

FOREIGN INFLUENCES ON AMERICAN SHIISM

By: Dr.Liyakatali Takim,

Muslim World, 00274909, Fall2000, Vol. 90, Issue 3/4

The composition of the American Muslim community is far from homogeneous. In fact, 'American Islam' is a mosaic of many ethnic, racial, sectarian, and national groups. Scholars who look at Muslims in America as a monolithic entity often neglect the various nuances that characterize the diverse Muslim population here. The growing presence of the American Muslim community has led to increased interaction between Muslims living here and those abroad. Globalization and improved modes of communications have further allowed foreign ideas to flow freely, enabling foreign accretions to permeate the lives of American Muslims.

This paper examines exterior influences on American Shi'i Muslims. Furthermore, the paper assesses the impact of the imported Shi'i heritage on the definition of Shi'ism in the American context. It also examines how foreign factors have helped to shape Shi'i institutions in America and how the Shi'is have drawn on their spiritual leaders based in the Middle East to form a cohesive milieu in America.

I have divided the kinds of foreign influences on Shi'i Muslims into three categories: political, religious, and cultural. Politically, Islamic resurgence in the Middle East has impacted popular Islamic thinking in America. Political movements with distinct ideologies are able to disseminate their views more productively in America than in their own countries, where they are often violently suppressed. Thus, many movements in the Middle East have seen the West as potentially fertile ground for the growth, development, and expression of their ideas.

The movements include dissident groups such as the anti-Iranian Mujahidin khalq, anti-Iraq and anti-Saudi groups. The thought of such Shi'i political activists as Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr, Imam Khumayni, and 'Ali Shari'ati is embedded in the consciences of American Shi'is by their followers, many of whom operate in the Islamic centers.[1] As will be discussed, the political and religious views of another prominent Shi'i scholar, Ayatollah Fadhallah, have been circulated in Islamic centers and over the Internet.

Political alliances abroad also influence the postures adopted by different Shi'i centers in America. The Islamic center of America in Dearborn, Michigan, supports the cause of the Lebanese-based Harakat Amal whereas the Majma' is more closely affiliated to the politically active Hizb Allah movement.[2] The Hizb al-Da'wa, a politico-religious movement opposed to the Iraqi regime, has recently purchased a mosque in Dearborn. This center (called The Islamic Cultural Center) has been partially financed by Ayatollah Fadhallah. His call for resistance to injustice is propagated in such centers. Another center called the Majlis is Iranian influenced. Due to this, it stipulates a strict dress code and adopts a more rigorous interpretation of Islam.[3]

The American government often assists political movements that promote its interests. For instance, the United States is expected to announce a program of T5 billion to assist groups opposed to the present Iraqi regime. For the first time, the plan might include support for Iranian-based Shi'i groups like the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq.[4]

The Role the Marja' al-Taqlid in America

The Shi'i experience in America is characterized by the influence of the Shi'i religious leadership, which derives its legitimacy from the institution of marja'iyya. A **marja'** is the most learned juridical authority in the Shill community, **whose rulings on the shari'a must be followed** closely by his adherents. In the absence of the twelfth Shi'i imam,[5] **the marja' assumes the responsibility of re-interpreting the relevance of Islamic norms to the modern era.** He is thus able to influence the religious and social lives of his followers. The process of following the juridical edicts of the most learned jurist is called taqlid (literally, "imitation"). The maraji' (plural of marja') appoint financial and religious deputies to act as their representatives in America. This has enabled community members to engage in projects that provide religious education for the Shi'i community in America.

Increasingly, Shi'i maraji' living in the Middle East have recognized the need to foster closer ties with their followers in the West. **Besides establishing centers, they have sought to meet the challenges of modernity by being more accessible to their followers in America,** sending emissaries to visit them. Thus, the prominent spiritual leader in Iraq, Ayatullah Seestani, regularly sends his agent al-Sayyid Murtaza Kashmiri to the West to monitor the progress and report on the needs of the community.

In recent times, a distinct genre of **juridical texts** called the mustahdathat literature has emerged from the Shi'i theological centers of **Qum** (Iran) and **Najaf** (Iraq). What is novel about these texts is that they evince increasing attempts by the maraji' **to respond to issues affecting the lives of Shi'is in the West.** The literature is a collection of a marj's responses to questions posed by his followers in the West. For instance, a question was posed to Ayatullah Seestani concerning the direction of prayer from North America. In the early 1990s, some Muslims prayed facing towards the **southeast** whereas the majority prayed towards the **northeast.** Interestingly, Seestani's ruling differs radically from his predecessor, Ayatullah al-Khu'i.[6]

Questions posed to Seestani and other ulama clearly reflect the challenges that confront American Shi'is. Thus, Seestani was asked about such things as the **genre of music** that Shi'is are permitted to listen to (halal music), **consuming food products** that contain **gelatin,**[7] **offering prayers in a space craft,** the permissibility of having **test tube babies,** and **praying and fasting** in places that have extremely long days or nights.[8] He was further asked whether it was permissible to **rely on DNA test** results that indicate a child was born out of wedlock. Even though there is no authoritative precedence in the normative texts, Seestani says: "Whosoever shall **attain certainty** through other means, be it through blood test or any other means, **should feel free to act upon it.**" Seestani

cautions that such a test is not a legitimate means of determining adultery and that the Islamic penal code will not be applicable based solely on DNA results.[9]

The need to address the younger generation residing in the West is further illustrated by the title of a recently published book, **A Code of Practice for Muslims in the West** in Accordance with the Edicts of Ayatullah al-Udhma as-Sayyid 'Ali al-Husaini as-Seestani. Here, such issues as **masturbation, homosexuality, and viewing pornographic pictures and films** are discussed quite explicitly.[10]

A **religious figure** who has become increasingly **popular** among many Shi'i youths is the **Lebanese marja' Ayatullah Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah**. His popularity in the West is **based on his greater accessibility to the laity**. In fact, it is possible for Muslims in the West to converse with him directly over the phone.[11] Fadlallah is also popular because of **his acquaintance with Western culture. He maintains that Muslims must understand the internal dynamics of Western civilization**.[12] The Islamic movement, he argues, is not to be confined to the Middle East; rather, it is to disseminate its teachings through peaceful means in the West.[13]

Fadlallah is more popular with the youth than other ulama because his religious edicts (fatawa) are more pragmatic and lenient. Contrary to Seestani, **he allows the shaving of the beard**. He argues that the ruling given by classical scholars regarding the requirement of keeping a beard has to be properly contextualized. **Their edict was predicated on the need to differentiate between Muslims and Jews**. This, Fadlallah says, is restricted to cases **in which Muslims are in a minority and others in a majority**. He further states: "It is understood from the hadith[14] that the prohibition of shaving the beard was contingent on a time-related issue at the beginning of the Islamic message." [15] Fadlallah also differs from Seestani in that **he allows playing chess**.[16] His liberal views can be discerned from the fact that he even allows men and women to masturbate **provided it does not lead to ejaculation**.[17] He also permits the viewing of pornographic material **under exceptional circumstances**.[18]

Fadlallah has written books that deal exclusively with youth and women, addressing issues that directly impact Muslims in the West. In his *World of Our Youth*, he quotes a tradition from the first Shi'i Imam 'Ali b. Abu Talib exhorting parents to **raise their children based on the needs of the time**. Fadlallah further calls for a re-evaluation of the traditional Muslim view on sex, saying that it is **necessary to impart sex education to Muslim youths**. Contrary to popular belief, he says, Islam does not regard it as dirty or an affront to a woman's dignity.

Fadlallah's discourses are bound to lead to a re-evaluation of gender issues in the West. He maintains that gender inequalities in child rearing are predicated on cultural, not religious constructs. Traditionally, he says, a girl is made to assume responsibility for the family's collective virtue in a manner that is not expected of a boy. "This kind of rearing is incorrect. **Virtue is an Islamic requirement equally of the male and female. Individually, chastity is required from the boy and the girl**." [19]

Fadlallah's appeal to Muslims in the West also lies in the fact that some of his views are in stark contrast to those held by the majority of the Shi'i ulama. Some ulama consider polytheists, atheists, and idolaters to be ritually impure (najas). Thus, their food cannot be consumed. Fadlallah disagrees, saying that in essence, no one is impure. [The impurity, he argues, lies in matters of beliefs, not in essence.](#)[20] Hence, he rules that even Hindus and Buddhists are ritually pure and that their food may be consumed.

Fadlallah also has a web site in Arabic and English where his Friday sermons, questions, and answers are posted. Issues that impact Muslims in America are evident in some of the questions posed to him. When questioned about the permissibility of [cloning](#), Fadlallah replied:

As for whether we should permit cloning or consider it unlawful, we believe that it is permissible to clone animals if it is to the benefit of mankind, such as cloning animals to produce organs that we want to implant in a patient who needs a heart, an eye or a kidney, so that we can do away with taking organs from living or dead human beings. [As for cloning human beings, it is an issue that demands extensive studies.](#)

Therefore, this is a dynamic issue that has to be studied in the light of future data, and we might be one of the few who did not issue a judgment considering cloning unlawful.[21]

[The influence of the maraji'in America extends in different ways.](#) For example, in 1989 Ayatollah al-Khu'i offered several million dollars to the Islamic Center of America, the Jami', to build an Islamic school in Detroit. The school was to be under the jurisdiction of the New York based al-Khu'i Foundation. The offer was declined by the Jami' because the board members wanted complete control over the school. Another center in Detroit, the Majma', accepted the offer and now represents the al-Khu'i Foundation.[22]

The maraji's impact in America has been further enhanced in places where [refugees from Iraq](#) have settled after the Gulf War. It has to be remembered that since many Iraqis originate from the holy Shi'i cities ('Atabat) of Kerbala and Najaf where the mardji' reside, the refugees tend to be more religiously inclined, thus imposing their religious commitments on Shi'i institutions here. Whereas some second generation American Shi'i may be lax in adhering to the fatawa of the marja', most Iraqis follow their edicts strictly, imposing these on American centers.[23]

By seeking to enhance religious awareness, the maraji' exert considerable influence on the lives of American Muslims. Most of the religious centers affiliate themselves with different maraji'. Khoja, Pakistani, and Iraqi centers [generally follow the rulings of Ayatullah Seestani](#), whereas Iranian centers follow the taqlid of Ayatullah Khamenei. Lebanese Shi'is tend to follow either Ayatullah Fadlallah or Seestani. Traditional differences generated abroad between the camps of the Ayatollahs have resurfaced in America, engendering further fragmentation within the Shi'i community.

A comparison with the Sunni experience in America indicates that the latter is influenced by mass movements from the Indian sub-continent and the Middle East that permeate

Muslim life, using mosques as bases for their activities. The goal of Sunni movements such as the **Tablighis** and the **Jamaat Islami** is to urge Muslims to follow the sunna of the Prophet and his early companions.[24] The **Shi'i** experience in the West is somewhat different. Rather than proselytization through mass movements, there is a definitive emphasis on following the edicts of a marja'in American Shi'ism. This is because the marja'is viewed as the representative of the twelfth Imam in his absence.

The Khutaba' in America

Apart from the Shi'i ulama, Shi'is in America are also influenced by a class of popular preachers (khutaba') who visit the community, especially in the months of **Muharram and Ramadan**. The commemoration of the martyrdom of Husayn b. 'Ali, the grandson of the Prophet, in the month of Muharram has provided the khutaba' the principal platform from which to communicate Shi'i teachings to the populace. **At no time of the year does a Shi'i speaker have such an audience as at the time of Muharram.**

The khutaba' are often itinerant preachers who use the mosques as bases for inculcating Islamic values, bringing forth what they perceive to be normative Islam, encouraging public demonstration of piety and seeking to reinforce established patterns of behavior like communal segregation of sexes. The khutaba' have been specifically trained to recite eulogies of the Imams, recounting their sufferings and persecution through history and evoking the feelings of their audience by delivering emotionally charged sermons.

The khutaba' forge a link between Shi'is abroad and those in America by bringing with them ideas conceived in their countries of origin. **Some of them act as representatives of foreign political movements; others echo the views of thinkers in the Middle East. Iraqi khutaba' narrate stories about the Imams and deliver the message of the maraji' to their followers.** They also recount the horrors endured by the Iraqi people under Saddam Hussein. In many communities, female khatibat are imported to lecture to the women in the mornings.

Some khutaba' regularly engage in anti-Sunni polemics. Although this genre of preachers is able to cater to the immigrant adult population by appealing to their emotions and reinforcing long-held views on history, it has alienated the younger generation and the intellectually inclined within the community **who view such topics as irrelevant to their needs in America.** It is in this context that we need to examine **the importance of the religious gatherings in molding the lives of the Shi'is** in America.

Majlis and the Formation of a Shi'i Identity in America

Besides the major foundations established by the Ayatullahs, centers have been founded to serve local Shi'i communities. It is in these centers that commemorative gatherings (majlis) are normally held. Historically, these gatherings have been used to recount the persecution endured by the Shi'i Imams, evoking, thereby, the emotions of the audience. **The role of these gatherings in regulating the socio-political and religious lives of Shi'i Muslims in America** must be properly understood. An inherent element in Shi'i religious

experience is the glorification of the martyrdom of Husayn. This experience provides Shi'i leaders with a favorable channel for mobilizing the populace. The *majlis* (plural of *majlis*) are normally held at the *Husayniyyas*, where a number of functions are carried out, including devotional rituals, community education, marriages, and preparation of the dead for burial.[25]

Although lectures are held at the *Husayniyyas* throughout the year, the Shi'i faithful congregate in large numbers in the month of Muharram, the month when Husayn was killed. It is in the *majlis* that the *kbutaba'* often re-enact the events of Kerbala, reviving devotional feelings for the family of the Prophet, and discussing the challenges of living in a secularized Western society. As Schubel states: "The remembrance of the battle of Karbala as a significant historical and religious event is crucial to the way in which Shi'i Muslims maintain their unique identity within the larger ummah. The importation of rituals for the remembrance of Karbala has also facilitated the community's adaptation to the Canadian environment. The remembrance and re-creation of Karbala allows the Shi'i community to claim space in North America that is both North American and Islamic: they thus Islamize elements of North American culture while creatively adapting Islam to the North American environment." [26]

The exposition of highly developed polemicized discourses and repeated affirmation of the historical injustices endured by the progeny of the Prophet helps mediate Shi'i Islam to the younger generation. The *majlis* also seeks to prove the verities of Shi'i beliefs and liturgical practices so as to forge and perpetuate a distinct Shi'i identity in America. This didactic function is indispensable to a religious minority that is required to defend its beliefs regularly from the assiduous attacks by the Wahhabis in America.

By linking events in Kerbala with contemporary society, the *majlis*, although imported from abroad, acts as a source of moral edification, teaching young American Shi'is that Shi'i sacred history demands allegiance to the family of the Prophet, even in a non-Muslim environment. Thus, the *majlis* becomes an important tool in perpetuating Shi'i heritage and ethos. The *majlis* also provides the leadership with an important vehicle to bring about the necessary adjustments as this religious minority strives to assert its identity in the midst of the challenges of a pluralistic society.

Powerful rituals accompany the *majlis*. These foreign rituals bring alive a historical moment filling a spiritual void that is engendered by living in a secularized ambiance.[27] The ritual encounter with Kerbala allows the believer to experience Kerbala in America, precipitating individual and communal reflection insofar as it challenges the believers to base their demeanor on the paradigmatic actions of the Shi'i Imams. It is the Muharram rituals that give American Islam a distinctly Shi'i coloring, for they differentiate Shi'is from Sunnis and all other Muslim sects.

Some communities perform these rituals in public, distributing, in the process, literature about Islam. Public re-enactment of Kerbala enables the community to make statements regarding its identity. Thus, what is inherently a re-enactment of a historical event is used to remove Western misconceptions of Islam. By observing the Muharram festivities in

public, Shi'is utilize the occasion to foster a better understanding with their non-Muslim neighbors.

The Muharram rituals that originate abroad are also used to forge Shi'i identity in America. In a survey I conducted in 1996, one of the institutions clearly linked fashioning a Shi'i identity with observing Muharram rituals. It proudly stated: "We were the first to take out **julus**[28] in North America." Other Indo-Pakistani Shi'is link their identity to performing acts of flagellation and to practicing **tabarra** (dissociation from and cursing of the first three Caliphs). For some Iranian groups, Shi'i identity is connected to observing an **appropriate dress code**.

However, not all communities accentuate their Shi'i identity. A question in my survey was related to the tension experienced between maintaining a distinct Shi'i identity and being a Muslim in America. It is noticeable that centers located in areas where there is a small Shi'i population are more willing to identify themselves with the larger Muslim community than those Shi'is living in places like New York or Washington, where support from the community is greater. Thus, one center said: "Whilst our mosque is Shi'a, our doors are always open to all Muslims. This is necessary in such a small community." While not denying their Shi'i penchant, smaller communities are more likely to downplay their Shi'i predilections than larger ones. This is also done to overcome the disadvantage of being in a double minority status, that is, Shi'i Muslims are not only disadvantaged (and thus in a minority) because they are Muslims but are further discriminated against because they are Shi'is.

It is to be remembered that the challenges facing the Shi'is in America are greater than those facing the Sunnis. This is because the Shi'is seek not only to assert their **Islamic identity** in the West but also to maintain their own distinct **Shi'i identity**. It is the Muharram rituals that help to affirm the latter.

Foreign Cultures in Shi'i Centers

Muslims in America are also subjected to external influences through cultural forces. Many immigrants continually reach out to their homeland for social and cultural reinforcement so as to perpetuate the ancestral traditions they brought with them.

Instead of forming religious organizations in America based exclusively on Islamic provenance, Muslims have stressed other characteristics of identity such as **ethnic, cultural**, and even national influences. The process of ethnicization, involving linking a specific population to distinctive cultural characteristics,[29] is important to many communities as it unites communal members and perpetuates customs imported from the home country. Thus, mosques have tended to fragment along ethnic lines, and the leadership has remained tied to customs developed in home states. In the processes of cultural negotiation, re-definitions and re-appropriation of a different culture, members of the Shi'i community have pursued different ways to adapt to the American milieu.

Iraqi Shi'is who sought asylum in North America after the Gulf War renew ties with the homeland, importing, in the process, their own distinctive culture. They often chide secularized Shi'is, leading to further altercations both within and between centers. In addition, having lived in areas like Najaf and Kerbala where the maraji' reside, **Iraqi Shi'is bring with them a deep sense of religious commitment that is not always shared by Iranian and Lebanese Shi'is.**[30] **The Lebanese originate from a more pluralistic and tolerant background** whereas many **Iranians have been influenced by the Shah's modernization and Westernization programs.** Hence their cultural outlook is quite different. The diverse imported cultures have precipitated "ethnic centers" in America, alienating Shi'is originating from different cultural backgrounds. To cater specifically to the Iraqi Shi'is, for example, a separate Iraqi center appropriately called the "Kerbala center" was established in Dearborn after the end of the Gulf War.

The importation of extraneous cultures has engendered considerable tensions within the Shi'i community. These tensions are discernible in the running of the centers. My survey of Shi'i institutes indicates that in many centers, services are conducted along the same lines as in their own countries, with little or no concern for the needs of the members in this milieu. The imposition of an alien culture in the centers has estranged the youths in the Shi'i community. **Programs held at the centers do not generate interest even among their own ethnic members.** The "intellectually inclined" adults and the younger generation reject the ancestral traditions and demand changes in the format of the programs offered. Due to the linguistic problem and the ritualization of religious services, many members of the community are estranged from the mosques. This observation is corroborated by the fact that the average crowd for Thursday night lectures in many centers is only 20-30 people.[31]

The problems engendered by the imposition of extraneous cultures and lack of participation by the younger generation in the centers have concerned many parents, leading to a re-examination of the types of programs offered in the centers. My survey indicates that **most institutions view the establishment of youth programs to be among their most pressing needs.**[32] Seventy percent of the institutions interviewed said they plan to organize events that would attract the younger generation within the community. However, many seem perplexed as to how to attract the youths to the centers. A remark in one of the responses is worth noting: **"Muslim youths are more attracted by American rather than traditional Muslim events.** Thus they are more likely to be attracted to retreats, recreational camps, picnics and debates than sermons and prayers." Youths reject what is posited as "normative Islam" imposed by the adult immigrant community. They are more concerned to differentiate between culture and religion leading to a paradigm shift from an old, culturally imposed mentality to a distinctly American mindset.

Tensions generated by intergenerational differences are further exacerbated by the fact that many Muslim youths are now trained in universities and colleges where they appropriate a distinctly American culture and are exposed to ideas that challenge traditional concepts. In addition to there being no interaction with preachers in the centers, the lectures are either delivered in languages that are alien to the youths or are in the form of repetitive and highly polemicized discourses, quite distinct from the much more objective intellectual challenges the youth are accustomed to in the universities.

It is important to bear in mind that the cultural factor is more accentuated in Shi'ism than Sunnism. Whereas Sunni religious events are confined to prayers at which Muslims from different ethnic backgrounds congregate, the Shi'i calendar is punctuated with events marking the births and deaths of Imams. Shi'is who congregate at the Husayniyya are divided along ethnic lines, with Pakistani Shi'is marking events like the death of Husayn b. 'Ali differently from the way that Iraqi or Iranian Shi'is do.

[Shi'i-Sunni Relations in America](#)

Relations between Shi'is and Sunnis in America have been contingent on political circumstances in the Middle East. In 1963, the [Muslim Student Association](#) was formed by students at the University of Illinois-Urbana. An important feature in the formative period of the organization was that commitment to Islam overrode sectarian considerations, with Sunnis and Shi'is worshipping together. In fact, four early MSA presidents were Shi'is.[33] Up to the late 1970s, Sunnis and Shi'is often worked together, holding joint programs in the MSAs and even in the mosques. [Yasin al-Jibouri](#) recalls that in the 1970s, he could deliver sermons and lead prayers in a Sunni mosque despite his Shi'i affiliations.[34]

Gradually, the MSA has been influenced by events abroad. Recent ideological battles between Saudi Arabia and Iran have led to Shi'is being marginalized within the MSAs. Many Shi'i students complain of enduring religious discrimination, of being barred from participating in MSA activities, and of Imams reviling Shi'is in Friday sermons. The fragmentation of the Muslim student body has often resulted in altercations between Shi'is and Sunnis on many campuses, leading Shi'is to establish parallel student groups in some universities. Shi'i students at the University of Toronto, for example, founded their own [ahl al-bayt organization](#). In some campuses, Iranian students have created the Muslim Student Association Persian Speaking Group (MSA/PSG).

[Saudi-Iranian political battles in the Middle East have impacted American Muslims in different spheres](#), creating animosity between Shi'is and Sunnis here. Political and religious differences in the Middle East have been transposed into Sunni-Shi'i religious disputes in several MSAs, mosques, prisons, and on the Internet. Polarization within the Muslim community has been further exacerbated by the influx of conservative immigrants. Immigration has resulted in the spread of a conservative spirit in many institutions, accentuating sectarian divisions and disputes between the two schools of thought. [Both immigrant communities have brought their own bitter experiences and prejudices](#). Hence, there is a tendency to replicate what prevailed abroad, making America a battleground for sectarian differences.

[Within the prison system](#), Shi'i inmates report widespread discrimination. Many of them complain that Shi'i books kept in the libraries have been removed by Sunni inmates. The acrimony has often led to physical confrontation within the correctional facilities and to some inmates being placed in isolation 'boxes.' Shi'i inmates now demand lectures that reflect their own faith and the right to perform rituals according to Shi'i law.

Political and religious disputes in the Muslim world have been globalized, impacting Muslims in America. Identity issues and sectarian interests have fragmented American Muslims into various groups, preventing them from interacting on a common platform.[35] The competition and attrition abroad are replicated here, leading to a rise in sectarian literature. Anti-Shi'i literature such as [Khutut al-Areedha](#) and [Up from Shiism](#) has been widely distributed in America.[36] The Shi'is have responded by translating and circulating the works of [Muhammad Tijani](#), a Tunisian born Sunni convert to Shi'ism, whose first work entitled [Then I Was Guided](#), has had remarkable impact in converting Sunnis to Shi'ism in America.

Shi'is complain that their precepts and praxis are attacked more by Sunnis than by non-Muslims. Thus, for American Shi'is, the challenge is two-fold: to ensure both that the younger generation is not assimilated to the West and that Shi'is are not influenced by anti-Shi'i rhetoric. Within the Shi'i community, there is greater concern with maintaining a distinct communal and sectarian identity than with reaching out to others. It is correct to say that [the primary focus for Shi'is in America is the preservation rather than extension of their religious and spiritual boundaries.](#)

Both Sunni and Shi'i Imams have tried to diffuse sectarian tensions. Many Sunni-Shi'i conferences are held in which members of both communities are invited to participate. Although a Shi'i, Imam [Mustafa al-Qazwini](#) interacts regularly with Sunni Imams. He is a member of the [shura council](#) which is composed of seventy Imams from both Sunni and Shi'i mosques. Imam al-Qazwini sometimes invites Sunni Imams to speak at Shi'i events in his mosque in Orange County, [California](#).[37]

[Leaders within both communities are anxious to unite the two groups.](#) At a recent banquet held by the weekly newspaper Muslim Observer in Detroit, a Sunni Imam led the evening prayers. To emphasize the ecumenical goals of the newspaper, a Shi'i Imam led the night prayers later on.

[Iranian Influence in America](#)

A study of Shi'ism necessitates the examination of the [role of Iran in America](#). The impact of the Iranian revolution has been felt in America in different ways: through the influx of Shi'i immigrants, through the Internet and through the importation of foreign literature. Immigrants bring their lasting impressions of the revolution and transmit these to American Shi'is. A number of Muslims were invited to Iran after the revolution and many returned with renewed zest for a more active expression of Islam in America. This activism has expressed itself in a number of ways, ranging from a ban on mixed swimming in schools to the establishment of worship areas in some airports.[38] Many Muslims began [observing regular prayers and fasts](#) and stopped consuming alcohol after the revolution. [The Iranian revolution also created heightened concern about how children were being raised in North America.](#)[39]

Literature on Iran is publicized mainly through Islamic centers that offer a variety of educational programs, bookshops, and sites for community gatherings. [The thoughts and](#)

sermons of Khumayni are widely circulated in such gatherings and conferences. It is in these centers that exterior influences are most palpable.

The impact of the Iranian revolution was not confined to Shi'i Muslims in America. According to Haddad, 85 percent of those interviewed in her survey expressed joy at the passing of the Shah's regime.[40] The revolution injected a sense of pride and provided a positive affirmation of identity as it was viewed by many Muslims as a vindication of God's promise to grant victory to the believers.[41] The establishment of an Islamic government was interpreted as an empowering of the Islamic community by God and an indication that salvation in America could come only through a similar process, one in which Muslims take charge of their lives by eschewing Western values and returning to the Islam taught by the Prophet.[42]

Due to Iran's strained relations with America, Iranian-backed activities are not overt. While the ambit of its activities is not as extensive as the Saudi-backed **Muslim World League**, Iran has managed to exert its influences in several forms. In the academic realm, an exchange program has developed whereby several scholars trained at the theological seminary in Qum undertake a doctoral program at **McGill University** in Montreal. Many of these students hope to teach in the West upon attaining their doctorate.

Unofficial Iranian groups have also been active in America. The Ansariyan Publication of Qum has recently published a large number of Shi'i books that it sends to converts in American prisons. Iranian sponsored magazines and journals such as **Mahjuba, Islamic Echo, and Tawhid** are widely circulated in America. Furthermore, the works of Iranian intellectuals like **Murtaza Mutahhari, 'Ali Shari'ati, and Soroush** have had significant impact in molding the thinking of many American Shi'i Muslims.

Iranian presence has been more conspicuous in the mosques/Islamic centers. **The Alawi foundation**, based in New York, has helped to establish Shi'i religious centers in different parts of America. Before the Iranian revolution, the Alawi Foundation (then called the Pahlavi Foundation) looked after Iranian interests in America. After the revolution, the Foundation was placed under the direct management of the Mostazafan Foundation in Tehran. Although most of its assets were frozen, the Foundation was able to distribute books on Shi'i Islam published either in Iran or in America. Subsequently, the Foundation's name was changed to Alawi.

The Alawi Foundation sponsors the **Islamic Education Center** in Maryland and in Houston. Although the centers do not outwardly express their Iranian penchant, Iranian ideologies are filtered through the sermons delivered and icons that are displayed. The Alawi foundation often determines which Imams serve the centers. Iranian politico-religious ideologies and teachings are disseminated through them.

The imposition of Iranian ideologies in some Islamic centers has met with disastrous results. Some Imams in Los Angeles and Houston have claimed complete control over the centers, maintaining that, based on Khumayni's concept of the comprehensive authority of the jurist (alwilaya al-mutlaqa), they have the right to run the centers in

accordance with Islamic dictates. Board members at these centers have rejected this claim, maintaining that managing the centers is an administrative office (mansab 'urfiyya), not a religious one (mansab shari'a).[43] The altercations have engendered power struggles within many centers, causing major rifts in the community.

The Iranian revolution has even affected some Afro-American movements. Disillusioned by the Sunni community, **'Isa Muhammad**, founder of the **Ansaar Allah movement**, turned to Shi'ism after the Iranian revolution. Around 1982, he began to appropriate Shi'i terminology and affirm the role of 'Ali (who he claims was black), thus rejecting Sunni Islam. He further traced his lineage to the Prophet, through Fatima and 'Ali. His self-identification as the Mahdi also fit into Shi'i millenarian expectations.[44]

Conversion to Shi'ism in America

Shi'i proselytization activities in America lack the financial support that is afforded, for example, to the **Saudi-backed Muslim World League** (MWL), which reflects Saudi religious interests in America, and, through various means, disseminates views attributed to the **Wahhabis**. In contrast, there are no such institutions or countries that financially support Shi'i missionary work.

In the late 1970s, foreign organizations such as the World Organization for Islamic Services sent books for distribution to **al-Jibouri's Islamic Societies of Georgia**. The **Bilal Muslim Mission**, which has been proselytizing in East Africa since the 1960s, also sent many books to America. By July 1977, about 5,770 books and booklets had been mailed out.[45] Some private Iranian sources like Ansariyan Publications based in Tehran also send Shi'i literature to American prisons. In recent years, the Canadian based Islamic Research and Education Center started a correspondence course, teaching Shi'ism to potential or actual converts.

Due to the relatively young age of many centers, few, if any, Shi'i mosques or centers in America have considered reaching out to non-Muslims or engaging in any interfaith dialogue.[46] A question in my survey related to types of da'wa (missionary) activities undertaken by the centers. Most centers did not respond to the question. It was clear that more stress is laid on providing religious services to community members.

Shi'i proselytization activities in America are limited to a few poorly funded organizations that are not properly structured for extensive da'wa activities. Institutes like the New York based **Tahrirke Tarsile Qur'an**, Islamic Humanitarian Services in Canada, **Bilal Muslim Missions of America**, and individual efforts by the likes of **Dr. Hashim** in Washington have dedicated themselves to reaching out to non-Muslims. A discussion of their proselytization activities, however, is beyond the scope of this study.

A recent survey that I conducted suggests that **there is a gradual increase in the number of Sunni inmates converting to Shi'ism**. Most converts espouse Shi'ism after having initially converted to Sunnism. Ironically, by their assiduous attacks on the Shi'is, the Wahhabis have aroused the curiosity of many converts to Sunnism who had not previously heard of

Shi'ism. Most of those who convert to Shi'ism do so as a result of their own study of Shi'ism rather than of extensive da'wa activities by the Shi'i community. Most converts come to Shi'ism from intrinsic rather than extrinsic factors. However, the writings of one convert in particular have had a remarkable impact on converting Sunnis to Shi'ism in America.

[Muhammad Tijani al-Samawi](#)

An important external factor that has led to conversions to Shi'ism in American prisons in recent history are the writings of [Muhammad al-Tijani al-Samawi](#). Born in Tunisia, Tijani was well versed in the Qur'an and religious sciences from his childhood. His position in the Sunni world was enhanced by his erudition and meetings with the teachers of Azhar in Cairo.

His first book, [Then I Was Guided](#), is a moving account of an inner struggle that led to his conversion. It was when he was travelling from Cairo to Alexandria on a ship that his preconceived notions about Shi'ism were challenged. His subsequent meetings with [Ayatullah al-Khu'i](#) and [Ayatullah Muhammad Baqir Sadr](#) in Najaf, Iraq, left Tijani perplexed and bewildered. He began to question his beliefs, developing an inclination toward Shi'ism. In his four main books, [Then I Was Guided](#), [Ask Those Who Know](#), [To Be with the Truthful Ones](#), and [Shi'as Are the Real Sunnis](#), Tijani appropriates Sunni hadith literature to challenge long held Sunni axioms.

He traces the provenance of Shi'i-Sunni disputes to the Prophet's time, exalting the virtues of early Shi'i heroes and chastising the Companions for acts like fleeing battles and changing the sunna of the Prophet. Tijani proceeds to emasculate Sunni arguments by questioning the integrity of Muhammad's companions. In this way, he attacks one of the basic tenets of the Sunni Islam, namely, the belief in the upright character of all the companions.

Having destroyed Sunni archetypal models, he replaces them with Shi'i ideas. He contrasts the behavior of the disobedient companions with those who were completely loyal to the Prophet. Tijani thus turns the Shi'i-Sunni dispute on its head. The Shi'is, he claims, are the true Sunnis. They are the orthodox, the mainstream from which others have merely deviated. This is seen in the title of his fourth book, *al-Shi'a hum ahl al-sunna* (The Shi'is Are the [True] Sunnis). By making the Shi'is the true Sunnis, he makes the Sunnis the true Rafidis, i.e. rejecters of the Prophetic sunna which, according to Tijani, was preserved only by the household of the Prophet (*ahl albayt*). Tijani's works have had an enormous impact in American prisons where increasingly more Sunnis have converted to Shi'ism.

[Conclusion](#)

The past decade has witnessed an increasing trend of foreign influences on American Muslims. In their desire to help their American brothers and sisters, Muslims abroad continue to shape the lives of American Muslims in diverse forms.

However, exterior influences have also led to conflicts within the American Muslim community. Some of these tensions have stemmed from the desire of Muslims abroad to increase the sphere of the abode of Islam, thus imposing their distinct ideologies. Tensions have also been generated by Saudi-Iranian political battles in the Middle East that have resurfaced in America. Indigenous conflicts have arisen due to an immigrant community that has had to come to terms with an alien culture. Discussion about whether to assimilate with the West or try to remain isolated from it has created much dissension between the adult and younger community.

In many ways, the Muslim community is experiencing the tensions and conflicts experienced by the Jewish community when it began to settle in America. Given the conflicts and divisions within the Muslim community, it is quite possible that it too will be divided along the same lines as was the Jewish community.[47] The challenge for the Muslim population in America is not only to engage in interfaith dialogue but also to initiate dialogue within the community.

Endnotes

1. For example, al-Sadr's book called "What do you know about Islamic Economics?" was translated by Yasin al-Jibouri in 1980. Al-Jibouri, himself a scholar from Iraq, has also published al-Sadr's book on contemporary society. Other Iraqi and Lebanese Shi'as residing in Toledo and other parts of America have also published and disseminated many of his Arabic works and speeches. Al-Jibouri, "A Glance at Shi'a Communities in the US," in *Islamic Insights*, Virginia (April 1995): 4.
2. Linda Walbridge, *Without Forgetting the Imam: Lebanese Shi'ism in an American Community* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1997), 53.
3. *Ibid.*, 54-5.
4. See *The Independent*, June 16, 1998, 14.
5. Twelver Shi'is believe that before his death, Muhammad appointed 'Ali to be his successor. They also believe that 'Ali was succeeded by a series of divinely guided Imams, the last of whom, the twelfth imam, went into an occultation when he was four years old in 874 C.E. He is the messiah whose reappearance is expected at the end of time.
6. *Current Legal Issues According to the Edicts of Ayatullah al-Sayyid 'Ali al-Seestani* (London: Imam 'Ali Foundation, 1997), 25-26.
7. *Ibid.*, 37.
8. 'Abdul Hadi al-Hakim, *A Code of Practice for Muslims in the West in Accordance with the Edicts of Ayatullah al-Udhma as-Sayyid Ah' al-Husaini as-Seestani*, trans. Sayyid Muhammad Rizvi (London: Imam 'Ali Foundation, 1999), 70, 84.
9. *Current legal Issues*, 48.
10. 'Abdul Hadi al-Hakim, *A Code of Practice*, 236.
11. In private circles, many jurists do not recognize Fadlallah as a competent marja'. Thus they do not accord him the status of one who can issue religious edicts.

12. Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi', *Intellectual Origins of Islamic Resurgence in the Modern Arab World* (Albany: SUNY, 1996), 239-240.
13. *Ibid.*, 238.
14. In the Shi'i context, *hadith* refers to the sayings of the Prophet and the Imams.
15. Ayatullah al-'Uzma al-Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Fadlullah, *World of Our Youth*, translated by Khaleel Mohammed (Montreal: Organization for the Advancement of Islamic Learning and Humanitarian Services, 1998), 226.
16. *Ibid.*, 225. Most jurists prohibit playing chess as it was used as a gambling tool.
17. *Ibid.*, 257.
18. *Ibid.*, 96.
19. *Ibid.*, 102.
20. *Ibid.*, 218.
21. See Fadl Allah's web page: www.bayynat.org.lb
22. Walbridge, *Without Forgetting the Iman*, 64.
23. *Ibid.*, see the examples cited on 72-3.
24. On the mass movements in Sunni mosques in America see Barbara Metcalf, "New Medinas: The Tablighi Jama'at in America and Europe," in *Making Muslim Space in North America and Europe*, ed. Barbara Metcalf (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996), 113.
25. Husayniyyas are distinguished from mosques in that rules governing ritual purity of mosques are not applied there.
26. Vernon Schubel, "Karbala as Sacred Space among North American Shi'a," in Barbara Metcalf, ed., *Making Muslim Space*, 187.
27. For a further discussion on how Karbala is recreated in both time and space see Vernon Schubel, "Karbala as Sacred Space," in *Making Muslim Space*, ed. Barbara Metcalf, 188.
28. This refers to the public processions marking the martyrdom of Husayn.
29. Rachel Bloul, "Engendering Muslim Identities: Deterritorialization and the Ethnicization Process in France," in *Making Muslim Space*, ed. Metcalf, 234.
30. Walbridge, *Without Forgetting the Iman*, 211-3. Walbride reports a more intense and dramatic atmosphere during the 'Ashura commemorations after the arrival of Iraqis.
31. Shi's normally congregate on Thursday nights to hear a lecture and recite *du'a Kumayl*, a devotional supplication reportedly dictated by 'Ali b. Abu Talib to a close companion, Kumayl b. Ziyad.
32. An important study on the subject is a recent survey done on the Shi'a youth in Toronto. The book marks an important milestone in understanding the youth predicament in North America. See *Muslim Youth at the Crossroads: Advancing into the Twenty First Century*, ed. Sadik Alloo (Toronto: Hyderi, 1995).
33. Emily Kalled Lovell, "Islam in the United States: Past and Present," in *The Muslim Community in North America*, eds. Earle Waugh, Baha Abu-Laban and Regula Qureshi (Edmonton: University of Alberta, 1987), 105.
34. This was related to me in a personal interview.
35. See the example given by Mohommed Muqtedar Khan, "Muslims and Identity Politics in America," in *Muslims on the Americanization Path?* eds. Yvonne Haddad and John Esposito (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998), 114.

36. Steve Johnson, "Political Activity of Muslims in America," in *The Muslims of America*, ed. Yvonne Haddad (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 119.
37. I am grateful to Imam al-Qazwini for sharing his personal observations with me.
38. See Jane Smith, *Islam in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 164.
39. Yvonne Haddad, "The Impact of the Islamic Revolution in Iran on the Syrian Muslims of Montreal," in *The Muslim Community*, eds. Earle Waugh, Baha Abu-Laban and Regula Qureshi, 174-77.
40. Yvonne Haddad, "The Impact of the Islamic Revolution in Iran on the Syrian Muslims of Montreal," in *The Muslim Community*, eds. Earle Waugh, Baha Abu-Laban and Regula Qureshi, 166.
41. *Ibid.*, 166-68.
42. Yvonne Haddad and Jane Smith, *Mission to America: Five Islamic Sectarian Communities in North America* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1993), 166.
43. Members of a mosque in Toronto posed a question to Ayatullah al-Khu'i as to whether a person who does not keep a beard (therefore lacks the moral probity and uprightness ['adala] can lead a community or not. Al-Khu'i's response was that since this was not a religious office, he was allowed to do so
44. Yvonne Haddad and Jane Smith, *Mission to America*, 134-35.
45. Larry Poston, *Islamic Da'wah in the West* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 128-29.
46. According to my survey, the mean years of Shi'i centers in America is 10.28.
47. See Leo Trepp, *A History of the Jewish Experience* (New Jersey: Behrman House, 1973), 299-316.

By Liyakatali *Takim*, University of Miami, Miami, Florida