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Dear readers of

this present issue focuses on the Shi'a and contains different perspectives on the historical development, political aspects, as well as scientific approaches.

According to estimates the Shi'a comprises about 215 million Muslims (15 % of all Muslims worldwide). Countries with a Shi'a majority such as Iran, Iraq, Bahrain and to a lesser extent Azerbaijan are in the center of media attention these days.

Shi'a Muslims believe in the exclusive right of 'Ali as the only legitimate direct successor of the Prophet Muhammad, and the Imams following him to guide and lead the *umma*. The name Shi'a is derived from *Shi'at 'Ali* which means "faction" or "followers of Ali".

In many Muslim countries Shiites constitute an active minority. While their religious centers and most of their holy sites are located in Iraq, their main theological schools nowadays are based in Qum, Iran. Even though the Shi'a historically was an Arabic phenomenon, the main country of the contemporary Shi'a is without a doubt Iran and the development of modern philosophy in Iran is closely linked to the Shi'ite denomination.

The different articles deal with acute problems such as inner-Islamic conversion. Shi'a politics in Bahrain are also described with a special emphasis on the concept of *Marja'iyya*.

The history of Shi'a studies in Germany, outlined in another article, shows that it has been a topic of German Orientalists for a long time. This issue also turns to the development of philosophy in Iran since the beginning of modernization.

In sum, our authors highlight various absorbing aspects connected to the Shi'a. Thereby, we hope to deepen our readers' interest in further studies of the Shi'ite denomination of Islam and its impact on the contemporary Muslim world.

Additionally, the last contribution deals with the latest developments in Afghanistan and the country's role in the region.

The editors of ORIENT join me in wishing you an interesting and instructive reading.

With best wishes

Gunter Mulack
Director of the German Orient-Institute

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"Then I was Guided"
Some Remarks on Inner-Islamic Conversions in the 20th and 21st Centuries

I. Introduction

In the religious marketplace, monotheistic religions tend to keep a keen eye on their competitors. The most ingrained convictions to be on the sole path to salvation easily seem prone to be undermined by those who walk on a different trail, and the one who converts represents a danger to his former community and is therefore regarded as a traitor. The most welcomed enlightened convert to the new religion is the abominable apostate to the old one.

Judaism, which is ostentatiously anti-missionary and even places extremely high obstacles in the way of the applicant, is an exception to this rule; Islam, which *cum grano salis* may be interpreted as a combination of the Jewish emphasis on the revealed law with the Christian missionary urge,[1] is not The prescriptions in Islamic law with regard to the *ahl al-kitāb* and the provisions in case of apostasy show the firewall that was erected against the challenges from without.[2]

But danger looms from within, too. No sooner was the Prophet dead than the Islamic community of believers, the *umma*, was shaken by discord as to who would be entitled to succeed him as political leader, and within a few decades a rift occurred that characterises the Muslim community until this very day, i.e. the rift between two groups that later came to be labelled Sunnites and Shiites.[3]

The civil war between ʿAlī and Muʿāwiya is called *fitna*, a term whose primary meaning is "temptation", and it was not a random choice of words.[4] Outward pressure normally leads to a closing of ranks among the beleaguered, whereas inner discord is a nagging temptation and a potential threat to the strength of the respective community. Where *fitna* reigns, the end is near, and it was therefore only natural that in the Sunnite *hadīth* collections *fitna* traditions were classified next to those dealing with the signs of the last hour.[5]

The question arises how to cope with this apparent inner disunity. Muslim scholars early on tried to rationalise it by providing appropriate traditions as-

cribed to the Prophet himself. Some of these were meant to shrug off the inevitable, such as the famous dictum "the difference in my community is a divine grace" (*ikhtilāf ummatī rahma*).[6]

Others were more pessimistic: in an equally well known *hadīth* the Prophet is said to have predicted that after his death the Muslim community would split into 73 groups (or 71 or 72, according to other versions), all of whom (except for one) were destined for hell-fire. It was left open, however – and nurtured many a discussion –, which group would be saved, but the result of discussions of this kind is fairly predictable in most cases anyway.[7] What was achieved was the more or less general acknowledgement of a legitimate extent of difference between the nascent Sunnite schools of law (*madhāhib*) as was expressed by a new genre of legal literature, "the difference of opinion among the schools of law" (*ikhtilāf al-madhāhib*): as long as the principles (*uṣūl*) of Islamic jurisprudence were not violated, differences in applied jurisdiction (*furūʿ*) were considered innocuous.[8]

It has to be borne in mind, however, that as late as the 20th century, there were occasional doubts regarding the question how far this *ikhtilāf* might go in practice. One of the most famous documents of Islamic modernism is the so-called "Transvaal-fatwā" of 1903, in which the Egyptian *muftī* Muhammad ʿAbduh (d. 1905) was asked, among other things, whether it was licit for a Shāfiʿī Muslim to perform his prayer behind a Hanafī imām – the undertone of course being the question whether the Hanafī could and should be considered a "true" Muslim. He answered in the affirmative, but similar discussions continued to be conducted for decades afterwards.[9]

ʿAbduh's judgement was in a line with the general tendency of Islamic modernism to do away with the rigid division of Muslim law into different schools of interpretation and to revive independent reasoning (*ijtihād*) on the basis of the Qurʾan and the sunna.[10]

On the whole, it has become largely undisputed that the believer is basically free to change his

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[1]   Jansen: *Mohammed*, pp. 15, 77f.
[2]   For an overview of the attitude in classical Islamic law, cf. Friedmann: *Tolerance and Coercion.*
[3]   Madelung: *The Succession to Muhammad.*
[4]   Crone: *Political Thought*, pp. 23ff.
[5]   Cf. e.g. al-Bukhārī: *Sahīh*, pp. 1281-92; Muslim: *Sahīh*, pp. 1076-1106.
[6]   Paret: "Innerislamischer Pluralismus".
[7]   It goes without saying and need not be discussed here that these traditions and countless ones of a similar tendency are later back-projections in order to sanctify or at least legitimise political developments after the alleged "Golden Age" by linking them to the miraculous providence of the Prophet. A classical study of the significance of the numbers 70 to 73 in Islam is Steinschneider: "Die kanonische Zahl der muhammedanischen Secten". See also below, note 39.
[8]   Art. "Ikhtilāf", *EI²* 3/1061f.; Nagel: *Das Islamische Recht*, pp. 284-305.
[9]   ʿAbduh's ruling can be found in Rashīd Ridā: *Tārīkh al-ustādh*, vol. 1, part 2, pp. 675ff.; for the historical context cf. Voll: "Abduh and the Transvaal Fatwa"; a similar case is described by Wild: "Muslim und Madhab"; cf. also Nūr al-Islām 5/5 (August 1934), p. 395.
[10]   Nagel: *Das Islamische Recht*, pp. 138ff.

madhhab affiliation and to switch from one Sunnite school of law to any other within Sunnism.[11]

II. Pre-modern History

Things were a little more complicated as far as Shiism is concerned, even Twelver Shiism (*Imāmiyya*), the most important and widespread branch of Shiite Islam to which the following remarks shall be confined.[12] Of all examples of mutual anathema with which classical heresiographical literature is replete, the most famous and momentous one is probably the controversy between the Shiite jurist al-'Allāma al-Ḥillī (d. 1325) and his Ḥanbalite counterpart Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328). Both the former's treatise *Minhāj al-karāma fi ma'rifat al-imāma*, an outline of Shiite doctrine, and the latter's refutation of it, *Minhāj al-sunna al-nabawiyya*, have become widespread in the Islamic world and engendered numerous new polemics in modern times.[13]

Occasionally and apart from blunt polemics, there were also more subtle attempts to win over the other side, which were to become the blueprint for several writers in the 20th century: in his book *Kashf al-mahajja*, the Shiite scholar 'Alī b. Mūsā Ibn Ṭāwūs (d. 1266), e.g., relates a series of alleged debates between himself and several unnamed Sunnite – and in one case even a Zaydī – interlocutors. These debates focused on the succession of the Prophet and the legitimacy of the first three Caliphs, the role of the Prophet's companions (*ṣaḥāba*), and other controversial issues such as temporary marriage (*mut'a*), *taqiyya* and the belief in the resurrection of some Muslims before the Day of Judgement; all in all, this is the catalogue that has continued to prevail in confrontations ever since. By relying mostly on the canonical (Sunnite) *ḥadīth* collections of al-Bukhārī and Muslim, Ibn Ṭāwūs easily manages, time after time, to drive his opponents into a corner, whereupon they readily acknowledge the falseness of their previous convictions and find themselves on the brink of converting to Shiism.[14]

This noticeable exception notwithstanding, conversion from one Muslim denomination to another does not seem to have played a prominent role in pre-modern religious literature. This is not to say, however, that it did not happen on a massive scale in practice. On the contrary, as a glimpse at the history of the Safavid empire instantly confirms. Before this dynasty – which itself had converted from a Sunnite Sufi order to Shiism in the course of the

15th century[15] – assumed power in Iran in 1501, the Persians had predominantly been Sunnite. It was only in the course of the following two centuries that the country turned Shiite, due to a combination of religious scholarship and political pressure.[16]

This experiment proved to be so successful that it outlived the Safavids until this very day; an attempt by the military ruler Nādir Shāh (d. 1747) to have a somehow watered-down form of Shiism acknowledged by the Ottoman Empire as a sixth *madhhab* and thereby to overcome the strong dichotomy between Sunnites and Shiites flatly failed.[17]

Another example of considerable importance for later events was the massive conversion of the formerly Sunnite tribes in Iraq in the 19th and early 20th centuries, which was primarily caused by the rise of the Shiite holy cities Najaf and Karbalā' as strongholds of Shiism after the decline of the Safavids. The concomitant economic changes and the Ottoman tribal policy of sedentarization more or less inadvertently favoured the conversion of the tribes. Although former social values persisted and the conversion hardly went beyond some superficial adoption of marriage and divorce law, it turned Shiism into the majority denomination in Iraq. The consequences of this development came to be felt only after the downfall of Ṣaddām Ḥusayn and the political upheaval in 2003.[18]

III. Ecumenism and Polemics in Modern Times

It was not until the 20th century, however, when the idea of a kind of ecumenical rapprochement between the Islamic denominations gained currency, that the topic of conversion received more attention in religious literature, too.

The "Association for the Rapprochement of the Islamic Legal Schools" (*Jamā'at al-taqrīb bayn al-madhāhib al-islāmiyya*), established in Cairo in 1947, made it clear already by its very name in which way it intended the problem to be treated in this context: as a purely juristic issue.[19] The gap between Sunnism and Shiism, it was incessantly stated, was by no means bigger than the perfectly legitimate *ikhtilāf* between the Sunnite schools of law. What is more, it was stressed that what was at issue was the rapprochement of the *madhāhib* exclusively, and not their unification, let alone their elimination. The conviction, according to some authors, that all Sunnites should be considered as Shiites in the sense that they revered the Prophet's

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[11] Yet even in contemporary *fatwās*, this point has to be explicitly made clear, since some questioners admit being puzzled by this freedom of choice; cf. *Arab News*, June 6, 2008: http://www.arabnews.com/?page=5&section=0&article=110617&d=6&m=6&y=2008.

[12] For a concise introduction to Twelver Shiism, cf. Momen: *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam*.

[13] On al-Ḥillī, cf. Schmidtke: *The Theology of al-'Allāma al-Ḥillī*; on Ibn Taymiyya cf., inter alia, Krawietz: "Ibn Taymiyya, Vater des islamischen Fundamentalismus?".

[14] For a summary of these debates cf. Kohlberg: "'Alī b. Mūsā ibn Ṭāwūs", pp. 325-50, 331-36, 341, 344; regarding Ibn Ṭāwūs in general cf. *Encyclopedia Iranica*, vol. VIII, pp. 55-58 (E. Kohlberg).

[15] Roemer: *Persien auf dem Weg in die Neuzeit*, pp. 221ff.

[16] For details, cf. Brunner: "The Role of Ḥadīth as Cultural Memory", pp. 318ff.; Jurdi Abisaab: *Converting Persia*.

[17] Tucker: *Nadir Shah's Quest for Legitimacy*, pp. 78-93.

[18] Cf. Nakash: *The Shi'is of Iraq*, pp. 25-48.

[19] On the history of this association, cf. Brunner: *Islamic Ecumenism*, pp. 121ff.; on its line of argumentation in particular ibid., pp. 228-48.

family (ahl al-bayt), and all Shiites were likewise Sunnites because they followed his sunna was not to imply that the association aimed at a Sunnitization of Shiites and vice versa.[20]

Apart from guarding against the reproach of proselytising among Sunnites which was put forward against the Shiite protagonists of the association, this argument also served the purpose of soothing apprehensions of mainly salafī propagations of a lā-madhhabiyya, i.e. the opinion that it is not obligatory and may even be regarded as blameworthy sectarianism to follow a specific madhhab.

Accordingly, Shiism in the context of the ecumenical debate was consistently equated with the so-called "Ja'farī madhhab", named after the sixth Imām, Ja'far al-Sādiq, who had been instrumental in developing Shiite jurisprudence. Incidentally – and without being specifically mentioned – this had also been the expression used by Nādir Shāh two hundred years previously in order to promote his idea of a rapprochement with the Ottomans. And it was precisely in this spirit that the famous fatwā by Mahmūd Shaltūt, then the rector of the Azhar university, stipulated in 1959 that, first, every Muslim was free to follow any of the established schools and also to turn from one to any other without being subjected to reproach and that, secondly, Ja'farite Shiism was acknowledged as being one of these schools, on a par with the Sunnite madhāhib. The problem of mutual conversion, contested and rejected officially, was supposed to be settled through the back door.[21]

Alas, things were not quite so simple. If this fatwā had reflected a more or less generally accepted opinion, the activities of the ecumenical society would have been a tremendous success, and most probably there would be no quarrel about inner-Islamic conversion anymore. Instead, the taqrib society failed for political reasons which are beyond the scope of this article,[22] and the polemicists won the day. The tone was set by the well-known salafī journalist Muhibb al-Dīn al-Khatīb who, in 1961, published a booklet with the longwinded, but highly instructive title "The broad lines of the foundations upon which the religion of the Imāmī Twelver Shiites is based".[23] Slim though the 45-page volume was, it soon proved to be one of the most influential anti-Shiite writings of the 20th century and was

quickly translated into several languages of the Muslim world. Occasionally, the Muslim World League in Mecca had it distributed, some editions were published under the auspices of official Wahhābī authorities in Saudi Arabia, and today, the booklet – which triggered off a number of refutations by Shiite writers – can be found on dozens of websites on the internet.[24]

The key-word in the book's title is of course the term dīn. The usual translation as "religion" is unsatisfactory in many regards, as it has always been a rather elusive concept with implications far beyond the purely theological sphere.

Thus, in early Islamic history, people would clarify their affiliation in the conflict about the caliphate by saying that they followed the dīn 'Alī or the dīn Mu'āwiya,[25] and the 94 Qur'anic references to it notwithstanding, it has never developed to become a clear-cut theological term.[26] Modern authors, especially those with Islamist leanings, commonly use it in the sense of and as a synonym for "system" (nizām) in order to emphasize the claim that the Islamic religion should have the final say in all political and social matters as well.[27] Yet it seems safe to assume that al-Khatīb, by choosing this title, indeed strove to imply that Shiism was an alien religion, totally incompatible with Sunnite Islam. The controversial issues he singled out – above all his allegation that the Shiites did not acknowledge the text of the Qur'an[28] – were meant to prove that the discord between Sunnites and Shiites was (and is) about more than merely a different set of law books. For him and his equals, it is a conflict about how early Islamic history should have been, about a completely different outlook on salvation history.

This last point is rather important in order to illustrate why switching from Shāfi'ism to Hanafism – the subject of 'Abduh's Transvaal fatwā – cannot be regarded as a conversion proper, whereas changing from Sunnism to Shiism can: In Sunnite Islam, spiritual leadership after Muhammad's death was collectively transferred onto the community of believers (umma) which, according to an often-quoted hadīth would not agree on an error.[29]

In Shiism, by contrast, the prophetic charisma more or less directly devolved upon the Imams

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[20] Cf., e.g., Muhammad Taqī Qummī in the jamā'a 's journal Risālat al-Islām 5 (1953), pp. 146-51.
[21] On the fatwā and its background cf. Brunner: Ecumenism, pp. 284-305.
[22] For details, see ibid., pp. 305-20.
[23] Khatīb: al-Khutūt al-'arīda li-l-usus allatī qāma 'alayhā dīn al-shī'a al-imāmiyya al-ithnā 'ashariyya; born in Damascus, Khatīb (1886-1969/70) had been an early protagonist of Arab nationalism before settling in Cairo in 1920 where he soon sided with various neo-salafī organizations. Between 1952 and 1959 he was editor-in-chief of the Azhar journal (Majallat al-Azhar) which under his guidance temporarily turned strongly anti-Shiite; cf. in detail Brunner: Ecumenism, pp. 255-75, 320-37.
[24] E.g., here: http://www.alsalafway.com/cms/books.php?action=books&id=1243; an enumeration of the various editions between 1961 and 1982 is given in the Cairo edition, p. 2.
[25] Crone: Political Thought, pp. 25-27.
[26] For an overview of the pre-modern usage of the word cf. van Ess: Theologie und Gesellschaft, vol. VI, pp. 565ff.; cf. also Amir-Moezzi: "Considérations sur l'expression dīn 'Alī".
[27] Qutb: al-'Adāla al-ijtimā'iyya, p. 79.
[28] Cf. Brunner: Die Schia und die Koranfälschung, pp. 95-98.
[29] Inna ummatī la tajtami' 'alā dalāla; Wensinck: Concordance et Indices, vol. I, p. 97b.

who thereby became the link to salvation history and the Qur'an that without their speaking would remain "silent".[30] Unconditional loyalty (walāya) to them – which goes hand in hand with an equally unquestioning dissociation from their enemies (barā'a) – thereby became the hallmarks of Shiism and have aptly been described as the core of Shiite faith.[31] After the disappearance in 874 of the twelfth Imam, the Mahdī who is (or is not)[32] awaited as the redeemer, this charisma in a thoroughly Weberian sense devolved further upon the religious scholars ('ulamā') whose position as guides of the believers by far outshines that of their Sunnite counterparts.[33]

IV. Beginnings of a Converts' Literature

Although the activities of the ecumenical association on the whole was rather unsuccessful and even backfired in the form of a renewed anti-Shiite polemics, it apparently did contribute to a climate change and encouraged several former Sunnites to have their coming out.

One of the first to step forward and publicly account for their conversion to Shiism was Muḥammad Marʿī al-Amīn al-Anṭākī. Born in 1896/97 in Ottoman Antakya, he studied at Azhar university in Cairo with Muḥammad Muṣṭafā al-Marāghī[34] and later returned to Syria to work in various religious fields[35] for some 15 years. The exact date of his conversion to Shiism remains unclear, but it seems to have happened in the early 1950s, judging by what Anṭākī revealed himself in his lengthy treatise "Why I chose the Shiite school" which he finished in 1961.[36] There he not only included a long and apologetic treatment of the Shiite view of Islamic history and described his own way from the Shāfiʿī madhhab to Twelver Shiism as well as his travels to Iran and Iraq to meet eminent āyatollāhs.

What is more, he also prided himself upon having managed, in endless debates with Sunnite scholars, to help them recognize their erroneous opinions of Shiism. Inevitably, these discussions, which more often than not are on the brink of caricatures, would lead to his interlocutors likewise converting, offering only a rather limited amount of resistance. The term Anṭākī uses in this context has become

the Shiite standard designation for new converts: al-mustabṣirūn, "those who are able to see".[37] The first who followed his call was his own elder brother, Aḥmad Amīn al-Anṭākī, who emulated him also by writing a report on it.[38]

Driven by the urge to belong to the one sect (out of 73) that according to the aforementioned ḥadīth would be saved from hellfire,[39] Anṭākī offers several reasons that finally made him convert to Shiism. Apart from his general dissatisfaction with the differences and contradictions between the Sunnite schools of law, his growing love for the ahl al-bayt and his equally growing loathing of the Wahhābīs, he mentions two more specific things that did the trick.

One was Shaltut's fatwā – which seems a little anachronistic, given the fact that it was issued only in 1959; the other and by far more important was his reading of the book al-Murāja'āt ("The Consultations") by the Lebanese Shiite ʿAbd al-Ḥusayn Sharaf al-Dīn (d. 1957).[40] This book, which was first published in 1936, consists of an exchange of 112 letters between the author and Salīm al-Bishrī, the former rector of the Azhar university, which, as Sharaf al-Dīn claimed, had taken place during his stay in Cairo a quarter of a century earlier, in 1911/12. The complicated publication history of the book as well as its general (rather spurious) authenticity cannot be dealt with here.[41]

Suffice it to say that the subject of the correspondence was the crucial question of the caliphate and the succession to the Prophet, namely the prerogative of ʿAlī and his descendents, his alleged designation by Muḥammad, and the shameful behaviour of the first two caliphs, Abū Bakr and ʿUmar, and other companions of the Prophet held in high esteem by the Sunnites, who were responsible for torpedoing this (ultimately divine) appointment.

In the end, Sharaf al-Dīn's sparring partner meekly gives in and thanks him for the signs of proper guidance which he had been granted. Many Shiite authors, who are of course far from questioning the trustworthiness of the scene, until this very day claim that the Shaykh al-Azhar had in fact con-

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30 Ayoub: "The Speaking and the Silent Qur'ān".
31 Amir-Moezzi/Jambet: Qu'est-ce que le shī'isme?, pp. 131-38; For more detail cf. Amir-Moezzi: "Notes à propos de la walāya imamite".
32 The picture of Shiism as an anti-messianic creed is drawn by Maghen: "Occultation in Perpetuum".
33 Brunner: "Le charisme des songeurs", pp. 112ff.
34 Marāghī (d. 1945) was one of the most important (yet also widely disputed) reformist scholars of the Azhar; on him cf. Costet-Tardieu: Un réformiste à l'université al-Azhar.
35 He himself described it as Imāmat al-jamā'a wa-l-jum'a wa-l-tadrīs wa-l-iftā' wa-l-khiṭāba; M. al-Anṭākī: Li-mādhā ikhtart, p. 6.
36 M. al-Anṭākī: Li-mādhā ikhtart, pp. 328, 332, 341, 352; he died in 1963 or 64.
37 ibid., p. 22; cf. also al-Bajnūrī: al-Mustabṣirūn; http://aqaed.com/mostabser/.
38 A. Amīn al-Anṭākī: Fī ṭarīqī ilā l-tashayyu'.
39 Cf. above, footnote 7; M. Anṭākī: Li-mādhā ikhtart, pp. 10, 12; also within the ecumenical debate, this ḥadīth was occasionally quoted (for those who managed to overcome the sectarian divide); Brunner: Ecumenism, pp. 237f.; Samāwī: Thumma ihtadayt, p. 74.
40 M. Anṭākī: Li-mādhā ikhtart, pp. 16, 18ff.
41 For details cf. Brunner: Ecumenism, pp. 51-81; editions and translations of this book (Saida 1936) abound and are also readily available on the internet; cf., among others, http://aqaed.com/shialib/books/06/morajeat/index.html for an Arabic version and http://www.al-islam.org/murajaat/ for an English translation.

verted to Shiism.[42] What made this book so valuable for the purpose of conversion was Sharaf al-Dīn's method – by which he closely followed predecessors like the aforementioned Ibn Ṭāwūs –, namely on the one hand, to present the matter in a highly stylised form of a dialogue between two eminent scholars, and on the other hand, to quote exclusively from Sunnite sources and thus "prove" to Sunnites that their own ḥadīth collections were actually a corroboration of the Shiite point of view.

It comes as no surprise that for further epigones like the Anṭākī brothers (but no less for likeminded authors after them) this book is the most precious tool and the model to be imitated; they, too, succeed in winning over the most obstinate Sunnites by making them read the Murāja'āt.[43]

V. The Impact of the Iranian Revolution

For several years, the number of Sunnite converts to Shiism – or at least of those who made their conversion public – remained rather limited, and their books presumably reached only a limited audience. Things changed, however, thoroughly after the Iranian revolution in 1979, which led to a distinct polarization of the relations between Sunnism and Shiism in nearly every regard.[44]

On the one hand, particularly the 1980s were characterised by an intense and at times bloody rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia and by the first Gulf War, and both events were fuelled by a constant stream of polemical literature on both sides.[45] On the other hand, the Iranian regime early on made efforts to appear as the new champion of Islamic unity and rapprochement, by convening conferences and founding a new ecumenical society in Tehran in 1990.[46] The association by the name of al-Majma' al-'ālamī li-l-taqrīb bayn al-madhāhib al-islamiyya was clearly intended to be a follow-up to the Cairene body, whose activities finally had come to a halt after the Iranian revolution, following several years of agony.

The immediate effect of events in Iran on Sunnite conversions seems to have been limited in the beginning. True, the verve of the revolution carried away several Sunnite authors, primarily those of an Islamist orientation who readily disregarded sectarian differences in favour of revolutionary au-

thenticity. It is not always clear how far this revolutionary zeal carried these activists and who in the end actually went so far as to convert to Shiism.[47] The Palestinian activist Fathī 'Abd al-'Azīz Shiqāqī, for instance, as early as 1979 wrote a book entitled "Khomeyni – the Islamic solution and the alternative", in which he praised Khomeyni's theory of government, welāyat-e faqīh (the Mandate of the Supreme Jurist), that was to become the cornerstone of the new political system in Iran.[48] While he did not apparently convert to Shiism, his compatriot As'ad Waḥīd al-Qāsim did and accounted for this step in his book "The truth of Twelver Shiism". Incidentally, he, too, claimed to have experienced a sort of awakening after reading the Murāja'āt by Sharaf al-Dīn.[49]

It is certainly not by chance that the Iranian regime before long also discovered this book by the Lebanese divine of Iraqi-Iranian descent and its usefulness for its own purpose of appearing as the champion of Islamic unity.[50] New editions and translations were published in quick succession, conferences were held in his honour. In addition, not least due to the intention to counter Wahhābī anti-Shiite propaganda, which readily made use of reprinting and disseminating well-tried polemics like the aforementioned diatribe by al-Khaṭīb, the reports of former converts to Shiism were also republished. Today, most of the material can be easily found on the internet.[51]

A good case in point in this regard is Muḥammad al-Tījānī al-Samāwī (b. 1943), a Tunisian teacher who at some point around 1970 converted to Shiism. His account "Then I was guided" is structured in a way very similar to Muḥammad al-Anṭākī's book, and it assembles all the well-known ingredients of a convert's tale: first a travelogue of his journey that took him to Iraq and during which, through intense conversations with ordinary Shiites and meetings with the Grand Ayatollahs, he gradually became suspicious of his former Wahhābite leanings; then a thorough study of the Shiite sources (including Sharaf al-Dīn's Murāja'āt) which eventually convinced him; finally, his own activities as a lecturer and author of numerous apologetic writings by which he in turn manages to convert other Sunnites.[52]

Translations (both English and Persian) of this book were subsequently published under the aus-

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[42] Bajnūrī: al-Mustabṣirūn, pp. 131ff.; Tījānī: Thumma ihtadayt, p. 87; Ahmad: al-Haqīqa al-dā'i'a, p. 207; al-Qāsim: Haqīqat al-shī'a, pp. 14-16; for a Sunni refutation of this claim, cf. al-Sālūs: 'Aqīdat al-imāma, pp. 170-81.

[43] M. Anṭākī: Li-mādhā ikhtart, pp. 340, 352, 363; cf. also the Persian translation Cherā madhhab-e tashayyo'-rā ekhtiyār kardam?, p. 3; A. al-Anṭākī: Fī ṭarīqī ilā l-tashayyu', pp. 17, 36; Samāwī: Thumma ihtadayt, p. 208.

[44] Brunner: Ecumenism, pp. 376-97; idem: "Shiism in the Modern Context".

[45] Ende: "Sunni Polemical Writings".

[46] Buchta: Die iranische Schia, pp. 245ff.

[47] Cf. also Sivan: "Sunni Radicalism in the Middle East".

[48] Shiqāqī: al-Khumaynī – al-hall al-islāmī wa-l-badīl; on Shiqāqī cf. Hatina: Islam and Salvation, pp. 53ff. and index; Buchta: Die iranische Schia, pp. 110ff.

[49] Qāsim: Haqīqat al-shī'a al-ithnā 'ashariyya, pp. 14ff.

[50] Brunner: Ecumenism, pp. 75ff.

[51] Cf., e.g., the latest edition of M. al-Anṭākī's Li-mādhā ikhtart, Qom 2003; online edition: http://www.aqaed.com/shialib/books/02/akhtart/; cf. also above, footnote 41; on Wahhābī counter-propaganda cf. Hasson: "Les Šī'ites vus par les néo-Wahhābites".

[52] Samāwī: Thumma ihtadayt; on the author cf. ibid., pp. 9ff.; somewhat surprisingly, there is even a wikipedia article on him: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Muhammad_al-Tijani

pices of Iranian authorities, as well as of Tijānī's later books which are more or less variations on the same theme.[53]

It is next to impossible to gain reliable data as to the number of converts to Shiism in the past 30 years – and to distinguish various Sunnite conspiracy theories from real Shiite proselytising efforts.[54] It is clear, however, that since the revolution in 1979 Shiite Islam has been spreading in regions far beyond the Middle East and South Asia, where there had formerly been no or only few Shiites. Sometimes this happens through the efforts of individuals who, like in Antākī's days, try to convince their students or neighbours; sometimes it is the Iranian embassy or other Iranian-backed organisations which are behind the upsurge. At least for the time being, however, the numbers which are quoted are not large by any standard.

Consider South East Asia, e.g:. in Malaysia, Thailand, or Singapore, there are merely a few thousand Shiites, the majority of them apparently new converts, and even if the estimated number of up to three million Shiites in Indonesia is correct (Shiite organisations would add another million), this is not really a lot, in relation to the country's more than 210 million Sunnites.[55]

Yet for Sunnite counter propagandists, more often than not supported by Saudi money, this is a good enough reason to disseminate polemical treatises, translated into the local vernacular. Even in Kenya, Swahili versions of Muhibb al-Dīn al-Khatīb's aforementioned treatise against the Shiite "religion" are available. In this particular case, these activities seem to be directed primarily against one individual scholar, Abdilahi Nassir, a well-known former Sunnite politician and scholar who converted to Shiism in the early 1980s, under the spell of Khomeyni's success and although he had just been nominated for the prestigious Saudi King Faysal Award. In contrast to most converts who are entirely focused on the caliphate issue and on history "as it should have been",[56] Nassir reveals motives that are closer to realities on the ground and talks about politics as it should be. In the current constitutional debate in Kenya, he shows undisguised distrust in democracy and instead pleads for what he terms a "benevolent dictator". This positive leader would not come to power by election, but would simply show up and be acknowledged by the people as the legitimate ruler.[57] Needless to say, this is a strong reminder of the Shiite idea of the Mahdi. who will emerge at the end of days and establish God's just dominion. Still, the practical effects of his lectures seem to be as limited as the number of people who listen to his lectures and who hardly exceed more than a few dozen.[58] Nevertheless, Nassir is among the very few who reflects politically and thereby manages to go beyond the usual motivation of new converts to Shiism, i.e. the emphasis – endlessly repeated by Antākī, Tijānī and their likes– on the historical wrong that once was inflicted upon the *ahl al-bayt* by the Sunnites.

VI. Old Reproaches in a New Garb

The relatively small number of converts and the stereotypical character of their writings notwithstanding, it would be a serious mistake to conclude that inner-Islamic conversion is a phenomenon that may well be totally ignored. For the significance of the topic does not lie in a few confessional reports or more or less fictitious conversations.

Its significance lies in its potential for political exploitation and ensuing social agitation. The familiar Sunnite anxieties of an Iranian export of the revolution that had been entertained in the 1980s are back on the agenda, with a slightly different tinge: the reproach of proselytising. Thus the Jordanian King 'Abdallāh warned of a "Shiite crescent" stretching from Syria and Lebanon in the West until Iraq, Iran and the Gulf states,[59] and the Egyptian President Husnī Mubārak stated in an interview in April 2006 that the loyalty of all Shiites in the region was not directed towards their respective countries but to Iran.[60]

A good case in point in this regard is Egypt: although only a small minority of Egyptians – supposedly less than one per cent of the total population – belongs to Shiism, there have been, since the 1980s, fierce public debates about the influence they are allegedly able to exert. Egyptian perception of Shiism has been ambivalent since the Middle Ages. The Fatimid epoch (969-1171) did leave its mark especially on the popular culture of the country,[61] and reverence for the *ahl al-bayt* has always played a prominent role for Egyptian religious consciousness; some Egyptians even describe their country as "juristically Sunni but with a passion for Shiism".[62] Yet the Iranian Revolution did not arouse much sympathy beyond Islamist circles, and the fact that the two most prominent spokes-

53 English: *Then I was Guided*, Qom 1992 (several reprints); Persian: Īngūne hedāyat shodam, Tehran 1990; *Rāh yāfte, yā chegūne Shī'a shodam*, Qom 2003; his other books: *Ask Those Who Know*, Qom 1990 (*Fa-s'alū ahl al-dhikr*, London 1991); *To Be With the Truthful*, Qom ³2000 (*Ma'a al-sādiqīn*, Beirut 1989); *Ahl-e sonnat-e wāqe'ī*, Qom 1994 (*al-Shī'a hum ahl al-sunna*, London 1993); cf. also
http://www.al-islam.org/index.php?t=sub_pages_74&cat=116&sid=37e1f558006e6ad7ee715093d1e665d7;
a refutation of these books is al-Nāsirī: *Kashf al-jānī Muhammad al-Tijānī*.
54 Elad-Altmann, *"The Sunni-Shi'a Conversion Controversy"*, pp. 2f.
55 Marcinkowski: *"Aspects of Shi'ism in Contemporary South East Asia"*, pp. 46, 47, 50, 59.
56 Lewis: *History - Remembered, Recovered, Invented*, p. 71.
57 Kresse: *"'Making People Think"*, pp. 237f.; I owe the reference to this article to Professor Ulrich Rebstock.
58 Ibid., 227; cf. also Kresse: *Philosophising in Mombasa*, pp. 176-207, 247-50.
59 The Washington Post, 8 December 2004; Nakash: Reaching for Power, p. 154.
60 al-'Arabiyya, 8 April 2006 http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2006/04/08/22686.html.
61 Stewart: *"Popular Shiism in Medieval Egypt"*.
62 Mustafā al-Fiqī: *"Misr: Sha'b sunnī al-madhhab shī'ī al-hawā!"*, al-'Arabiyya 24 April 2006 (English version: "Egypt: Sunni but Shia inclined", *al-Ahram Weekly* 25 May 2006).

men for Shiism in Egypt came from this background did not necessarily contribute to winning over public support. Both Ṣāliḥ al-Wardānī and Aḥmad Rāsim al-Nafīs had belonged to Islamist groups before they converted – again under the spell of Khomeyni's revolution – to Shiism in the 1980s and started the usual career as proselytisers and writers for the case of Shiism and against Wahhābism.[63] In the past, occasional rumours about a Shiite political party have been answered by the Egyptian authorities time and again by crackdowns on Shiite activists – who then, among other things, are interrogated by the prosecutors about the way they pray and their attitude towards Abū Bakr and ʿUmar b. al-Khaṭṭāb.[64]

Two events in particular contributed to making the situation so tense in recent years: The war in Iraq and the Shiite takeover after 2003 (which not only led to a growing Iranian influence in the region but also spilled hundreds of thousands of refugees into the neighbouring countries, many of them Shiites), as well as the war in summer 2006 between Israel and the Ḥizbullāh, which entailed a huge wave of support for Ḥasan Naṣrallāh, Ḥizbullāh's secretary general, across the whole Middle East and beyond.

In an angry, but probably calculated outburst the well-known Sunnite scholar Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī reacted by calling Naṣrallāh a fanatic and by warning of Shiite attempts to infiltrate Egypt and proselytise the Sunnites; the Shiites, he concluded, should stop defaming the companions of the Prophet and claiming the incompleteness of the Qur'an.[65] When he repeated his criticism in January 2007, on the occasion of an ecumenical conference in Qaṭar, and again criticized Iran's allegedly proselytising politics in the Middle East, this caused a major scandal.[66] The issue of missionary activities has moved to the centre of the debate, and it was used by commentators, journalists and scholars so excessively that the Egyptian sociologist Saad Eddin Ibrahim finally stated that the Sunnites in Egypt should stop behaving as if they were the persecuted minority.[67]

In recent months, turmoil about alleged or factual Iranian attempts at proselytising spread to several other Middle Eastern countries. One focal point is Syria, an Iranian ally since the revolution, where the situation is further complicated by the fact that it involves not only Sunnites and Twelver Shiites, but also Ismailis and the smaller group of the ʿAlawites to which the ruling class of the country has belonged since 1963. It seems, however, that the bulk of the activity there takes place within Shiism, i.e. from Ismailiyya and ʿAlawiyya to Twelver Shiism, and therefore cannot be considered as conversion proper in the sense outlined above.[68]

Things are different in the case of Morocco, where the government accused Iran of missionary activity and thereupon decided to sever diplomatic relations between the two countries in March 2009. It is difficult, however, to assess to what extent this far-reaching decision was brought about by actual Iranian activity in the country, or whether it was intended as a supporting measure with regard to the controversy between Iran and Bahrain a little earlier, when Morocco firmly protested against the Iranian reference to the Gulf state as an actually Iranian province.[69]

The issue of inner-Islamic conversions is decidedly a one-way street, as it is next to impossible to come across any Shiite who accounts for his being reborn as a Sunnite. It is true that there are a few renegades from Shiism, such as the enigmatic Mūsā al-Mūsawī, who publicly turned away from very basic Shiite tenets. But this does not normally lead to a conversion to Sunnism, but rather to the call for reform within Shiism.[70]

And even when Ṣāliḥ al-Wardānī, one of the aforementioned Egyptian activists, performed a spectacular backward roll and announced in October 2006 that he no longer considered himself to be Shiite, due to his estrangement from Iran and the clerical establishment, this did not amount to his re-conversion to Sunni Islam. Instead, he declared his intention to propel a new movement called al-Khiṭāb al-jadīd, which was to represent an Islam without madhāhib.[71] Judging from daily news about sectarian tensions in Iraq or the Gulf States, it is not very likely that such a "new discourse" is indeed apt to bridge the sectarian gap within Islam. Sunni-Shiite relations today, including proselytising efforts, take place within the political framework of the 21st century. At the same time, and perhaps more than ever, they express an obsession with the foundations of Islam: the Prophet, the caliphate, and the umma. This, however, is precisely when disunity started and fitna began. It is a temptation until this very day.

[63] To name only a few of their many books: al-Wardānī: al-Shīʿa fī Miṣr; idem: ʿAqāʾid al-sunna wa-ʿaqāʾid al-shīʿa; idem: Ibn Bāz faqīh āl Suʿūd; idem: al-Munāẓarāt; al-Nafīs: al-Miṣriyyūn; idem: al-Shīʿa wa-l-tashayyuʿ; idem: Naqd al-wahhābiyya.

[64] Nafīs: al-Miṣriyyūn, pp. 147-58; for details on the background of these debates and their current repercussions cf. Brunner: "Interesting Times".

[65] al-ʿArabiyya, 2 September 2006 http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2006/09/02/27111.html.

[66] Islam Online, 21 and 22 January 2007,
http://www.islamonline.net/Arabic/news/2007-01/21/02.shtml,
http://www.islamonline.net/Arabic/news/2007-01/22/08.shtml.

[67] al-Miṣrī al-yawm, 17 March 2007, http://www.almasry-alyoum.com/article2.aspx?ArticleID=51467;
cf. also Elad-Altmann: "The Sunni-Shiʿa Conversion Controversy", pp. 4f.

[68] Sindawi: "The Shiite Turn in Syria"; on the relations between the ʿAlawiyya and Twelver Shiism, cf. Bar-Asher: "Le rapport de la religion nuṣayrite-ʿalawite au Shīʿisme imamite".

[69] "Morocco Cuts Off Diplomatic Relations with Iran, Accuses It of Spreading Shiʿism in the Country", MEMRI Special Dispatch, no. 2294, 24 March 2009, http://memri.org/bin/articles.cgi?Page=archives&Area=sd&ID=SP229409.

[70] Brunner: "A Shiite Cleric's Criticism of Shiism".

[71] al-ʿArabiyya, 31 October 2006, http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2006/10/31/28702.html.

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