

Creating a diasporic public sphere in Britain

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Oliver Scharbrodt

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Creating a diasporic public sphere in Britain: Twelver Shia Networks in London

Since the 1980s, the Borough of Brent, in the northwest of London, has been a major global hub of transnational Twelver Shiism. With the influx of Iraqi refugees, many clerical leaders of Twelver Shia Islam established their European headquarters in Brent, and, in addition to Damascus and Tehran, London turned into a major centre of Iraqi diaspora politics during Saddam Hussein's regime. The transnational networks and organisations based on Brent engage in an Islamic 'transnational public space' which Bowen (2004) defines as a globally operating discursive 'field of Islamic reference and debate'. Based on ethnographic research in London, the article provides novel insights into Twelver Shia Muslim organisational field in Britain and its engagement in 'an alternative diasporic public sphere' (Werbner 2004) that articulates issues and contestations specific to Shia Muslims living in Britain: what does displacement and migration mean for Shia Muslims who have often escaped oppression, war and civil conflict; how do Shia Muslims in Britain define their relationship to Sunnis in the context of rising sectarianism in the post-Arab Spring Middle East; how do Shia Muslims position themselves towards Iran and its aspiration to be the political leader of global Shiism?

Keywords: Twelver Shiism; diaspora; transnationalism; British Islam; sectarianism

Introduction

This article investigates how Twelver Shia networks and their spatial manifestations in London are involved in 'the creation of alternative diasporic public spheres in Britain' (Werbner 2004, 895). Since the 1980s, the Borough of Brent, in the northwest of London, has been a major global hub of transnational Twelver Shiism: with the influx of Iraqi refugees, many clerical leaders of Twelver Shia Islam established their European headquarters in Brent, and, in addition to Damascus and Tehran, London turned into a

major centre of Iraqi diaspora politics during Saddam Hussein's regime, in particular of Shia Islamist parties and movements (Rahe 1996). The transnational networks and organisations engage in an Islamic 'transnational public space' which Bowen (2004) defines as globally operating discursive 'field of Islamic reference and debate' (880) which argues about the place of Islam in European societies while retaining reference points to the wider Muslim world and traditional centres of normative authority within Islam, located outside of Europe.

Research on the formation and articulation of a Muslim diasporic consciousness in Britain has primarily focussed on the experience of Sunni Muslims, of South Asian background in particular (Werbner 2002a; 2002b; 2003; 2004; McLoughlin 2010; 2013; 2014; 2017), while the particular diasporic experience of Twelver Shia Muslims in Britain has only recently been considered more extensively in academic research (Spellman 2004; Gholami 2015; Shanneik 2017; Dogra 2017; Degli Esposti 2018). Taking Twelver Shia networks and communities as a case study, the article provides novel insights into Twelver Shia Muslim organisational field in Britain and its engagement in 'a conflictual diasporic Muslim public sphere' (Werbner 2004, 895) that articulates issues and contestations specific to Shia Muslims living in Britain: what does displacement and migration mean for Shia Muslims who have often escaped oppression, war and civil conflict; how do Shia Muslims in Britain define their relationship to Sunnis in the context of rising sectarianism in the post-Arab Spring Middle East; how do Shia Muslims position themselves towards Iran, the regional Shia hegemonic power with its aspiration to be the global political leader of the 'Shi'i International' (Mallat 1998)?

The discussion of these questions in the article is based on ethnographic research in London between September 2014 and November 2016.¹ Ethnographic fieldwork was undertaken in Arabic, Persian and English at numerous religious gatherings in twelve community centres and five private homes, mostly located in Brent. As part of the research, 32 semi- and unstructured interviews and seven focus group discussions were conducted, primarily with the male elites within these networks and community centres. As such, the article presents original insights into the diversity of Muslim diasporic consciousness in Britain, their discursive formations and their multi-local connectivities.

Islam and alternative diasporic public spheres

In discussing transnational Islam, Bowen (2004) distinguishes three dimensions: the actual movement of Muslims from one location to another, transnationally operating Islamic networks, organisations and institutions and, finally, ‘a global public space of normative reference and debate’ (880). The third dimension, a discursive field of Islamic normativity and legitimacy, involves Muslim actors in Europe or North America who debate the place and nature of Islam within these particular Muslim minority contexts while retaining reference points to the wider Muslim world and traditional sources and centres of normative authority within Islam: they debate on ‘how to become wholly “here” and yet preserve a tradition of orientation toward Islamic institutions located “over there”’ (Bowen 2004, 882).

¹ Funding for this project was provided by the Gerda Henkel Foundation as part of the project “‘Karbala in London’: Transnational Shia Networks between Britain and the Middle East’ (2014-2016).

Werbner (2004) observes that diasporas as de-territorialised social formations entail a strong ‘representational’ (895) dimension: organisational structures need to be established that represent the diaspora’s interests to the wider public and bestow sufficient credibility and legitimacy to suggest that particular organisations and networks are ‘authentic’ representatives of a particular diaspora. Within an Islamic context and following Bowen’s observations, successful claims to representativeness require the diaspora’s engagement and embeddedness in the global Islamic field of normativity and legitimacy. In addition, Werbner (2002a) broadens the meaning of diaspora. For her, ‘diasporic, rather than simply ethnic or religious, is an orientation in time and space – towards a different past or pasts and towards another place or places’ (125). Transnational Islamic formations, such as the Muslim minority presence in Europe and North America, are therefore diasporic in that they engage with a global discursive field of Islamic normativity, that is rooted in the past, and maintained by current global networks of Muslim authorities across the globe.

Werbner (2002a) also emphasises another dimension of diasporas. As ‘deterritorialised imagined community’ (121), formed by a collective memory, they contain a sense of ‘co-responsibility’ (Werbner 2002a, 121) for their members. At the same time, diasporas are internally diverse and socially heterogeneous: ‘diasporic groups are characterised by multiple discourses, internal dissent, and competition for members between numerous sectarian, gendered or political groups, all identifying themselves with the same diaspora’ (Werbner 2002a, 123). As such diasporas are ‘complex and segmented’ (Werbner 2004, 900). Their members might unite for particular causes and present themselves as a homogenous social group, pursuing shared interests, while in other circumstances they might be in conflict with one another over resources, ideology, representation, politics or religion. Such internal communal contestations and debates are articulated in ‘a local

diasporic public sphere' (Werbner 2002a, 898), often invisible to the wider public sphere. Taking the case study of transnational Twelver Shia communities in London, this article examines how Twelver Shia networks create an alternative diasporic public sphere in which intra-communal contestations are articulated.

Brent as global hub of transnational Twelver Shiism

The more formalised structures of religious authority in Twelver Shiism and the location of specific centres of authority have given Shia clerical networks a transnational – or prior to the formation of nation-states – a trans-local character (Louër 2008, Corboz 2015). The most important seminary institutions (*hawza*) of Twelver Shiism are based in the shrine cities of Iraq and Iran, in Najaf and Qom, which also host the most senior clerical authorities of Twelver Shiism. In addition, the *modus operandi* of clerical authority within Twelver Shiism facilitates their transnational reach: any lay Shii Muslim needs to follow a recognised senior cleric, referred to as grand ayatollah or *marja' al-taqlid* (source of emulation) (Walbridge 2001, 3-13). Emulating a particular senior cleric not only entails following his religious edicts and teachings but also paying religious taxes (*khums*) to him. As channels of communication between their followers and for the collection of religious taxes, senior clerics run a network of representatives (*wukala'*) who act as local agents in particular localities across the world and as members of a particular clerical network ensure its transnational reach. The most senior and most widely followed cleric in contemporary Twelver Shiism is Iranian-born Grand Ayatollah Sayyid 'Ali Sistani (b. 1930) who was trained and is based in Najaf and heads a network spanning the entire globe (Rizvi 2018).

The formation of Shii Islamist movements in the latter half of the 20th century further added to the transnational nature of Twelver Shiism. Shii Islamist parties in countries like

Kuwait, Bahrain or Saudi Arabia were initially offshoots of Iraqi parties such as the Hizb Al-Da'wa, which is the most important Shia Islamist party in Iraq and was in government between 2005 and 2018 (Jaber 2003, 73-143; Louër 2008, 82-88). Given the leading role clerical authorities played in the formation of these parties in Iraq, their spread to the other Arab Gulf countries was facilitated by existing clerical networks between Iraq and Shia communities in the Gulf monarchies (Louër 2008).

A third factor facilitating a further transnationalisation of Twelver Shii religious and political networks lies in the experience of oppression and persecution of Shii clerical and political actors within autocratic regimes of the Middle East. The rise of Saddam Hussein in Baathist Iraq after 1968 led to the oppression and persecution of Iraqi Shia political and clerical dissidents, in particular after the Islamic Revolution in Iran after 1979. For most Iraqi Shia activists neighbouring countries in the Middle East such as Iran, Kuwait or Syria were destinations of their exile (Louër 2008; Mervin 1996; Szantos 2012).

From the mid-1980s London became an important destination for Iraqi Shiis. While Iranian clerics and the Khoja community initially played a central role in establishing a religious infrastructure in the capital city in the 1970s, Iraqi Shiis began to dominate the institutional field of Shiism in London from the late 1980s. There at least 20 Shia community centres located in Brent representing different national backgrounds but also different religious and political factions within contemporary Shia Islam. These community centres, referred to in Arabic and Persian as *husayniyya*, are not mosques but congregational halls used for Shia commemorative ceremonies and rituals. While Iraqi centres constitute the majority of networks present in Brent, other centres and initiatives are run by Iranians, Afghans, Gulf Arabs and South Asians.

One of the oldest and most prominent Shia organisation in Brent is the Al-Khoie Foundation which was established in 1989 to manage the two independent schools on its

premises. Given the oppression of Iraqi Shiis following their uprising in southern Iraq in 1991, it turned into the global headquarters of Grand Ayatollah Abu Al-Qasim Al-Khoie (1899-1992), the most senior Shia cleric based in Najaf in the latter half of the 20th century and teacher of many prominent contemporary clerics such as Sistani. After his demise, the Foundation re-invented itself as a transnational NGO with various branches across the globe running community centres, schools and orphanages in Paris, New York, Montreal, Mumbai, Islamabad, Bangkok, Najaf, Mashhad and Qom (Al-Khoie Foundation [2015], 99-149). Internationally, it is well-connected to organisations such as the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva, making regular interventions in its sessions, the Jordanian Royal Institute for Inter-Faith Studies, established by Hasan ibn Talal, and Ali Al-Hashimi, the judicial and religious advisor to the President of the United Arab Emirates (Al-Khoie Foundation [2015], 86-88). At national and local level, the Al-Khoie Foundation is known for its various outreach activities to the wider public having become in the eyes of the British public and government officials the quasi-official representation of Twelver Shia communities in Britain.

Dar Al-Islam, established in 1993, is the official representation of the Da'wa Party in Britain. Having Iraqi Shia Islamists as its main constituency, Dar Al-Islam primarily attracts – similar to the Al-Khoie Foundation - middle- and upper-class educated professionals. Unlike the Al-Khoie Foundation, Dar Al-Islam's religious, political, educational and cultural activities primarily possess a diasporic character; engagement with the wider British public in the form of interfaith dialogue or local civic activism are not visible, as Dar Al-Islam has served as a local centre for politically active Iraqi Shiis forced into exile during the regime of Saddam Hussein.

Other Iraqi Shia centres in Brent similarly focus on catering for the spiritual and religious needs of their diasporic communities in an attempt to re-create the homeland abroad. The

community centre Rasool Al-Adham thereby represents a different social segment and religious faction of the Iraqi Shia diaspora which began to organise around the centre from the mid-1980s. Rasool Al-Adham primarily attracts a lower middle-class and working-class congregation. Members of this congregation primarily come from Karbala, the Iraqi shrine city in which the third Shia Imam Husayn is buried. Being the followers of a prominent clerical family that originally hailed from Karbala, Muhammad Al-Shirazi (1928-2001) and his younger brother Sadiq Al-Shirazi (b. 1942), attendees of Rasool Al-Adham are also referred to as Shirazis (Louër 2008, 88-99; Jaber 2003, 216-224).

A more controversial spatial manifestation of the Shirazi network is the Fadak Al-Asghar centre run by the young controversial Kuwaiti cleric Yasser Al-Habib (b. 1979) who arrived in the UK in 2004 after being convicted in Kuwait for inciting sectarian hatred. Al-Habib received his scholarly training by members of the Shirazi family, initially from Muhammad Rida' Al-Shirazi (1959-2008), a son of Muhammad Al-Shirazi, and later from Mujtaba Al-Shirazi (b. 1943), a young brother of Muhammad Al-Shirazi who had settled in London in 1979. Al-Habib's sermons and speeches are broadcast on the centre's own satellite channel Fadak TV and contain explicit anti-Sunni sectarian discourses and offensive statements about figures of reverence of Sunni Islam such as the Prophet Muhammad's wife Aisha and many Companions of the Prophets, in particular the second caliph 'Umar ibn Al-Khattab. Equally, Al-Habib is extremely critical of the clerical establishment based in Najaf and openly hostile to the political and religious leadership of the Islamic Republic of Iran accusing both of an appeasement policy towards Sunnis. Al-Habib's centre is based in Buckinghamshire, outside of the main centres in Brent. Given his controversial discourse and activities, he is shunned by the mainstream organisations and networks in London and entertains a difficult relationship with the more established Shirazi *husayniyya* in London, Rasool Al-Adham.

Regional identity markers and the desire to re-create the homeland in the diaspora are evident in the activities of the Al-Husseini Association (*al-majlis al-husayni*), referred to as ‘Balaghiyyeh’, which is run by the Balaghi family from southern Iraq. In the past, the family rented a tent (*khayma husayniyya*) to hold gatherings, but since 2014 it has used an old warehouse as the location for its activities. The Balaghiyyeh is a good example of the spatial ‘extension’ (Knott 2009, 156) religious diasporas undertake. The Balaghiyyeh connects Brent with southern Iraq by recreating the rituals, discourses and overall atmosphere of a commemorative gathering in the homeland; there is a strong emphasis on the role Shia rituals play in maintaining the emotional and imagined link with the homeland. The Balaghiyyeh attracts first generation émigrés from Iraq but also a significant young audience consisting of recent arrivals that have fled Iraq after 2003.

The Islamic Centre of England, located in Maida Vale not far from the main Iraqi Shia centres in Brent, is the official representation of the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Ali Khamenei (b. 1939). The Islamic Centre of England is one of the largest Shia centres in London providing a number of educational, religious, pastoral and charitable services, publishing various magazines and running conferences and interfaith and intra-faith meetings. Financial resources provided by the office of the Iranian Supreme Leader makes this centre one of the financially most robust in the UK. As the actual number of practising Iranian Shia Muslims would not warrant such a centre, the Islamic Centre of England seeks to have a much wider appeal catering for Shia Muslims of a variety of backgrounds. Religious activities are provided in Persian and also in Arabic, Urdu and English. Furthermore, the Islamic Centre of England is the only Shia centre providing sustained and systematic support services for converts to Shia Islam, running training courses and other activities for them.

Creating Shia diasporic identities in London: discursive elements

The major Twelver Shia institutions and organisations in Brent and the transnational networks they are part of provide a good example of the complexity and segmentation of diasporas (Werbner 2004, 900). Being situated in Brent within walking distance and sharing a small diasporic space, they represent different clerical and political allegiances and orientations and hence compete with another over followers and representing normative Shiism in the diaspora. At the same time, these networks, despite the competition and – at times – open hostility – exhibit a sense of diasporic ‘co-responsibility’ (Werbner 2002a, 121) that transcends clerical factionalism and political divergences. This co-responsibility is visible in the familial and personal relations among members and leaders of these networks which defy existing doctrinal or ideological boundaries (Maurielle 2018). It also becomes evident in the public representation of the ‘Shia community’ by organisations such as the Al-Khoie Foundation or at public displays of a common Shia identity, for instance, during the annual processions during ‘Ashura’ and Arba’in in the city centre of London at which a broad spectrum of Shia communities participate (Degli Esposti 2018).

Equally, these community centres participate in a global public sphere of Islamic discourse; some centres and individual figures derive their authority and legitimacy through their connections to respective clerical or political centres of authority, or alternatively by contesting them, and seek to emplace Shia Islam in the diaspora by engaging with normative discourses in the Middle East. However, given the role of that London has played as one of the global hubs of transnational Twelver Shiism and of exilic headquarters of Iraqi Shii organisations in particular, the Twelver Shia diaspora has not only received discourses from the Middle East and used them to legitimise their own diasporic presence but has equally shaped the ideological and sectarian formations in the

Middle Eastern ‘heartlands’ of Shiism. Thereby, these networks have created diasporic alternative public spheres that are inherently multi-local: from localised contestations around how to practice and represent Shia Islam with transnational references to Islamic notions of authority and normativity to shaping discursive formations within the ‘Shi’i International’ more globally. In the following, discourses observed during ‘Ashura’ after the rise of ISIS in Syria and Iraq from 2014 to 2016 will be discussed in order to examine how these networks partake in, respond to and impact on the global Shia public sphere. The first ten days of the Islamic month of Muharram, known as ‘Ashura’, constitute the peak of the Shia religious calendar. During these days, Shiis across the world remember the martyrdom of Imam Husayn in Karbala, in southern Iraq, in 680CE when he and his family and entourage were killed by the forces of the Umayyad caliph Yazid. ‘Ashura’ memorial gatherings (*majlis al-‘aza*) are usually held in the evening and include a fairly fixed format with some cultural variations among different ethnic groups: a memorial lecture re-narrates the events on each of the ten days culminating in the re-narration of the killing of Imam Husayn (*maqatal*) on the tenth day of ‘Ashura’. The lecture is followed by rhythmic self-beating of the congregation (*latmiyya*) to articulate grief while devotional poetry is recited in praise of Imam Husayn, his entourage and other members of the family of the Prophet (*ahl al-bayt*). Certain groups engage in self-flagellation (*tatbir*) on the tenth day of ‘Ashura’ to commemorate the actual killing of Imam Husayn. Passion plays, whether in the form of the more elaborate Iranian *ta’ziyeh* performances or the more rudimentary *tashabih* of Iraqi and other Gulf Arab Shiis, re-enact scenes of the battlefield in Karbala and its aftermath. Finally, mourning processions on the day of ‘Ashura’ and visiting the tomb of Imam Husayn in Karbala, preferably 40 days after his death (*arba’in*), conclude the mourning period in the Shia religious calendar (Nakash 2007, 115-137).

The concentration of different Shia centres in Brent leads to a vast array of activities with certain groups hiring venues for the occasion, and many memorial gatherings are held in private homes as well. Observing the memorial lectures and ritual activities provides a good opportunity to observe transnational discursive formations in different community centres which usually invite external speakers and poetry reciters (*radud*, *mulla*) during ‘Ashura’ and compete among another to attract the most popular speakers and reciters. The actual memorial lecture is given by a scholar with some formal religious training. The lecture re-narrates or refers to particular events of Karbala and deduces a general moral and spiritual message. Very often, the lecture applies specific Karbala events to current local, national and transnational contexts and circumstances and may have overt or implicit political connotations. This technique of applying the ‘Karbala paradigm’ (Fischer 1980, 19-26) – a narrative of, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, making a stand against an oppressive and illegitimate ruler and the ultimate sacrifice – is referred as *nuzul* (lit. ‘descent’) in Arabic and *goriz* (lit. ‘projection’) in Persian (Afary and Anderson 2014, 47).

The technique of *nuzul* or *goriz* expands Twelver Shia discourses across space and time and exhibits an diasporic orientation: it possesses a transnational or trans-local character with its references to authority figures based in the Middle East and is also trans-temporal by utilising mythico-historical reference points of the Shia ‘collective past’ (Werbner 2002a, 121). The particular centre’s political orientation, the ethnic and socio-economic demographics of its congregation and concomitant expectations and the style and ideological orientation of the speaker determine to what extent and in which way *nuzul* or *goriz* is applied. The following examples give an idea of the different ways the Karbala narrative, other mythico-historical references and clerical authority are framed by speakers at the major community centres in Brent between 2014 and 2016.

a) migration and diaspora

Given the diasporic location of the Shia community centres in London and the experiences of forced migration and exile of their founders and the majority of the members of their congregations, the themes of migration, displacement and diasporic identity feature in the discourses during ‘Ashura’. The lectures given and interviews conducted during ‘Ashura’ in autumn 2015, specifically, were also under the impression of the refugee and migrant crisis of the summer of 2015 during which many Iraqis fled their country following the ISIS advances in much of Iraq. Themes addressed in the lecture revolve around the question of whether and when it is legitimate to leave an ‘Islamic country’ and what are the consequent responsibilities of the diasporic Shia community. They also engage with the question of what integration means and what overall role the diasporic Shia presence in the West might entail for the wider Shia Muslim world. These issues and debates are discussed with reference to relevant authoritative sources, in particular traditions attributed to the Prophet Muhammad or the Twelve Imams, or to the ‘Karbala paradigm’ when discussing the moral and spiritual lessons of Imam Husayn’s martyrdom and its relevance for Shia Muslims living in the West.

In 2014, the Al-Khoie Foundation invited an Iraqi speaker, based in Denmark who gave an eloquent and intellectualised account of the early days of the events leading up to the martyrdom of Imam Husayn. The speaker discussed the notion of ‘emigration (*hijra*)’ in Islamic history as well as in the history of other religions. The initiation of Imam Husayn’s campaign, leaving Medina to Karbala, was likened to the *hijra* of the Prophet Muhammad from Mecca to Medina, the exodus of Abraham from his home town, of Moses and the Israelites from Egypt to the Holy Land, or the emigration of Imam ‘Ali

from Medina to take up his residence in Kufa. According to the speaker, love for the homeland is encouraged and leaving it ‘disapproved (*makruh*)’ in Islamic law, when proper Islamic institutions such as mosques and seminaries exist and it is possible to practise Islam. However, emigration is required when it is not possible to practise Islam anymore in a particular location and its very existence depends on emigrating to another location. As such, Imam Husayn fulfilled a trans-historical prophetic and soteriological paradigm with his own exodus ensuring the survival of ‘authentic’ Islam, its spiritual purification and the salvation of his followers.

The speaker thereby moulded his presentation around different discursive layers; Imam Husayn’s own actions are likened with an interreligious prophetic paradigm. At the same time, Imam Husayn’s move to Karbala mirrors the specific migratory experiences of himself and his congregation: they had to leave Iraq as they could not practice their religion in their country of origin freely. The analogies created between the experiences of displacement and migration of the Iraqi congregation and mythical figures also provide their settlement a positive evaluation – as an opportunity to practise Shia Islam freely.

More critical voices around the emigration of Shiis from Iraq were also articulated. The organisers of the Balaghiyyeh follow the clerical leadership of Sistani, and his London representative, and son-in-law Murtadha Kashmiri regularly attends and speaks at the gatherings. In one of his talks, given during ‘Ashura’ in 2015, he was critical of young Iraqis leaving their country, ‘the country of the Commander of the Faithful [Imam ‘Ali] (*balad amir al-mu’minin*).’ This statement was motivated by the migrant and refugee crisis Europe experienced in the summer of 2015 which also included the influx of Iraqis fleeing ISIS. At the same time, Kashmiri acknowledged the particular challenges of raising Shiis in the diaspora, stressing the importance of learning Arabic as ‘the language of our creed (*lughat ‘aqidatuna*).’ A year later, in 2016, in one of first nights of ‘Ashura’

of that season, Kashmiri emphasised the role young Shiis in the West play as representatives of Islam and as role-models for Shia Islam who should aspire to the highest moral standards and follow the laws of Islam (including women wearing the Islamic headscarf) while at the same time adhering to the laws of the country in which they reside. In addition, young Shia Muslims have the responsibility to follow the authority of senior clerics as ‘the leadership of the jurisconsults (*qiyadat al-fuqaha*)’ provides the ultimate protection of religion in a non-Muslim diasporic context in particular. In these statements, a more ambivalent view of displacement and migration comes to the fore: they contain a reprimand to young Iraqis leaving their country in 2015 and present the Shia presence in the diaspora as a challenge that can only be mastered by adhering to the authority of senior clerics in Najaf. Kashmiri thereby intended to ensure the transnational reach of clerical authorities based in Iraq and the diasporic orientation of Shia communities in the West to these authorities.

The fear of losing one’s religious and cultural identity in a Western minority context and the need to preserve it emerged as a theme in lectures at other community centres as well. The speaker at Rasool Al-Adham during ‘Ashura’ 2015 introduced one of his lectures with the remark that the greatest mistake any ‘community (*umma*)’ can commit is leaving its foundations. He refers to an anecdote from Japan at the time of the Meiji restoration (1868-1912) when young men were sent to the West as students of modern sciences. Many came back wearing European dress or exhibiting Western ideas and were consequently executed if they had entirely Westernised. The reference to Japan is here deliberately chosen as an example of a non-Western, Asian society that managed to modernise while apparently retaining its cultural identity. For the speaker, the case of Japan illustrates that each community needs to find meaning and solutions to its challenges by using its own cultural resources. Islamic culture is based on the Qur’an, the

unity of God and the prophethood of Muhammad. Adhering to Islamic principles, and for Shiis in particular ‘the culture of Husayn (*thaqafat al-husayn*)’ will have an impact on the society in which Shiis live. The speaker referred to another historical example when the Ilkhanid ruler Mahmud Ghazan (1271-1304) and his brother Oljeitu (1260-1316) converted to Shia Islam after they had observed the processions in Karbala commemorating the martyrdom of Imam Husayn.² Similarly, the presence of Shiis in the West and the preservation of their culture, which includes most importantly the performance of rituals, will attract non-Muslims to Islam. As the first Ilkhanid rulers, initially representing a non-Muslim superior power, were attracted to Islam through the rituals commemorating Imam Husayn, so will people in the West embrace Islam when Shiis exhibit ‘the culture of Husayn’.

Preserving Shia identity in the diaspora is presented differently in the Balaghiyyeh and Rasool Al-Adham. While Sistani’s representative in London, Kashmiri, emphasised adherence to the clerical establishment in Najaf and upholding Islamic moral principles, the speaker in Rasool Al-Adham underlined the centrality of rituals not just to preserve Shia identity in the diaspora but also to attract non-Shiis. Neither discourses actively encourage any kind of civic engagement but rather emphasise elements that make Shia Muslims clearly visible as such. The speaker at the Arabic *majlis* at the Islamic Centre of England went beyond simply preserving one’s identity in the West in one of his lectures during ‘Ashura’ 2014. The particular evening lecture was dedicated to the companions of Imam Husayn (*ashab al-husayn*) and their virtues. For the speaker, one of their virtues was that they did not blindly followed rumours or hearsay but critically scrutinised

² On Mahmud Ghazan’s conversion to Islam see Melville (1990). It is not entirely clear from where the notion comes that he and his brother converted to Shia Islam.

information they received. Similarly, Shiis living in the West should not follow blindly news stories about the Middle East but confirm their veracity. The speaker referred the fatwa that Sistani issued in 2014 in which he declared the military fight against ISIS as *jihad*. According to the speaker, media outlets globally and in the UK misrepresented the fatwa as encouraging Iraqi Shiis to fight against Sunnis. Given such gross misrepresentations, it is necessary for Shiis living in the West, young Shiis in particular, to overcome their silence and to publicly redress these. For the speaker, civic engagement also entails reading the local newspaper and understanding local issues in order to be actively involved in their solution and thereby to raise the public profile of Shiis in the West. Switching from Arabic to English, he concluded: ‘We live and work in Britain and take citizenship. So we need to live as the British live.’

A number of interviewees – when reflecting on the role of Shiis living in the West – also referred to a prominent eschatological prophetic tradition according to which one of the signs of the imminent arrival of the Day of Judgement is that the sun will rise from the West. Given it an allegorical interpretation, respondents understood the tradition as meaning that true Islam will be revived in the West or the West will be the place where true Islam can be practised. While such statements were made in personal interviews with respondents, the public endorsement for such a reading of the tradition and its meaning for Shia Muslims in the West was given by Sistani’s representative Kashmiri at his lecture in the Balaghiyyeh in 2016. Kashmiri also referred to the tradition and used it to underline the important role Shia Muslims play in the West as role-models and representatives of Islam. Such a creative re-reading of an eschatological tradition gives the Shia presence in the West a much more significant role in protecting and restoring Islam: the diaspora in the West does not just pose a challenge for Shiis to maintain their identity, it becomes the

locus of reviving their identity in a socio-political context that is not marked by oppression, conflict and war.

b) Sunni-Shia sectarianism and the rise of ISIS

The rise of ISIS in 2014 and their explicit anti-Shia hostility were also reflected in the discourses coming from ‘Ashura’ lectures between 2014 and 2016, often involving wider considerations of the relationship between Sunni and Shia Islam. Shia speakers thereby exhibited different degrees of sectarianism. Their discourses ranged from emphasising Islamic unity to veiled criticism of Sunnism as being the breeding ground for radical interpretations of Islam to explicit anti-Sunnism.

The speaker in Dar Al-Islam during ‘Ashura’ 2014, for instance, enumerated the motifs for Imam Husayn’s campaign; he fulfilled the will of God by sacrificing himself and intended to make a stand against the Umayyad dynasty whose rule was marked by ‘corruption (*fasa’id*)’ and ‘terror (*irhab*)’. While the speaker did not make any overt references to the rise of ISIS, his choice of words characterising the Umayyads presents ISIS as their latter-day manifestation. The analogy between the Umayyad dynasty and ISIS became more apparent when he referred to the first Umayyad caliph Mu’awiya (602-680) who killed his opponents and then engaged in sexual intercourse with their widows - an anecdote that resonates with the actions of ISIS fighters who enslaved the daughters and wives of Yezidis after having killed their fathers and husbands.

A much more explicit sectarian tone was adopted by the speaker at Rasool Al-Adham in 2014 in light of the rise of ISIS. His series of memorial lectures was entitled ‘school of terror (*madrasat al-irhab*)’ of which ISIS is but one of the latest manifestations. However, for the speaker ISIS is not just a contemporary product of the perversion of the Umayyad dynasty – which also holds an ambivalent position in Sunni historiography. The ‘school

of terror’ is a veiled reference to Sunni Islam more generally and its inherent deficiency resulting from its rejection of the infallible guidance of the family of the Prophet and the Shia Imams. As a consequence, Sunni Islam is bound to degenerate as ISIS most plainly illustrates. To illustrate this further, the speaker referred to Khalid ibn Al-Walid (585-642), an initial opponent of Muhammad and the early Muslims in Mecca, who later became the most prominent and effective military commander of the growing Arab-Muslim empire under the first two caliphs. Widely respected among Sunni Muslims as a capable military leader and Companion of the Prophet, Shia Islam portrays him as a major opponent of ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib. The speaker at Rasool Al-Adham referred to an anecdote during the *ridda* wars under the caliphate of Abu Bakr when reengage tribes tried to break away from the early Islamic community. Khalid ibn Al-Walid played a central role in defeating these tribes and as part of his military campaigns killed the tribal leader Malik ibn Nuwayrah who was accused of retaining *zakat* payments. For the speaker at Rasool Al-Adham and in line with the general Shia view, Khalid killed Malik in order to engage in sexual intercourse with his wife. For the speaker, Khalid was ‘a murderer and adulterer (*qatil wa-zani*)’ who executed an innocent Muslim in order to rape his wife – setting the precedent for his latter day followers in ISIS.

While these examples were directed to the particular congregations in the community centres and exhibited different attitudes towards Sunnism, the public display of Shia communal identities similarly demarcated Shia Muslims from ISIS. The Arba’in processions in central London are good example of this particular discursive demarcation. In 2014, posters displaying ‘Shia Muslims standing against terrorism’, ‘Shia Muslim are the biggest victims of terrorism’ or anti-ISIS slogans were carried by some participants. At the start of the actual procession, brief speeches were given in different languages – also in English thereby targeting a wider audience as the gathering between Marble Arch

and Hyde Park Corner was observed by the wider public. One of the speakers, a female British convert to Shia Islam, responded to critics within the Shia community that one should not openly remember Imam Husayn and the events of Karbala in order to avoid being perceived as sectarian. However, for her, remembering Imam Husayn provides an opportunity to present a different image of Islam that stands in stark contrast to ‘the travesty of Islam’ as promulgated by ISIS.

While these discourses contain veiled anti-Sunni references and more or less direct criticism of figures venerated in Sunni Islam, the community centre Fadak Al-Asghar led by the Kuwaiti cleric Yasser Al-Habib exhibits the strongest and most explicit anti-Sunni discourses, targeting specifically highly-venerated figures in Sunni Islam that were known for their opposition to ‘Ali and his family. Al-Habib gained global notoriety when he celebrated the death of Aisha in 2010 and also revived the tradition of cursing the first two caliphs, Abu Bakr and ‘Umar ibn Al-Khattab – a practice regularly performed in his own lectures and by members of his congregation. In addition, he created new terminology to refer to Sunnis, denoting them as ‘bakri’, followers of Abu Bakr; for him, only the followers of the family of the Prophet (*ahl al-bayt*) can claim to follow the *sunna* of the Prophet. However, most attacks of Al-Habib and his followers are directed against other Shiis, whether they follow Khomeini’s ideology of the guardianship of the jurisconsult (*wilayat al-faqih*) or the clerical establishment in Najaf. In his nomenclature, he refers to these Shiis as ‘batri’, a pejorative reference to a branch of the Zaydi sect that exonerates the first two caliphs from wilfully depriving ‘Ali of his position as successor of Prophet Muhammad; Abu Bakr and ‘Umar were unaware of ‘Ali’s designation and hence cannot be accused of having usurped the caliphate (Haider 2014). In a personal interview with the author, Al-Habib used this term for any Shii ‘who calls for people to respect Abu Bakr, Umar and Aisha, stays silent about them, defends them, supplicates for

God to be pleased with them or justifies and belittles their crimes [against the family of the Prophet]’ (Al-Habib 2016). Any Shia who seeks a rapprochement with Sunnis is, for Al-Habib, a modern manifestation of the “‘Batriya” to which the current Iranian regime belongs’ (Al-Habib 2016).

Al-Habib’s lecture – delivered in immaculate classical Arabic - on the last night of ‘Ashura’ of 2015 mentioned a decision by the Egyptian government to bar Shiis from performing a pilgrimage (*ziyara*) to the shrine of Imam Husayn at the Al-Husayn Mosque in central Cairo. Referring to the Shia past of Cairo with Al-Azhar being initially a Shia institution of learning, Al-Habib decried this violation of the religious freedom of Egyptian Shiis: ‘If Muslims are barred from praying at Al-Aqsa [in Jerusalem], they talk about religious freedom. But where is religious freedom here?’ Al-Habib compares this ban with a recent publication by an institution associated with the shrine of the first Shii Imam ‘Ali in Najaf. The book added praise to the names of Abu Bakr and ‘Umar whenever they were mentioned including the phrase – common in Sunni Islam – ‘may God be pleased with him (*radiya allah ‘anhu*)’. For Al-Habib, this example illustrates how the clerical establishment in Najaf exhibits ‘batri’ Islam; rather than denouncing the first two caliphs as enemies of the family of the Prophet, they are given honorific titles to seek rapprochement with the Sunnis. For Al-Habib, the Egyptian government decision to ban Shia rituals at the Al-Husayn Mosque and the veneration for the Sunni caliphs articulated in official publications of the clerical establishment in Najaf show that both ‘bakri’ and ‘batri’ Islam are two sides of the same coin: both stand in opposition to the teachings of the family of the Prophet.

The above statements engaged in various degrees of anti-Sunni sectarian discourse either to demarcate Shia Islam clearly from radical and militant interpretations of Sunni Islam, to denounce Sunni Islam as inherently deficient or to antagonise Sunni Muslims and the

political and clerical establishment of Shia Islam in Iran and Iraq that seek to overcome sectarian tensions. On the other hand, discourses emerged that supported Islamic unity and rejected sectarian differences that had become more pronounced in the Middle East from 2003 onwards and much more so after the rise of ISIS in 2014. In his ‘Ashura’ lecture in 2015 at the Balaghiyyeh, Kashmiri, as official representative of Sistani, emphasised Islamic unity: all Muslim should be united under ‘one single creed (*kalima wahida*)’ and their sectarian differences should not matter: ‘There is no Shia, no Sunni.’ Kashmiri connected this emphasis on unity with the lesson to be drawn from the events of Karbala: ‘Love (*muhabba*), concord (*ittilaf*) and unity (*wahda*) are among the objectives of the revolution of Husayn (*thaurat al-husayn*).’ Statements as these reflect the views of Sistani who has countered the sectarian conflict in Iraq since 2003 with various fatwas and declarations; they also reflect the immediate threat posed by ISIS in Iraq at that time and to counter the impression that the militant struggle against ISIS is implicitly directed against Iraqi Sunnis. The fight against ISIS was framed as a national struggle of all Iraqis, regardless of their religious background (Abdo 2017, 22-23). Statements such as these, directed towards Shiis living in the West, also respond to and intend to counter the appeal of figures like Al-Habib and their anti-Sunni sectarian discourse.

c) attitudes towards Islamic Republic of Iran and political Shiism

Within the discourses coming from the various community centres and their congregations on the Islamic Republic of Iran, its ideological foundations and political Shiism more generally three different attitudes can be observed: (i) views in clear support of the Iranian regime and the concept of *wilayat al-faqih*; (ii) community centres and groups taking a neutral stance by espousing non-political forms of Shia Islam or not

commenting directly on politics; (iii) and various stances which are a more sceptical or oppositional to the Islamic Republic.

The Islamic Centre of England is the official representation of the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 'Ali Khamenei, in the UK. The speaker at the Arabic gathering in 2014 switched in his lecture between Arabic and English. His English interventions addressed young Shiis in the audience urging them to integrate into European societies and to become civic actors. In Arabic, he engaged in a defence of *wilayat al-faqih*. Responding to those Shiis who deny or question the 'blessings (*barakat*)' of *wilayat al-faqih* and consider Iran, its ideological reading of Shia Islam and its policies as harming Shiis, the speaker presented Iran as the regional and global guardian of Shia communities. In the regional context of the Middle East, he suggested that Shia communities in Bahrain, the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon should form a loose political and military union under the leadership of Iran in order to ensure their survival against the onslaught of radical militant Sunni movements such as ISIS. The speaker's discourse responded to transnational events in the Middle East, while articulated a supra-national unity of the Shia *umma* and suggested the political formation of a 'Shi'i International' led by Iran to protect Shia communities in the Middle East.

Discourses such as these at the Islamic Centre of England seek to make Khamenei's political authority relevant to Shiis living outside of Iran, both in the Middle East and in the West, by projecting his authority as political leader of the 'Shi'i International'. Such a reading does not challenge or undermine the clerical leadership of the senior clerics based in Najaf while providing a political counterweight to their more cautious interventions, in particular on political issues affecting Shiis outside of Iraq. Proponents of this reading presented a particular urgency to accept this model in light of the rise of

ISIS, the crackdown of the Shia opposition in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia in 2014 and the civil war in Yemen.

However, such discourses in clear support of the Iranian regime is not the only type of attitudes espoused by Shia congregations based in London. Many community centres adopt a neutral stance towards the Iranian regime and promote apolitical forms of Shiism focussing on ritual activities. A good example of this approach is the Balaghiyyeh in London which focusses on the re-creation Iraqi Shia folk culture for the diaspora in London. With good relations to Sistani, if political statements are made from the pulpit by figures like Kashmiri, they reflect the official line of the clerical establishment in Najaf and are concerned with issues affecting Iraq.

A group of Iranian Shiis living in northwest London has organised religious activities since 2012. Without a physical space of their own, the group has used different facilities in the area. The attendees of the events are religious middle- and upper-class Iranian Shiis and also include a number of second-generation Iranians living in London. While not articulating an oppositional stance to the Islamic Republic and the Islamic Centre in London, the organisers characterise themselves as ‘non-political’ in their approach. Their choice to run a Persian-speaking programme outside of the Islamic Centre provides them with more freedom in terms of speakers they can invite to give lectures, the performance of rituals and their particular style as well as their outreach to segments of the Iranian Shia diaspora who are not secular but would not feel comfortable attending religious events run by organisations associated with the Supreme Leader of Iran. In 2015 and 2016, the group invited a religious speaker from Iran coming from a prominent family of preachers. The speaker’s father was a popular preacher in Iran before the Islamic Revolution and part of the so-called *velayatis*, a group of scholars and popular preachers (*vo’az*) who emphasised the adherence to the authority (Arabic: *wilaya*, Persian: *velayat*)

of the Twelve Imams. The *velayatis* opposed in particular the activities and discourses of ‘Ali Shari’ati (1933-1977), an important ideologue of the Islamic Revolution, whose public lectures in Tehran played a significant role in mobilising young Iranian Shiis in the lead up to the Revolution (Rahnema 1998, 266-276).

At the religious gatherings in London, the preacher’s lectures mostly focus on spiritual topics or the proper performance of rituals. In one of his lectures, the speaker emphasised the central authority of the Mahdi whose sovereignty (*velayat*) overshadows any other authority, whether political or religious, the authority held by the clerics, even the authority of one’s parents. Taking this point even further, the speaker stated that all the writings and scholarship of the clerics are obliterated in the presence of the Mahdi. Such statements are *prima facie* common iterations of fundamental precepts of Twelver Shiism – also contained in Article 5 of the Iranian Constitution which refers to the Mahdi as ‘the sovereign of the age (*vali-ye ‘asr*)’. Upon his appearance, any religious and secular authority will be made redundant. However, such an emphasis on the absolute sovereignty of the Mahdi, even during the time of his occultation, could be understood as a veiled critique of the political system in Iran in which the country’s Supreme Leader is invested with almost all spiritual and secular prerogatives of the Hidden Imam.

Sceptical attitudes and different assessments became also evident in a private commemorative gathering in Brent during which participants expressed different attitudes about the role of Islam in a modern state. One representative, associated with the Al-Khoie Foundation, referred to the Western trajectory with the separation of church and state and relegation of the church to the role of providing social services and dealing with spiritual matters. For him, this historical development – albeit presented in rather simplistic terms – has been successful. He was particularly critical of the Islamic Revolution and the creation of an Islamic state in Iran as having been damaging for Shiis

worldwide. Other participants in the gathering disagreed with him, rejecting the secular separation between church and state as not applicable to Islam. In relation to the Islamic Revolution, some of them conceded that perhaps under Khamenei the Iranian regime had become dictatorial but this was not the case when Khomeini led the Islamic Revolution. Even figures from Shii Islamist organisations that were initially created with Iranian support expressed sceptical views of Iran's political role in the region and its leadership claims for Shiis worldwide. One Iraqi activist who moves between London and Iraq was one of the founding members of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), the umbrella organisation for Iraq Shii dissident political groups, created in 1982 under Iranian patronage. On the relationship between Iraq and Iran, the activist distinguished between Arabs and Iranians and their dissimilar cultural identities and referred to the much longer presence of Shia Islam in Iraq compared to Iran. He not only disputed the political hegemony of Iran over Iraqi Shiis but also emphasised the priority and superiority of the clerical establishment in Najaf over Qom: 'Najaf speaks for Shia Islam, not Qom.' The seminary institutions in Qom are only a couple of decades old which Shia educational institutions in Najaf date back centuries.

The most vocal rejections of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the ideological orientation of the regime and any form of political Shia activism came from members of community centres associated with the Shirazis. An attendee of Rasool Al-Adham expressed hostile views of Khomeini and the Islamic Republic of Iran as the greatest force harming Shiis today: 'Khomeini was worse than the Wahhabis, Saddam Hussein and Hizb Al-Baath together.' The policy of taking hostages by Hizbollah during the Lebanese civil war as well as the protracted war with Iraq – which Khomeini could have ended earlier – are for him the main reasons why the image of Shia Islam has been tarnished in the West. Khomeini's attraction to Islamic mysticism makes him equally suspicious. Muhammad

Al-Shirazi and other clerics associated with the Shirazis have made strong statements against mystical approaches to Islam declaring anyone subscribing to such ideas as being a non-Muslim. To the astonishment of the respondent, somebody like Khomeini who cannot even be considered a Muslim because of his mystical inclinations is considered by many Shiis as a great Muslim leader.

Similar strong statements came from members of the congregation of Fadak Al-Asghar led by Yasser Al-Habib who referred to Khamenei as leader of the ‘batri’ Shia. While cursing the enemies of the family of the Prophet more generally or those responsible for the murder of Imam Husayn and his family in Karbala, such as Yazid ibn Mu’awiya, is not uncommon among Shia communities, members of Fadak Al-Asghar also curse Abu Bakr, ‘Umar and Aisha. In addition, during rituals performed on ‘Ashura’ in 2015 curses were made against representatives of the Islamic Republic of Iran and its ideological foundation: ‘Cursed be Khamenei and Khomeini (*‘ala khamina’i wa-khumayni al-la’na*)! Cursed be the guardianship of the jurisconsult (*‘ala wilayat al-faqih al-la’na*)!’

Other members of the congregation at Rasool Al-Adham, when asked about what is specific about the Shirazi approach to Shia Islam, referred to the principle of separating religion and politics as its main characteristic. They distinguished two types of Shiism: ‘political Shiism (*al-shi’a al-siyasiyya*)’ and ‘religious Shiism (*al-shia al-‘aqa’idiyya*)’ with the Shirazis representing the latter. Blending religion and politics ultimately corrupts religion and its doctrines. Iran, despite claiming to be a Shia state, exercises political control on both the doctrines and rituals of Shia Islam and thereby stifles two central elements of Shia Islam. The clerical leadership of the Shirazis is free from political interference and hence independent from any kind of government influence and control – demarcating the Shirazis from other contemporary movements in Shia Islam that are too political or too close to particular political regimes.

Such contestations around the regional and global role of Iran illustrate how ‘the Muslim diaspora also opens up a diasporic space of critical dissent’ (Werbner 2002: 130): anti-Iranian attitudes are more difficult to articulate in such strong terms in Middle Eastern Shia contexts, let alone extreme forms of anti-Sunni sectarianism as promoted by Yasser Al-Habib. The diasporic space allows the development of discourses and rituals outside of normativities created by nation-states in the Middle East, that are often autocratic or conflict-ridden, and clerical authorities. Attitudes towards Iran also serve as an area of contestation to mark boundaries between different Shia communities and their transnational networks and to articulate different visions of Shiism, either promoting a sense of global Shia political activism, spearheaded by Iran, or restating ‘utopian visions’ (Werbner 2002: 129) of Shiism that are not contaminated by the caveats of *realpolitik* and are articulated in de-politicised notions of clerical authority and an emphasis on ritual practise.

Conclusion

The examples discussed in the article illustrate the segmentation of the Shia Muslim diaspora in Britain whose doctrinal, ideological and political contestations are articulated in an alternative diasporic public sphere which is informed by geopolitical developments in the Middle East post-Arab Spring, political and clerical authority figures based in Iraq and Iran and the mythico-historical tropes of a collective Shia past. The presented discourses also confirm Bowen’s observations that the ‘transnational Islamic sphere of reference and debate’ (Bowen 2004, 891) is not necessarily ‘post-national’ as it is concerned with events in various nation-states in the Middle East, Iraqi domestic politics and the role of Iran as a regional hegemonic power in particular, and the role of Shia

Muslims in Britain in presenting an alternative image of Islam that contradicts militant and violent articulations of Sunni Islam.

The discussion in the article equally illustrates how diasporas are ‘chaorders, chaotic orders’ (Werbner 2002a, 121) that act fairly independently from any centre and lack ‘a central command structure’ (Werbner 2002a, 123) despite the efforts of the clerical establishment in Najaf and the Iranian regime to extend its transnational reach to Shia Muslims in the West. As these examples illustrate, such efforts can either be ignored or outrightly challenged. At the same time, Twelver Shia networks share and utilise a similar discursive and symbolic mythico-historical repertoire and partake in, respond to and impact on the transnational (Shia) Islamic public sphere. Doctrinal, ideological and political contestations reveal the power relations between the different networks that either seek to ensure the transnational influence and relevance of the Shia centres of political and clerical authority in the Middle East or contest their legitimacy and authority in order to appeal to the increasing number of those Shia Muslims in the diaspora that are disaffected by them.

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