clergy. The study of this latter category is often characterized by two systematic errors: that the religious elite is reduced to senior scholars and *mujtahids*, and/or it is assumed to be a cohesive, unified group with one opinion. Therefore, the religious elite is not and should not be limited to the *mujtahids* and senior scholars; they should also include all those who belong to the religious establishment, such as young scholars, students, and so on.

This categorization can be deduced from the analysis of the personalities who participated in the 1919 British referendum. They included the Iraqi elites, whose purpose it was to determine the form of government in the country and whether to remain under British administration or to be under Arab rule.[7] Perhaps this is not a new categorization. Many academics have searched for it, whether Hanna Batatu in his general classification of the elite; or Yitzhak Nakash, whose book *The Shi'is of Iraq* is littered with this classification, despite focusing on the elders and the *mujtahids* as the two most important elements among the Shi'i elite; or Faleh A. Jabar in identifying the elites who reared the political Islam project.[8]

Of these three categories of Shi'i elites, personalities would emerge as part of the nascent state and its political and administrative class. Contrary to the impression left by the fatwas of some Shi'i clerics to boycott this state and its institutions, many Shi'i elites were linked to the governing establishment. These included the Shi'i aristocracy, sheikhs, urban elites, and even clerics (Mohammad Al-Sadr, Mohammed Ridhā Al-Shabibi, and Hibatuddin Shahrestani ... etc). Most of these elites advanced Shi'i demands, issues related to the general demands of the Shi'i community (or communities) or expressed positions close to the orientations of this community, thus preserving their legitimacy in representing the Shi'i community.

Abdul Mahdi Al Muntafiki, one of the most prominent Shi'i representatives, ministers and politicians of the royal era, is perhaps one of the best examples of subjecting political performance to the sensitivities of the Shi'i community (or communities). His famous debates, when he was minister of knowledge in the late 1920s, with the then director of public education, Sāti' al-Husrī, focused on issues related to Shi'i history, or related to Shi'i figures.[9] These debates have been appropriated by the narratives of the sectarian history of Iraq as proof of the legacy of the sectarian conflict in the country. Sometimes, these Shi'i elites open up to redefining their disputes with the state on a sectarian basis, such as in the 1935 uprising in which clan leaders allowed purely tribal demands to produce a document entitled "Shi'i demands". It was signed by one of Najaf's senior clerics, Sheikh Muhammad Hussein Al Kashef Al-Ghetaa.

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6 Abd al- Razzāq Al-Hasanī, *Tārīkh al-Wizārāt al-ʿIrāqiyyah* (History of Iraqi Cabinets), 2nd Print. (Sidon: al-ʿIrfān Printhouse, 1965), 286.

7 Abd al- Razzāq Al-Hasanī, *Al-ʿIrāq fī Dawrai al-Iḥtilāl wa al-Intidāb* (Iraq in the Occupation and Mandate Eras). (Sidon: al-ʿIrfān Printhouse, 1965), 71 onwards.

8 Faleh A. Jabar, *The Shi'ite Movement in Iraq*. (London: Saqi Books, 2003), 51.

9 Sāti' Al-Husrī, *Mudhakkarātī fī al-ʿIrāq* (My Memories in Iraq) (Beirut: Altaleaa Publishing House, 1967), 590 - 601.

This led to the reinterpretation of the grievances attributable to the administration of lands that came under the control of tribal leaderships, in an area limited to the central Euphrates, as broadly inclusive "sectarian" grievances, seemingly the demands of the Shi'a, whatever social class or regional affiliations. This is despite the fact that these sheikhs adopted policies and attitudes toward the emerging state that contradicted those of scholars and *marja's*.[10]

The description of these elites as "Shi'is" is not a reference to their origins. Rather, it is a description based on the political and social mobility that these elites have exercised, even if related to Shi'i identity in a way that results in the identities being completely merged. Here, I am positing the idea that confessional or sectarian identities were, at that time, intertwined with political mobility.

This matter is without a doubt theoretically complex. However, a number of important scholars deal with the description of a "Shi'i" without checking, as a reference to origins not as a link between these elites and Shi'i identity to their political performance. Therefore, I think this requires a long theoretical pause; for if Al Muntafiki is part of the Shi'i elite, then is Salih Jabr, the first Shi'i prime minister under the monarchy as well? Is this equally true of Muhammad Fadhel al-Jamali, the foreign minister and prime minister in the 1950s? Then is the same also true of the followers of other schools of thought and sects to the same extent? In other words, does a Shi'i elite mean that there is a Sunni elite in turn, whose movement is based on a sense of "Sunni identity"?

Whatever it was, an important segment of the Shi'i elites lived in the conflict over the relationship between the emerging national identity and Shi'i identity. The motives for choosing one or two identities may have been linked to purely individual or collective interests.

Nakash traces disagreement and discord between the tribal and the Shi'i religious elites, and how this dispute could be developed through the state or the British occupation authorities and utilized by them.[11] In my estimation, the most important conflict here is among the religious Shi'i elites and perhaps it is the real conflict in this area – and a complex one. On the one hand, these elites assumed that they are the source of Shi'i identity, in terms of religious identity, and its protection. Hence, the challenge of national identity tends towards an understanding based on Shi'i identity, while other elites have no problem integrating into national identity, even if it represented the Shi'i identity defined as a social identity. Part of the religious elites' conflict included a confrontation of this definition of Shi'i identity and attempts to undermine it. On the other hand, the national identity fell within the context of the wave of modernization that began to engulf the region. Religious elites, especially the *mujtahids*, scholars and *marja's*, had to confront it in order to establish their powers and authority. Additionally, the national identity challenge had to face religious elites and an ethnically mixed religious establishment, with Iranian scholars constituting the dominant part of the Shi'i religious establishment in Iraq at that time.

In my estimation, the results of this conflict, some of which are contradictory, will have a great impact not only on the fate of the Shi'i community, but on the entire country.

The British, from early on, were scaling back the role of the religious establishment and the Iranian scholars in Najaf. According to the British, the two matters were synonymous. In one corner were the Iranian scholars who were the main leaders of the *Hawza* (seminary) of Najaf. The British feared that they would transmit the model adopted by the pro-constitutional movement in Iran, based on a constitutional civilian state in which the clerics exercised a supervisory role. Their fear was mostly directed towards the role of Mirza Shirazi, who emerged after the 1919 referendum as the most powerful leader in the Shi'i religious establishment in Iraq and was able to mobilize the Shi'i and Sunni elites, who were supporters of the constitution in Iran and opposed to the British. He effectively led the Iraqi revolution of 1920 and formulated the vision later associated with the Shi'i religious establishment about the shape of the political system in Iraq (an Arab Islamic state, led by an Arab prince, bound by a legislative council). If this vision is designed for one of Sharif's sons and interpreted as demanding a

10 Nakash, 163 onwards.

11 Ibid.

"Muslim Arab King", one of the main slogans of the 1920 Revolution, this vision is undoubtedly derived from the Iranian pro-constitutional literature.[12]

Rasul Ja'faryan notes that the Iranian scholars and students in Najaf, on the eve of the constitutional revolution in Iran (1905-1907) and after which, were supporters of the pro-constitutional movement. This includes a group of leading scholars at the time (Akhund Khorasani, Shirazi, Shaykh al-Shari'a Isfahani, Muhammad Hossein Naini, and Abu l-Hasan al-Isfahani). Najaf's support for the constitutional movement was crucial[13] and even Najaf witnessed the writing of one of the most important parallels to the pro-constitutional movement in Muhammad Hossein Naini's book *Tanbih al-Ummah wa Tanzih Al-Milla* (the awakening of the community and refinement of the nations).

However, the turmoil of the pro-constitutional movement provided a basis for a Shi'i political jurisprudence, Najafi in particular, dominated by the constitutional trend over the first quarter of the 20th century. This trend conveyed an idea for governance that was not restricted to the clergy but gave them a supervisory role over a state under civil rule. At that time, this principle was referred to as restricting authority.

This vision, in my opinion, transformed into a paradigm that dominated Shi'i political jurisprudence in Najaf until the present day. Any pivotal changes that have emerged since then are only different versions of the same tendency; both Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr's *Khilāfat al-ʾInsān wa-Shahādat al-ʾAnbiyāʾ* (Caliphate Role of Man, and Witness Role of Prophets) in 1979[14] and Sistani's portrayal of the relationship between the state and the religious establishment in Iraq after 2003. This last vision is the final manifestation of this constitutional trend, as established by the Shi'i scholars in the first quarter of the twentieth century. It is Sistani who revived this trend during the re-establishment of the political system in Iraq after 2003. This paradigm is not necessarily a jurisprudential derivation but a manifestation of this traditional establishment's attempts to confront modernity, and an attempt to fix the limits of its authority.

The Religious Establishment and National Identity

Beyond this constitutionalism movement, the main motivation for the British to confront the Iranian clerics in Najaf was their sense that they were trying to bring an Iranian battle to Iraq. This meant that the Iranian scholars, most of them supporters of the pro-constitutional movement, would act on Iranian motivations in Iraq. That is, they would pursue anti-British motives because of the British support for Qajari rule and the fact that the UK had signed a power-sharing agreement with Iran with Russia, rendering Iran a de facto subject of Britain.[15] The British, seeking to curtail the role of Najaf/Iranian scholars, ended up exiling a number of *marja's*, as well as forcing them to sign a pledge not to interfere in politics.

The Shi'i religious establishment in Najaf has seen huge Iranian influence, at least in its modern history. Most of the leading clerics who built their traditions have been of Iranian origin while Arab scholars had little impact. In the run up to the establishment of the modern Iraqi state, the three senior *marja's* in Najaf, all of whom had Iranian origins, passed away. First to pass in 1919 was Mohammed Kazem Yazdi, followed by Shirazi and Shaykh al-Shari'a Isfahani in 1920. Nakash mentions that after the death of these three *marja's*, there were no senior *marja's* who agreed on their leadership of the *Hawza*, and a division on this matter arose.[16] This was despite the presence of two prominent Iranian *marja's*, Muhammad Hossein Naini and Abu l-Hasan al-Isfahani who were well-

12 Ibid, 116 - 118.

13 Rasūl Ja'faryān, *Al-Tashayyuʿ fī al-ʿIrāq wa Silātuhu bi al-Marjaʿiyyah wa ʾĪrān* (Shi'ism in Iraq and its Relations with Marjaʿiyyah and Iran), (Qom: al-Habib House for Printing, Publishing & Distribution, 2008), 92.

14 Mohsen Kadivar, *Naẓariyyat al-Ḥukm fī al-Fiqh al-Shīʿi: Buḥūth fī Wilāyat al-Faqīh* (Theories of Ruling in Shi'i Fiqh: Studies in the Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist) (Beirut: al-Jadīd Publishing House, 2000), 142 - 145.

15 Mansour Bonakdarian, *Britain and the Iranian Constitutional Revolution of 1906-1911: Foreign Policy, Imperialism, and Dissent* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2006).

16 Nakash, 147

versed in both jurisprudence and teaching at the time. In the 1920s and 1930s, however, the vacuum left in by the exclusion of Iranian scholars in Najaf spurred a historic upsurge of Arab scholars.

The *Hawza* was eventually redefined as an *Iraqi Hawza* with its identity acquired from the emerging state. The *Marja's* who stepped up to the front were labelled second-rate scholars and most were young men who engaged in essential work. They inherited the traditions of the *Hawza* in the way that Iranian scholars had established (a *Hawza* that does not further theocratic theory but intervenes in general political matters at specific moments) and put it in the context of Iraqi national identity. Since then, the political role played by Najaf has been linked to Iraqi Arab scholars (Muhammad Hussein Al Kashef Al-Ghetaa, Abdul Karim al-Jaza'iri, Muhammad Jawad al-Jazairi, Muhammad Rida al-Muzaffar, Muhsin al-Hakim, Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr and others) whether in the 1935 uprising, the May 1941 movement, or later.

Again, Arab scholars played this pivotal role, despite the existence of Iranian scholars, who are classified as more important than Arab scholars on the jurisprudential and Usuli level, such as Naini and Abu l-Hasan al-Isfahani, who was described as the "supreme marja'." The latter, however, as a result of the British intervention, could not play a political role. So Naini, for example, whose book *Tanbih al-Ummah wa Tanzih Al-Milla,* one of the most important documents on the pro-constitutional movement, that constituted a central vision to the movement was written from Najaf, never wrote any work on the political regime of Iraq. Apart from his involvement in the anti-British movement against Iraq and the signing of some statements calling for the independence of Iraq, Naini had no role, and was completely silent from 1923 onwards.[17]

The Arab scholars that arose were not only distinguished by the fact that they were Arabs, but that an important segment of them was nationalist. Some of them had undertaken political activity in early Arab nationalist organizations, or at least were conscious of their Arab identity. The most important segment was made up of people from the families of southern Iraq, not from Najaf or any other holy city. In their study of Shi'i scholars in Najaf, researchers focused on their ethnic origins, especially the Iranian/Arab binary, and did not focus on the class, region, or city roots of the Arab scholars. Did these roots affect the attitudes of these scholars?

In general, it is possible to separate the Arab scholarly families and the Arab scholars themselves between two distinct types: the Najafi scholarly families (al-Hakim, Bahr al-Uloum, al-Sadr, al-Jawahiri and Sheikh Radhi), some of whom are of Iranian origin, and families that migrated from the south of the country to Najaf for religious study (Al Kashef Al-Ghetaa , al-Muzhaffar, al-Jaza'iri and Al-Shabibi).

Behaving with an Arab identity was more pronounced among the second group of scholars. This, I think, is because Najafi scholarly families have been socialized for centuries within a religious institution controlled by the Iranians, while the scholars with southerly origins were not, and came from an environment with a more vibrant Arab identity. They differed in their adherence to the traditions of the *Hawza*. While the Najaf scholars were more adhering to these traditions, southerners were more open to the possibility of modernizing the *Hawza* and its traditions from within.

On the other hand, these Arab scholars are an extension of nationalist and/or local Islamic organizations established in the run-up to the birth of the modern state, such as the Covenant Society and the Islamic Renaissance (Nahda) Society. However, the project to build the Iraqi identity of the *Hawza* did not take real shape until under Muhsin al-Hakim's leadership, in the fifties and sixties. Although many academic studies have written about the al-Hakim era, it seems to me that none of them focused the relationship of the *Hawza* to national identity. I argue here that this path began immediately after the establishment of the modern Iraqi state in the 1920s, when the *Hawza* began to acquire its identity from the state identity and characterized itself through Iraqi identity.

Once again, the exclusion of Iranian scholars and the rise of Arab scholars was a pivotal point in the history of the Shi'i religious establishment in Najaf. However, the controversy that Arab scholars have lived with ever since has produced two opposing movements.

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17 Abdul-Hadi Hairi, *Shi'ism and Constitutionalism in Iran: a Study of the Role Played by the Persian Residents of Iraq in Iranian Politics* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1977).

The first movement I will describe here is the dynamic that was launched after the establishment of the modern state. The *Hawza* itself became a "national" seminary, so to speak, that gained its identity from the emerging state during the al-Hakim era. The rise of the Arab scholars was only a prelude to acquiring the *Hawza's* national identity in a country where the Arab identity is predominant. This will require several actions; foremostly determining the scope of social and political activity that will be an indicator of the identity of the Iraqi *Hawza* and determining the nature of the relationship of the *Hawza* to the emerging state. The area of social and political activity is Iraq, which is different from the area of religious or jurisprudential activity, which is mainly directed to matters of worship, which have nothing to do with national borders. Thus, the relationship remains between the *marja'*, whatever his nationality and wherever he may be, and the *mukallaf* (the religiously responsible follower), whatever his nationality and wherever he may be.

It can be said that Najaf adopted a methodological distinction (perhaps not clearly theorized) between two types of activity practiced by the Shi'i religious establishment: religious and political activity. The scope of religious activity is the relationship between the *faqih* (jurist) and the mukallaf, in respect of religious acts and transactions, and these are not limited to a specific ethnic or national identity. In fact, Najaf's *marja's*, from Hakim to Sistani, have been the most traditional *marja's* for the Shi'is of the world. Political effectiveness on the other hand remains confined to the national political sphere.

However, studies close to the Shi'i *marja'i* establishment always describe the identity of this circle as having a universal identity, transcending ethnic and national boundaries. This ideological perception is provided by, for example, Ja'faryān, an Iranian historian who can be counted as within this circle[18] while the social and political activity of the marja', is not universal, but defined by national boundaries. This involves the *Hawza's* interest in the nature and form of the state. In fact, over the last 80 years, the most authoritative *marja's* in Najaf, Hakim and Sistani have almost only ever intervened in Iraqi politics.[19] This distinction is not clear to many, causing confusion in the understanding of the movement of the Shi'i religious establishment.

Apart from this, the *Hawza* had varying and intertwined relations with some of the state parties. Indeed, some actors within the *Hawza* had started seeking to be part of the emerging state structure. Apart from this, the *Hawza* had different and intertwined relations with some of the parties to this state. Indeed, some of the parties within the *Hawza* had reached the point of seeking to be part of the emerging state structure. Perhaps the attempt by Sheikh al- Muzaffar to update the *Hawza's* religious teachings through the *Muntada al-Nashr*, and then College of Jurisprudence, and linking it with the Iraqi ministry of education is the greatest expression of his desire for the "statization" of the *Hawza*. Therefore, it seems to me that it is part of the conflict between the Arab and Iranian scholars in the *Hawza* of Najaf, and that it is not just an attempt by Arab scientists to wrestle religious teachings from the grip of Iranian scholars, by linking it to the state.[20] On the other hand, the "statization" of religious institutions is not limited to attaching the institution or its structure within the state, like Al-Azhar in Egypt, and the incorporation of Sharia into statutory law,[21] but included attempts by the religious establishment to redefine its identity as part of the state's identity.

On the other hand, it can be said that the relationship of the *Hawza* with national identity was one of the sources of Najaf's — and specifically, the traditional *marja'i* establishment's — rejection of the Khomeinist idea of "*Wilayat-Faqih*" (Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist). The rejection was not just a based on jurisprudential positions and does not prevent the performance of a political role. Rather, it was based on the reluctance to grant a jurist a general mandate to establish an "Islamic government" that would necessarily be known through a specific sectarian identity (i.e. the constitution of the Islamic republic in Iran). This would lead to the demarcation

18 Ja'fariyān, 75.

19 Mohammad al-Shaikh Hadī Al-ʾAsadī, *Al-ʾImām al-Ḥakīm: ʿArdh Tārīkhī Li Dawrihi al-Siyāsī wa al-Thaqāfī* (Imam al-Ḥakīm: Historical Display of his Political and Cultural Role) (Baghdad: Afaq Foundation for Iraqi Studies and Research, 2007), 162 - 209.

20 Nakash, 360 - 365.

21 Sami Zubaida, *Law and Power in the Islamic World*. (London: I.B. Tauris, 2003), 160 - 167.

of the boundaries between national identities and the dissolution of national identities themselves, in favour of one transnational identity.

Thus, the reservations towards *Wilayat-Faqih* included a defense of the Iraqi identity of the Shi'i religious establishment. On the contrary, the trend that supported the *Wilayat-Faqih* was that which redefined Shi'i identity as transnational. Thus, the public/private *Wilayat* binary is not synonymous with the opposition of Najaf/Qom, understanding that there is a parallel between *Usuli* traditionalists or jurists. It is beyond this simplification. This is, in my estimation, is part of the opposition between the two configurations: the Iranian *Hawza*, which along with Morteza Ansari advanced the central idea of managing the confrontation with modernization, and the Iraqi *Hawza*, which was formed in the context of political modernization.

Transnational Religious Identity

While the *Hawza* was dedicated to defining its identity as part of Iraqi national identity, in the early 1950s, a group of young clerics and the sons of *marja's* within the traditional religious establishment were establishing Shi'i Islamist political organizations. This move had a profound impact on other political dynamics related to Shi'i identity in Iraq and culminated in the establishment of the Islamic Da'wa Party, which can be counted as the oldest and most important experience in the Arab Shi'i political space.

The danger and significance of this step is that Shi'i political Islam ends up being an antithesis of what the traditional *Hawza* wanted to accomplish by defining itself as an "Iraqi *Hawza*," in line with the Shi'i elites attempts to make Shi'i identity a type of Iraqi identity. While Shi'i political Islam would end up defining the Shi'i identity as a cross-border identity, broader and greater than Iraqi identity, eventually building a concept of the "religious state", populated or governed by Shi'i Muslims.[22] The goals of Shi'i Islamism, before this juncture, had focused on the demands of a social component within the state of Iraq.

When the definition of identity is placed beyond the borders, the redefinition of similarities and differences begins with a discourse that "discovers" the similarities between the Shi'is of Iraq and the Shi'is of Lebanon and of the Gulf and so on, and the differences between them and the Sunnis of their country.

Here, I try to characterize two successive eras, or two opposing models, which progress simultaneously: The first is the definition of Shi'i identity as a social identity and a type of national diversity. The Shi'i religious establishment identifies itself through national identity by separating the areas of religious and political activity. The second is the definition of Shi'i identity as a religious identity or a cross-border religious association. The religious establishment eliminates the separation between the areas of religious and political activity.

One of the factors of this shift, in my view, is the minoritiy attitude that ruled the movement of the Shi'is, despite constituting the largest ethnic and religious group in Iraq. One of the leaders of the Baath Party, Hani al-Fkeki, described his meeting with representatives of al-Hakīm, who he describes as "the Mujtahid of Shi'i Arab majority in Iraq," after the first Baathist coup in February 1963. He explains that their demands were small and modest and similar to those of the non-Arab minority groups, related to the support of Shi'i religious and cultural institutions, or study methods and allowing the teaching of Jafari jurisprudence, or expanding the appointment of Shi'is in administrative positions, and so on.[23] Consequently, this complex of being a majority group with a minority attitude opened up the Shi'i identity to external forces, a classic dynamic in the behaviour of ethnic and religious minorities.

This shift more fundamentally relates to the failure of the nation-building process and the attempt to present a project offering an alternative to the National League, that does not rely on the restoration of a pre-national identity, which is the sectarian identity

22 This state was embodied in the Islamic Republic of Iran.

23 Hani al-Fkeki, *ʾAwkār al-Hazīmah: Tajrubatī fī Ḥizb al-Baʿth al-ʿIrāqī* (Nests of Defeat: My Experience with Iraqi Ba'th Party) (Beirut: Riad El-Rayyes Books, 1997), 274.

here, but rather opens it to a wider nation. Therefore, the expression of a transnational Mashreqi Shi'i identity is defined as one symptom of crisis for the nation state. This path repeated across the Arab nation states, seemingly inevitably. In a previous works, I have posed that expulsion and genocide are a necessary product of the way in which the nation state was formed. A study of transnational identity as a counter-strategy to nation-building could add that sectarianism is also an inevitable product of the nation State.(24)

By counter-strategy I mean that while the nation state project in the region during the post-colonial era was to bring about a cultural and political conformity between the state and the nation, this conformity is no longer necessary. In parallel with the existing nation state entity, there are interactions and relations that can be called "supra-national". Some of the main actors believe that these links are the "right" nation, even if they do not correspond to the borders of existing states. In other words, many political actors believe that there is a "Shi'i nation", the links of which are clearer and more significant, even if it does not correspond to the borders of existing States, and there is no project to fit them in a State. This composition (a state with supranational links) has become an end in itself, and has started to take some control of the policies of states that have become subject to transnational nations.

The turning point in the redefinition of Shi'i identity in Iraq can therefore be seen as an indicator of the birth of a new generation of Shi'i elites, the generation that established early political Shi'i Islam. This generation is not only different in terms of era, but also in its substance; it transcends the limits of the previous ternary classification, even if it seems to fit one of the categories of the old classification (clergy), since its pillars are the young clergy and the children of the *marja's*.

In this generation, the cleric becomes a partisan political actor, fundamentally different from traditional clerics who take positions of a political nature. This is what gradually produced "Shi'i Islamism" as an independent group that did not form and was not formed by the religious establishment. Although it remains within the framework of what can be called the "religious elite," it in fact expands the boundaries of this elite. Rather, it is possible that this generation is an expression of the conflict within the new Shi'i Islamist elites. The new Shi'i Islamist elite was working on the premise that the three traditional classifications of Shi'i elites had failed to fulfil Shi'i demands.

To be sure, such convictions (regardless of their accuracy, the extent of their realism, and the extent to which they are based on existing societal data) are based on perceptions that develop with the formation of political Islam and remain with it as part of the construction of reality. At the heart of these perceptions is that there is a Shi'i community with unified demands, and there are elites who seek to fulfil these demands, but they failed.

Regardless of whether the struggle of these groups is linked to the Shi'i identity (which is the nagging theoretical problem), or at least was seeking to define Shi'i identity as a type of social diversity, it is certain that the rise of the new Islamic Shi'i elite did not just surpass the previous elites, but also put an end to the historical role of all categories of the Shi'i elite.

On the whole, it can be said that the new elite has brought about three major accomplishments:

- Consolidating the centrality of the religious establishment to Shi'i political activity, which from then on would be confined to the religious elite (and specifically the *marja's*). This new elite was born within the *marja'i* circle. Before that, the religious establishment was one of several elements in the Shi'i political sphere, along with elites of cities, bureaucrats, intellectuals and tribal leaders. However, with the rise of the religious-political elite (or the religious party elite, more precisely), all the former Shi'i elites were phased out, and the former completely monopolized the Shi'i scene. In this sense, the rise of the religious party elite may express the religious establishment's desire to concentrate Shi'i political activism in its own hands, an old trend that may be due to the early establishment of the state or may be resorted to by the Shi'i community since the religious establishment has the for public mobilization.

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24 Haider Saeed, "al-Ṭā'ifīyyah al-Siyāsiyyah fī al-'Irāq 'Inkāran wa I'tirāfan," (Political Sectarianism in Iraq as a denial and as a Recognition), in: Jamal Barout, (ed.) *Al-Mas'alah al-Ṭā'ifiyyah wa Ṣinā'at al-'Aqalliyyāt fī al-Waṭan al-'Arabī* (The Sectarian Question and the Manufacturing of Minorities in the Arab World) (Doha/Beirut: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2017), 501.

- This led to the definition of the Shi'i community as a religious group. In fact, these two issues overlap (the centrality of the religious establishment in Shi'i political activity and the definition of Shi'i identity as a religious identity), and lead to one another. This has been included in many Shi'i speeches and documents since then. In the early 1970s, at the height of the controversy over the political role of the religious establishment and the clergy, Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr (one of the most prominent faces of this generation) refused to differentiate between spiritual and political Shi'ism with Shi'ism the basis of his political movement.(25) If this means the conformity between religious and political Shi'ism, it also means reconciliation between historical and contemporary Shi'ism.
- Finally, the definition of Shi'i identity as a transnational identity, as presented above; where religious identity is not limited by national borders. Shi'i political Islam was working on the sectarian integration of all Shi'i societal groups and placing them in a system that was not a vertical, semi-closed hierarchy, but rather a horizontal structure (at least politically) dominated by clergy.

In sum, there was a complex movement that created a community linked by religious sectarian ties, to formulate a transnational Shi'i identity.

This can be illustrated by the triad of Shi'ism, Shi'i identity and the religious establishment. The three entities can be systematically separated, and thus the forms of interaction between them can be discerned.

Shi'ism is the religious school of thought (madhhab) and the movement or proselytization of a political nature; in the sense that it is a collection of beliefs and narratives about religious history (the Imamate, the *Maʿād*, the text on Ali's caliphate, the Saqifah and the succession of the twelve Imams). The religious establishment is the one responsible for theological and narrative reproduction. The Shi'i identity is a modern one, which describes the groups or demographics that unite, at some point, around the historical narrative of Shi'ism.

Shi'i political Islam has tried to keep the modern Shi'i identity within the framework of historical Shi'ism, that is, within the context of historical narratives of Shi'ism, and defined it as transnational identity. This means that it is based primarily on religious affiliation and religious narrative, which grants the Shi'i clergy the legitimacy to play a central role in Shi'i political activity.

The sectarian issue and the issue of the relationship between the Shi'is and the state and the government have continually been present since the establishment of the state. Often, crises or conflicts with different backgrounds, such as economic crises for example, were re-defined as a sectarian conflict, such as the uprising in 1935. This redefinition would not have enabled these conflicts to take place in the context of a disintegration of the relationship between Shi'is and the state. What happened with the emergence of the fourth elite in the 1950s was not a turning point in the problem of the Shi'i relationship with the state. It did not begin with the feelings of victimhood, but rather the feeling that the traditional Shi'i elites had failed to meet the demands of the Shi'is.

The birth of the new Islamist Shi'i elite coincided with the radical changes that took place in the country after 1958, ending with the establishment of a totalitarian state and military control over the political sphere. The political sphere was closed almost completely during the Baathist era (1968-2003) with the emergence of authoritarianism and one-party rule. Because of the "death of politics" and the dominance of religious elites over Shi'i expression and activity, the nature of the post-1958 Shi'i elites, i.e., elites who express a Shi'i identity, is impossible to conceive and sketch out. There have been no studies on the nature of these elites.

The *Hawza* itself witnessed a lull in the quarter century that followed the execution of Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr in 1980. The history of the Shi'i religious establishment in Iraq only began to move again with the US occupation in 2003. The only exception that broke through the calm of the 1980s and 1990s was the phenomenon of Mohammed al-Sadr, who also came from within the religious establishment.

The most important task of this elite was the establishment of a Shi'i Islamist political party, embodied in the Islamic Dawa Party in 1958. For the

25 Muhammad Bāqir Al-Sadr, *Nashʾah al-Tashayyuʿ wa al-Shīʿah* (Birth of Shi'ism and Shi'is), edited by: ʿAbd al-Jabbār Sharārah. (Beirut/Qom: Al-Ghadīr Center for Islamic Publishing, 1993), 91 - 92. See also: Abdullah Fayyad, *Tārīkh al-ʾImāmiyyah waʾAslāfihim min al-Shīʿah* (History of Imamis and their Shi'i Predecessors) (Baghdad: Asʿad Press, 1970).

first time, a political organization based solely on Shi'i identity is being established. Before that, the Shi'is were active and institutionalized in parties across the board in Iraq. Although the Shi'i political organizations described themselves as "Islamic" and did not use the description "Shi'i," they were almost exclusively limited to Shi'is, and had some connection to the Shi'i religious establishment, gradually focused on the demands of the Shi'i community as well as the adoption of the idea of the Islamic state according to Shi'i design.

It is often said that the Dawa Party was an attempt to create a Shi'i version of the Muslim Brotherhood. However, it appears that the model of the transnational parties has been influential, especially the leftist and nationalist parties. Thus, the Dawa Party did not form as an Iraqi party, as much as it was a Shi'i party, and more accurately, an Arab Shi'i party. There were only a small number of (Arabized) Iranians in the founding leadership and bases of the party. There were Arabs from Lebanon and the Gulf, along with the Iraqis, who played a central role, both organizationally and ideologically. This was the first time that non-Iraqi Arab Shi'is played a role in Shi'i political activism in Iraq. Before that, when there were no Shi'i political organizations, and there was only the traditional religious establishment in Iraq's Shi'i political sphere, there was no role for non-Iraqi Arabs. This means that this (partisan) space is the only space in which non-Iraqi Shi'i Arabs have been able to engage in Shi'i political activism, because this space — and not the political role of the *Hawza* — has dealt with Shi'i identity as an issue that extends beyond Iraq's borders. Thus, while the Dawa Party was closed to non-Shi'i Iraqis, it was open to non-Iraqi Shi'is.

Again, this movement (to redefine the Shi'i identity as a transnational identity) was no different from the corresponding movement (to put an end to the definition of the Shi'i religious establishment through its Iraqi identity), and in fact reveals a fundamental contradiction within the Shi'i community in Iraq, the most explicit expression of which was only in the late 1950s. This contradiction was the conflict between Shi'i identity and national identity; whether the Shi'i community was defined as a sub-identity and social group within Iraqi identity, or as a religious identity extending beyond Iraq. The shift in the definition of Shi'i identity involves a shift between two systems: from "identity politics" to a sectarian system.

Here a distinction can be made between identity politics and a sectarian system. Identity politics constitute political and social discourse and/or action, which is governed by or emanates from feelings of an identity, set apart from or inferior to national identity, to whatever degree. This is usually accompanied by political acts based on national identity. The sectarian system avoids the combination of national and subnational identities in favour of the latter, or, rather, the latter is the basis of political mobility, as if it refuses to recognize national identity and believes that there is a transnational Shi'i identity. This involves the formation of a system based on the collection of sectarian identities; in other words, the elements of this system can be defined only by sectarian identity.

It may be problematic or difficult to determine that this political dynamic is based on a supra-national identity. However, I think that, theoretically, it is possible to draw a line between what can be attributed to identity politics and what can be attributed to a sectarian system.

Identity politics in modern Iraq never ceased. In other words, political action was dominated by, or sometimes influenced by, the feelings of ethnic identity (such as Arab and Kurdish identities) or sectarianism. The response to the law of conscription, or the redefinition of the tribal problem in the Middle Euphrates as a sectarian issue (the 1935 uprising), or the response to Sati' al-Husri, or the struggle to narrate the revolution of 1920 are all examples that reveal sectarian feelings. The sense of the existence of privileges for a community at the expense of another exists and continues. There has always been a charge that Shi'is are loyal to Iran. However these accusations are, in my estimation, just part and parcel of identity politics.

However, identity politics in Iraq was to necessarily result in a sectarian system, which is the emerging alternative to the failure of nation-building. In other words, the transition from the first to the second field may be natural and necessary if there is a defect in the existing system to manage identities. The second field becomes the solution to the first.

The Shi'i identity and the Birth of Shi'i Islamism

Faleh A. Jabar describes the general trends that dominated the study and interpretation of Shi'i political Islam in three basic approaches: The communal approach that interprets it as part of a relationship between an oppressive Sunni minority and an oppressed Shi'i majority; the cultural-essentialist approach that sees it as part of the reactions to the waves of modernization in the postcolonial world; and the conjunctural approach that it interprets through patterns of discrimination and prevailing social and economic conditions.(26)

These approaches are structural and universalist in nature, meaning that they (or some of them) form part of the general approaches to the interpretation of the other movements of political Islam. Subsequent research has adopted approaches that may not be covered by this threefold classification; they are not interested in interpreting the emergence of Shi'i political Islam as much as they are trying to understand its internal action mechanisms, although this in itself may harbour a vision of structural Shi'i relations, especially with the appearance of the concept of transnational networks.(27) In addition, there is greater ability within the approaches that are specific to Iraq, which explain the emergence of Shi'i political Islam through the context of Iraq and do not claim to be universal, fall into the category of the three previous models. One of these contextual interpretations, for example, is that Shi'i Islamism is an attempt by the religious establishment to regain the effectiveness it lost in its confrontation with the British occupation.(28)

One of the factors behind the emergence of political Islam is that the "Islamist activists" sensed that leftist and nationalist organizations were in control of the political sphere, and that Islamic organizations were barely present or absent entirely. This is perhaps more evident in the Iraqi experience because of the size of the presence of leftist and nationalist parties, in contrast to the lack of Islamic organizations. These activists are clerics within the religious establishment, who are concerned about the spread of leftist and nationalist organizations, and lack of an Islamist counterpart.

In fact, there was no Islamist activity outside the framework of the religious establishment until the political elite was created by the Dawa party.

Izz al-Ddin al-Jaza'iri, a cleric who is considered the founder of the first Shi'i Islamist organization, wrote in his memoirs that the post-World War II era saw a shift from the regimes trying to imitate western styles of governance born from the independence from colonialism. However, the struggle in this area, as noted by the al-Jaza'iri, was led by leftist and nationalist elites, without any Islamist involvement. From here, he sought to form an Islamic political organization that could compete with the leftist and nationalist organizations.(29)

The sense of the vacuum of Islamic organizations quickly opened to the role of Shi'is, especially after the establishment of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt in 1928, and the participation of many Shi'is in it, because of the vacuum of the Shi'i Islamist political sphere.

A further systematic debate arises from this discussion. The susceptibility of Shi'i political Islam to sectarian expression has generated widespread academic debate over its definition: Is it an expression of a fundamentalism or of sectarianism in the sense that its main function is to express the Shi'i identity and not a fundamentalist position?

The question of whether Shi'i political Islam is a fundamentalist or sectarian movement implicitly assumes that fundamentalism and sectarianism are "two situations with distinct origins and strategies"(30)

The basic thesis of Joyce Wiley in her book *The Islamic Movement of Iraqi Shi'as* - one of the earliest books on the subject - was to reject the notion that

26 Jabar, 33.

27 Laurence Louër, *Transnational Shia Politics: Religious and Political Networks in the Gulf* (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 2008).

28 Waǧīh Qānso, "Ḥizb al-Dȧwah al-ʾIslāmiyyah fī al-ʿIrāq" (Dawa Party in Iraq), in: Emad, Abd al-Ghani (ed.), *Al-Ḥarakāt al-ʾIslāmiyyah fī al-Watan al-ʾArabī* (Islamist Movement in the Arab World) (Beirut: Centre for Arab Unity Studies, 2013), vol. 2, 2139 - 2140.

29 Jawdat Al-Qizwīnī, *ʿIzz al-Dīn al-Jazāʾirī: Rāʾid al-Ḥarakah al-ʾIslāmiyyah fī al-ʾIrāq* (ʿIzz al-Dīn al-Jazāʾirī: The Pioneer of the Islamist Movement in Iraq) (Beirut: Al-Rafidain Publishing House, 2005), 121 - 122.

30 Juan R.I. Cole & Nikki R. Keddie (eds.), *Shi'ism and Social Protest* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 3.

Shi'i political Islam was labelled sectarianism. She argues that, like all other types of political Islam, Shi'i Islamism emerged as a response to modernity and in search of Islamic fundamentalism. She posed that this supposed "sectarianism" was the product of propaganda,[31] while Jabar saw it as a unique combination of these two situations.[32]

Determining this combination (fundamentalism and sectarianism) is necessary to understand the essence of Shi'i political Islam. Its attitude towards modernization was not a false shell hiding a sectarian core, nor was its transformation to a Shi'i Proselytism movement a display of its fundamentalist core. Rather, they form two sides of the same coin. Fundamentalist Islamism has always expressed a sectarian nature in divided sectarian societies (Syria and Lebanon).

Important here is that even if these factors, in whole or in part, were an overlapping package that led to the emergence of Shi'i Islamism, these interpretations were ultimately not treated as an ahistorical ideology that came out of nowhere by chance in the modern period. Shi'i Islamism has nothing to do with modernity except that it uses its tools, but modernity treats Shi'i Islamism as an instantaneous and modern "reaction", the "ideology" of which concerns theocratic content, rather than the fundamentalism that results from confronting Western modernization.

I agree that the Islamist movements were not created for ideological reasons. They are an expression of a recent endeavour to establish an old Islamic state. There has always been a cultural factor in the emergence of Islamic movements. This means that theocratic ideology is an extension of the cultural factor, not the source of Islamic movements. The fact that Islam is a source of these movements offers many choices (Islam as the opposition to the West, or a dominant identity in the context of multiculturalism, or as a component of national identity, as part of the laws and ways of life, etc.). This means that the theocratic ideology is only one choice and not the only choice when characterizing Islamist movements.

Even if these movements adopt Sharia to stand up to secularism and statutory law, this is no more than a cultural position. In the cases of Turkey and Tunisia, the Islamist movements were an expression of the restoration of the Islamic component of the national identity, discarded by secular regimes that imitated the West. In the case of Islamist organizations in the Arab Mashreq (particularly Iraq and Syria), they were not ideological formations as much as they were sectarian actors, to a great extent, the product of the sectarian context.

Shi'i political Islam (at the forefront of which is the Islamic Dawa Party) presents a narrative about itself claiming that it arose to counter the rising tide of leftism in Iraqi society. The "leftist tide" here means the expansion of the Iraqi Communist Party during the 1950s, despite the Communist Party dating back to 1934 and the early leftist movement in Iraq preceding this date. I think that this narrative must be dealt with seriously, especially given that the greatest manifestation of the Shi'i Islamism (the Dawa Party) emerged immediately after the revolution of 1958.

Taleb al-Rifai, one of the founders of the Islamic Dawa Party, said: "The situation erupted on the morning of July 14, 1958, and politics turned upside down [...] The Communist tide came like a flood, and to this moment we have no organization, and nothing called the Dawa Party, neither the name nor the entity and not even any idea of founding it at all. The popularity of Abd al-Karim Qasim overwhelming, and the strength of the Communist Party was influential in the community, so at that time new tasks were put before us, the first and most important being how we would face this change."[33] Therefore, often discussed is the collusion between the Baath party with the emerging Dawa party, or even with the Najaf marja' community in order to strike down the Communist Party from the end of Qasim era, as reflected in the February 1963 coup and subsequent large-scale retaliation of the Communists.

This narrative can be included in the cultural essentialist approach, according to the classification provided by Jabar. There is no doubt that the main factor behind the emergence of Shi'i Islamism, or the first steps in this direction in the late 1940s and early 1950s, is similar to the basic factor behind the emergence of Sunni political Islam, a reaction

31 Joyce N. Wiley, *The Islamic Movement of Iraqi Shi'as* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1992).

32 Jabar, 44.

33 Rashīd Al-Khayyūn, *ʾAmālī al-Sayyid Ṭālib al-Rifāʿī* (Memories of al-Sayyid Ṭālib al-Rifāʿī) (Dubai/Beirut: Madarek Publishing House, 2012), 123

to the waves of modernization and Westernization that afflicted the societies of the region in the post-colonial era. This is clearly demonstrated in other history books and memoirs written by Islamist actors and clerics about this era, as there was a frequent focus on the need to stand up to the tide of atheism. This means that there was an Islamic fundamentalist component, related to the Islamic identity (not the Shi'i one) that underlies the emergence of Shi'i Islamism.

This factor, however, was not the only one; narratives of Shi'i Islamism itself mention other factors. The idea of establishing a Shi'i party was popular in Najaf in the fifties, as stated by Taleb al-Rifai, who says that Muhammad Mahdi al-Hakim, the son of Muhsin al-Hakim, suggested the idea on a number of occasions in the 1950s. It seems, at this point, that they sought a "Shi'i Muslim Brotherhood". This is certainly one of the factors associated with the emergence of early Shi'i Islamism and its subsequent developments. For years, the Muslim Brotherhood model has been a source of inspiration for the Dawa Party, both in organizational structure and in ideology. Also, the movement of a number of young Shi'is to join Sunni Muslim organizations (especially the Muslim Brotherhood and Hizb al-Tahrir) expressed an attempt to find a political alternative to the dominant currents in the political arena at that time: the communist and the nationalist.[34] Many of them became key leaders or members in the party.

The context in which the idea of a Shi'i party, the timing (the 1950s), and under what pressure remains a fundamental question that is not answered by the aforementioned factors. That moment was not an arbitrary one; it is more than just an ideological confrontation or the "Shi'ization" of the brotherhood model. It is more expansive than the emergence of the Islamic Dawa Party in the late fifties, the most important Shi'i party experience and greater than the emergence of the Muslim Youth Association, the first Shi'i Islamic political organization founded by Izz al-Din al-Jaza'iri in Najaf in 1952.

The question is: Why was the first Shi'i political party was born in 1958, and not before when Iraq underwent huge waves of modernization? When does the expression of Shi'i identity become a fundamental goal of Shi'i Islamism? In which context?

Certainly, there are other factors that are not explained by the categorizations above, primarily regional transformations. The military coups and the fall of the postcolonial regimes (especially in Egypt) gave rise to a feeling that the regime would collapse, requiring the formation of a Shi'i organization to redefine the state.

In his memoirs, Mahdi al-Hakim narrates that his father, Muhsin al-Hakim, "also began to think of gathering Shi'i political figures such as Salih Jabr, [Saad Saleh] Jrew, Dhia Jafar and others, in the interest of collective action. That endeavor was in the early 1950s, before the events of Suez in 1956, because Sayyed felt the beginning of an emergency movement in Iraq."[35]

One of the principle factors here is that Najaf began to develop a clear position on the post-1958 regime. In fact, this position may go back to before 1958, but it was not a unified position at the time and was sometimes contradictory. This contradiction was a result of the conflicting movement within the Shi'i religious establishment described above (the conflict between the "Iraqiization" of the *Hawza* and the Shi'i identity and the perception of Shi'i identity as transnational).

Taleb al-Rifai mentions that Mahdi al-Hakim, who was the most important figure in establishing Shi'i Islamism, complained about sectarian rule. The Second Period of Iraq's monarchy (1946-1958) witnessed increasing talk of sectarianism, despite this era overseeing the expansion of Shi'i political representation. According to Hanna Batatu, the proportion of Shi'i representation in ministerial posts rose from about 18% in the 1920s to about 35% in the second period,[36] which also gave rise to the selection of four Shi'i prime ministers. In addition, this period

34 Ibid, 99 - 159.

35 Al-Hakim Family's Martyrs Center for Historical and Political Studies (ed.), *Min Mudhakkarāt al-ʾAllāmah al-Shahīd Muhammad Mahdī al-Ḥakīm ḥawla al-Taḥarruk al-ʾIslāmī fī al-ʾIrāq* (From the Martyr Allamah Muhammad Mahdi al-Hakim's Memories of the Islamist Movement in Iraq). (n.p: Al-Hakim Family's Martyrs Center for Historical and Political Studies, n.d), 50.

36 Hanna Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq: a Study of Iraq's Old Landed and Commercial Classes and of its Communists, Ba'thists, and Free Officers* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978) 69.

witnessed intermarriage and political links between the royal family and the Shi'i aristocracy.

Thus, the source of this sense that the government was sectarian seems to be a necessary question: does it reflect reality? Did the state consecrate its "Sunni identity", culminating in the project initiated by the Sharifian officers of the mid-1930s, parallel to the expansion of Shi'i representation? Is this feeling a general Shi'i feeling or one limited to the religious elite?

In fact, this perception existed before the 1950s, and within the religious establishment, and was reflected in many documents. These included the fatwa forbidding work in the emerging state institutions, including the aforementioned "Shi'i demands" document, drafted by Al Kashef Al-Ghetaa in 1935. But the perception was not universal and fluctuated at different stages.

In my opinion, the post-World War II period saw Najaf's implicit acceptance of the existing state system, and Najaf did not have any notable role in political events of that time, from the 1948 coup, the Palestine issue, and the execution of party leaders, to the Baghdad alliance, the abolition of the 1954 election results, and the Suez crisis.

To be precise, even if Najaf implicitly believed that the government was sectarian or that Shi'i representation in it was weak, the idea of forming a political reaction to this was formed only by the clerics who would shape political Islam, and the transnational definition of Shi'i identity. It is in this context that Mahdi al-Hakim's complaint should be understood.

The attitude of the traditional religious establishment, not the young clergy, emerged immediately after 1958; the Shi'i religious establishment began to feel that the government had come under the influence of the leftist tide, which had directly emerged through the laws and procedures impinging upon Najaf (notably the Agrarian Reform and Personal Status Law). Moreover, the 1958 revolution blew up the so-called "implicit understanding" between the monarchy and the marja' circle of Najaf.

Therefore, at the end of 1958, the "Committee of Scholars" was established in Najaf, which included the great *marja's* of Najaf. Its principle aim was to confront the revolution and the possible resulting social changes. This committee of scholars is always considered one of the platforms that led to the establishment of the Dawa Party. However, I would draw a fine line between the two sides of this opposing movement. Where the trend of transnational identity is best suited to the idea of a sectarian confrontation, the "Committee of Scholars" fit better within the traditional current (the Iraqiization of the Shi'i identity). In any case, the late 1950s and the 1960s saw a clear negative attitude towards the regime in Najaf, even if this position was derived from different sources.

What is important, here, is that this position was relevant to Shi'i identity; whether stemming from the grievance about a sectarian government, or the actions that affected Najaf directly. The fundamentalist position was mixed with sectarianism; in other words, the sense of Shi'i identity was present throughout this movement, without being central to it.

Thus, the first movement of Shia political Islam was not an expression of Shi'i identity as much as it was an attempt to shape an Islamic fundamentalist trend in the face of Westernized modernization. However, it can be said that the sense of Shi'i identity was present in the basis of Shi'i Islamist logic, especially because of the role played by the marja'i establishment in its origin. The founders of Shi'i Islamism came from the heart of the marja'i establishment. The marja'i establishment acts as a protector of Shi'i identity. If a number of Shi'is joined the Muslim Brotherhood or Hizb al-Tahrir, most of them came from outside the marja'i circle, while the founding generation of the Dawa Party saw it as a mistake that the Shi'is were joining these parties. Mahdi al-Hakim tells how Arif al-Basri (one of the leaders of the Dawa Party, who had been a Shi'i member of Hizb al-Tahrir), came to regret his association with a movement outside Shi'ism.[37]

The sectarian elites had interests in seeking to contribute to (or monopolize) the movement to re-define the state and power after the shocks to the political system. Sectarian identity is the functional area of these elites. This is what happened in Iraq. The approaches that dealt with Shi'i Islamism

37 Al-Hakim Family's Martyrs Center, 38.

have stopped at interpretation without focusing on the (mostly conceptual) tools that it used in its reaction, or the subsequent concepts, perceptions and orientations, without clarifying the implications of the later Shi'i Islamism — the discursive interactions that in turn leave behind frameworks for understanding the world.

Part of these described approaches is the interpretive successor to Shi'i Islamism itself. For example, Peter & Marion Farouk-Sluglett attribute the sectarian approach to Iraq's history, which includes the idea of a conflict between a ruling Sunni minority and an oppressed Shi'i majority, to "most historical and political analyses of Iraq's current and contemporary history" produced by Western academics.(38) Any venture into the documents of Shi'i Islamism reveals that this approach is the manufacture of Shi'i Islamism itself, which adopted the rhetoric of "imbalances" and thus interpreted them as a pattern of sectarian relations between a ruling and a ruled sect.

As much as I care about the interaction between facts and discourse, I will point out that Shi'i Islamism was, like political Islam in general, a protest space. However, this protest space is not a negative entity, but rather it derived a generalized explanatory vision from the facts of discrimination and social imbalances. Thus, attempts are made to frame the social imbalances in a meaningful space. The imbalances interact with a discourse that produces an interpretive vision, and they cannot be seen or dealt with from the outside.

Therefore, in interpreting the emergence of Shi'i Islam, elements evolved into instruments that it would use and develop, particularly the element of identity.

Conclusion: On the Geostrategy of the Shi'i Identity

Clifford Gertz believes that primordial ties, despite standing in the way of nation-building, can offer themselves as an alternative to the nation, strengthened by modernity. They may act as organized forces to seek control of the public domain and the state.(39)

In examining sectarian identities in the Arab Mashreq, it seems more complex than counting these identities. In modern times, these are the same traditional primordial ties enabled with modernity. There is a qualitative difference between the identity imposed by a particular religious denomination and sharing the sense of belonging to a collective association. In fact, it can be said in general that primordial bonds are being radically and qualitatively transformed with modernity.

In the pre-modern world, primordial ties do not stop at specific national borders; therefore, they collide with the nation state as they arise. What ensues cannot be reduced as it adapts to the control of the nation state, but it is reformulated and reproduced. The perceptions about the nature of the relationship between Shi'is of Iraq and successive states in Iran in the early years after the formation of the modern Iraqi state, between Iraqi and Iranian Shi'is, or even the form of loyalty that links them to the successive states of Iran, are common perceptions, and not new, are not related to the emerging state.

So, is the perception of transnational links, expressed by a political party, an extension and evolution of those old perceptions, or something different? Can these perceptions be distinguished?

The two matters are different, in my mind. The decisive factor is the emergence of the nation state as a dividing line between two worlds: the pre-modern world and the modern world.

The extent of overlap and boundaries between ethnic identities are unclear. The features, which would be described as "supra-national" in the 1990s, were common in the pre-modern world. This explains, or helps to understand, the significance of the Qajari Shah's adoption of the responsibility of protecting the holy shrines in Karbala after the Wahhabi invasions of the early 19th century (as well as competition with the Ottoman Empire). The reaction of the Ottoman state is based on a security approach, not on the principle

38 Peter Sluglett & Marion Farouk-Sluglett, "Some Reflections on the Sunni/Shi'i Question in Iraq," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 5, no. 2 (1978), 79.

39 Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 255 - 311.

of "national loyalty".[40] When the new nation states in the region, at the turn of the twentieth century, based their national identity on a specific ethnicity (Arab ethnicity in the case of Iraq), the new process of establishing national borders began, along with ethnic borders. So too came the distinction between the Iraqi and the Iranian, the Persian and the Arab.

In my opinion, the overlap that occurred, in some cases at the beginning of the formation of the state, between Iraqis and Iranians, and reactions to it, or even the campaigns questioning the loyalty of Iraqi Shi'is, and the extent to which these campaigns were accepted and politicized is all part of the long process of drawing these borders. In addition, this is based on a long legacy of overlap and indistinct boundaries between ethnic identities in the pre-modern world. (I do not say a long legacy of supra-national relations, because I do not want to describe the past through the language of a future phenomenon). Thus, the idea of transnational Shi'i identity, adopted by Shi'i Islamism, was not an extension of this inherited overlap from the ancient world. Rather, it was based on another model, namely, the introduction of transnational identities as an alternative and a rival to national identity.

Moreover, the birth of a transnational identity removes it from the factors that gave rise to its birth in the first place, both internal and structural, and begins to create its geostrategic context. The development of identity begins with external factors, not only internal, without closing the debate on the relationship of this identity to national identity.

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