

***Al-Mustabşirūn*, “Those Who Are Able To See The Light”: Sunnī Conversion to Twelver Shī‘ism in Modern Times**

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Abstract

The present study’s objective is to analyze the phenomenon of the *mustabşirūn* in Twelver Shī‘ism in modern times. The term *mustabşir* is used among (Twelver) Shī‘ites to refer to someone who has left his previous faith, converted to Shī‘ism and adopted its doctrines. In this study we inquire into the meaning of the term in general, in the Qur’ān and its commentaries, and as a specific term. We examine the motivation for conversion to Shī‘ism, the types and status of converts and the reasons which drive them to convert, the pressures and threats which converts face from Sunnī circles and how converts cope with these and respond to the attacks on them. The study also surveys *mustabşir* websites and their contents, books which such converts have written, describing their conversion experience, as well as factors which have contributed to the popularity of the conversion movement, among them the support which Iranian cultural missions provide to converts, the Lebanon War of 2006 and the burgeoning popularity of Ḥasan Naşr Allāh, the political protection which many converts enjoy, monetary and economic emoluments given to converts, and Shī‘ite satellite TV stations and websites. The study’s main conclusion is that the terms *mustabşir* (“he who has had his eyes opened”, convert to Twelver Shī‘ism) and *istibşār* (the verbal noun: conversion) have taken on a clear and definite meaning, denoting a real trend in recent years, although still relatively limited in scope, so that at present and in the foreseeable future Sunnī Muslims have no reason to fear this trend.

Keywords

Shī‘a, Twelver Shī‘a, conversion, Ḥizbullāh, Syria, Lebanon, Iran, Iraq, ‘Alī, caliphate, imamate, Prophet

Introduction

The term *mustabṣir* is used among contemporary Shī'ites to denote a convert to Shī'ism. Literally the term means "having had his eyes opened", so that the more such a convert learns about his faith and the Prophet's family, the more "his eyes are opened" and thus the greater his *istibṣār*.¹

The verb and its derivations in this use can be traced back to the dawn of Islam, when people began to join the new religion in droves. As scholars and intellectuals began to disseminate their new faith, those who decided to adopt it considered themselves as having come out of darkness into light and thus "had their eyes opened", individually and collectively, in every part of the Muslim world.²

Islam throughout its history has witnessed more than one wave of significant Shī'ite expansion. Some of these introduced a significant, albeit transitory, Shī'ite presence for some time in the affected territories, as was the case, for example, in Egypt and Palestine during the Fāṭimid period. In our times certain official religious Shī'ite organizations have undertaken the mission of spreading Shī'ism among Sunnī Muslims. Among these organizations are the Center for Doctrinal Studies (*Markaz al-Abḥāth al-'Aqā'idīyya*) under the auspices of the Shī'ite religious authority (*marja'*) Fāris Ḥassūn, and the Āl al-Bayt World Center (*Markaz Āl al-Bayt al-'Ālamī*), headed by the *marja'* al-Sīstānī; both of these centers have their own websites.

Conversion to Shī'ism (*istibṣār*) has in many Arab and Muslim countries become a significant intellectual and cultural force. According to some observers³ the cultural and intellectual importance which this phenomenon has attained is due to the fact that often such converts are among the country's leading intellectuals, whose prominence has made the fact of their conversion resonate strongly in Shī'ite circles.

¹ See Ḥasan Farḥān al-Mālīkī, "Qirā'a fi l-taḥawwulāt al-sunniyya li-l-shī'a", *al-Majalla* issue 1082, 11 November 2000.

² See Ghulām Aṣghar al-Bajnūrī, *al-Mustabṣirūn*, ed. 'Alī al-'Usaylī (Beirut: Dār al-Ṣafwa, 1993), p. 11.

³ Al-Yamanī, <http://almostabsiroon.com/index.php?option>, 2006 (accessed 27 February 2009).

***Istibṣār* and *mustabṣir* in Arabic Lexicography, in the Qurʾān, and as a Shīʿite Term**

According to the *Lisān al-ʿarab*, the verb *istabṣara* means “distinguished between the good and the evil he encountered”.⁴ The author of the *Kitāb al-ʿayn* has the following definition: “*istabṣara* on the matter of one’s religion means to have discernment (*baṣīra*), namely to be convinced of the truth of one’s faith in one’s heart”.⁵ In the *Majmaʿ al-baḥrayn* the term *mustabṣir* is defined as “one who sees the matter clearly”.⁶ In its original meaning the word thus denotes a person of discernment, capable of distinguishing between good and evil.

The word *mustabṣir* appears only once in the Qurʾān, in the plural form. In Q 29:38, in reference to the people of ʿĀd and Thamūd, we read: “And ʿĀd and Thamūd—but it is plain to you from their habitations; for Satan made seemly to them their works, and turned them from the way, sagacious (*mustabṣirīn*) though they were!” According to the *Bihār al-anwār* the word in this verse means “wise persons, capable of distinguishing between truth and falseness by sight, or believing that they are on the right path”.⁷ To a question which Abū Baṣīr⁸ asked the sixth Twelver imam Jaʿfar al-Šādiq⁹ (d. 765) on the interpretation of Q 25:73, “and those who when they are reminded of the signs of their Lord do not fall down thereat deaf and blind”, he was given the follow-

⁴ Ibn Manẓūr al-Miṣrī, Jamāl al-Dīn Muḥammad b. Mukarram, *Lisān al-ʿarab*, vol. 4 (Beirut: Dār Šādir, 1990), p. 65, s.v. BṢR.

⁵ Al-Khalīl b. Aḥmad al-Farāhīdī, *Kitāb al-ʿayn*, vol. 7, ed. Maḥdī al-Makhzūmī and Ibrāhīm al-Sāmarrāʾī (Beirut: Muʾassasat al-Aʿlamī li-l-Maṭbūʿāt, 1408/1988), p. 117, s.v. BṢR.

⁶ Fakhr al-Dīn al-Ṭarīḥī, *Majmaʿ al-baḥrayn*, vol. 1, ed. Aḥmad al-Ḥusaynī (Qumm: Maktab Nashr al-Thaqāfa al-Islāmiyya, 1395/1975), p. 207, s.v. BṢR.

⁷ Muḥammad Bāqir al-Majlisī, *Bihār al-anwār*, vol. 11 (Beirut: Muʾassasat al-Wafāʾ, 1984), p. 19.

⁸ There are four known figures whose agnomen is Abū Baṣīr: Layth b. al-Bakhtarī al-Murādī, Yaḥyā b. Abū Qāsim, Yūsuf b. al-Ḥārith, and ʿAbd Allāh b. Muḥammad al-Asadī; for more details see Ḥasan b. Yūsuf b. ʿAlī al-Ḥillī, *Rijāl al-ʿallāma al-Ḥillī* (Qumm: Dār al-Dhakḥāʾir, 1411/1990), pp. 392f.; Ibn Dāwūd al-Ḥillī Taqīyy al-Dīn al-Ḥasan b. ʿAlī, *Kitāb al-Rijāl* (Teheran: Published Foundation at the University of Tehran, 1383/1963), p. 393, nos. 7-9. It is not clear which of these is meant here, since all of them transmitted traditions in the imam al-Šādiq’s name.

⁹ For details on him see: M.G.S. Hodgson, “Djaʿfar al-Šādiq”, *EP*, 2, pp. 374f.

ing answer by the imam: "What is meant by them is the *mustabṣir*, not those who are skeptical of their religion."¹⁰

In Shī'ite usage the word *mustabṣir* denotes someone who has left his faith and converted to Shī'ism, after "God showed him the right path and made him see with his heart, not with his eye, the way of truth, and did everything in his power to embrace the right religion [...] the religion of truth which brings salvation, and who is prepared to defend the Shī'ite creed".¹¹

Such a person, who "has seen the light" is called *mustabṣir* "because light, that is seeing or observing, comes about through discerning (*istibṣār*)". A *mustabṣir* is also someone who has been shown the right path and who has come to realize the proper status of the Prophet's family, whose love has settled in his heart. The reason why Shī'ites have adhered to this term is their call to join the Shī'ite faith. 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib is quoted as saying that "the *mustabṣir* endures war calmly and is faithful in battle".¹² The term *mustabṣir* thus denotes, in the Shī'ite view,¹³ those individuals who have chosen Shī'ism from among all Islamic sects, having realized that it is the only true faith, the one which God and His Messenger commanded, and which represents the path taken by the Prophet's family.

Motives for Conversion

A perusal of books written by *mustabṣirūn* reveals the following motives for conversion:

A. The Sunnī creed is perceived as lacking the solidity or strength to survive on its own. Ṣāliḥ al-Wardānī has this to say on the matter:

¹⁰ Muḥammad b. Ya'qūb al-Kulaynī, *al-Kāfi*, vol. 8 (Teheran: Dār al-Kutub al-Islāmiyya, 4th edition, 1946), p. 178, *ḥadīth* 199, whence al-Majlisī, *Bihār al-anwār*, vol. 16, p. 262.

¹¹ See <http://www.alsanabis.com/article.php?newsID=864> (accessed 27 February 2009).

¹² Ibn Abī al-Ḥadīd, *Sharḥ nahj al-balāgha*, vol. 20 (1404/1983), p. 288.

¹³ It is worth noting in this connection, that converts to Shī'ism are also called *mutaḥawwil* ("transformed, converted"); the latter term refers to anyone who converts either from the Sunnī to the Shī'ite creed or the reverse. For more details see: Usāma Shihāda, *al-Mushkila al-shī'iyya* (Cairo: Kitāb al-Rāsid 3, 2008), p. 102.

The doctrine of the Sunnīs is an official creed, which has lived under the protection of rulers from its inception to this day. It obtained support and legitimacy from these rulers, and by this was able to survive and spread. That is the only reason why this faith has been able to maintain its central position as the majority religion. Actually it should have come to an end, were it not for its adoption by the rulers.¹⁴

- B. Recognition of the legitimacy of the imams descending from the Prophet, especially through the line of Fāṭima and al-Ḥusayn b. 'Alī, and the influence of the story of the latter's tragic death at Karbalā'.¹⁵
- C. Encounters between Sunnī converts to Shī'ism (before their conversion) with Shī'ites. Such encounters at times played a role in their decision to convert (become *mustabṣirūn*).¹⁶
- D. Some converts were convinced by the evidence found in books and in accounts of the Prophet's sayings and doings (*sunna*); such converts were Muḥammad Mar'ī al-Anṭākī, Muḥammad al-Tijānī al-Samāwī, and others.¹⁷
- E. Others were convinced after having read books by Shī'ites and by other converts to Shī'ism; one such a convert was Idrīs al-Ḥusaynī.

Stages of Conversion (*istibṣār*)

According to 'Alā' al-Ḥassūn a new convert (*mustabṣir*) to Twelver Shī'ism goes through the following stages and grades:

¹⁴ Ṣāliḥ al-Wardānī, *Ahl al-sunna: sha'b Allāh al-mukhtār (dināsa fī fasād 'aqā'id) ahl al-sunna* (n. p.: Kanūta Ṭibā'a Nashr wa-Tawzī', 1417/1997), p. 65.

¹⁵ See, for example: Muḥammad 'Alī al-Mutawakkil, *Wa-dakhalnā l-tashayyū' sujjadan* (Beirut: Dār al-Khalij al-'Arabī li-l-Ṭibā'a wa-l-Nashr, 2nd edition, 1422/2001), p. 40; 'Abd al-Mun'im Ḥasan, *Bi-nūr Fāṭima btadaytu* (Beirut: Dār al-Khalij al-'Arabī li-l-Ṭibā'a wa-l-Nashr, 2nd edition, 1420/1999), p. 210; Idrīs al-Ḥusaynī, *Laqad shayya'anī l-Ḥusayn ('alayhi l-salām) ... al-intiqāl al-ṣa'b fī riḥāb al-mu'taqad wa-l-madhhab* (Beirut: Dār al-Nakhīl li-l-Ṭibā'a wa-l-Nashr, 1414/1993).

¹⁶ Ṣāliḥ al-Wardānī, *al-Khid'a ... raḥalatnī min al-sunna ilā l-shī'a* (Beirut: Dār al-Nakhīl li-l-Ṭibā'a wa-l-Nashr, 1416/1995), p. 17.

¹⁷ See, for example: Muḥammad Mar'ī al-Anṭākī, *Li-mādhā khtarṭu madhhab al-shī'a madhhab ahl al-bayt (alayhim al-salām)*, ed. 'Abd al-Karīm al-'Uqaylī (Qumm: Office of Islamic Information Press, 1417/1996), p. 51; Muḥammad al-Tijānī al-Samāwī, *Li-akūna ma'a l-ṣādiqīn* (Qumm: Mu'assasat Anṣāriyān li-l-Ṭibā'a wa-l-Nashr), p. 44.

- A. At first the prospective convert comes to realize the error of the beliefs which he held his entire life and enters a period of doubt and confusion. His mind becomes a battleground between the old convictions of the past and the new information obtained by reading in the books of the Shī'ites. As an example, al-Tījānī describes the confusion which had beset him as follows: "I remained perplexed and at a loss for three months, during which I was drawn by my thoughts, and driven hither and thither by doubts and imaginations."¹⁸
- B. In the next stage doubt comes to an end. All *mustaḥṣirūn* report that their continued researches into the Shī'ite faith convinced them ever more firmly of its truth.¹⁹
- C. Then comes a stage of preparing oneself for the change in denomination. Their decision to leave the Sunnī faith and convert to Shī'ism does raise difficulties and obstacles for the *mustaḥṣirūn*, but at this stage their internal doubts are at an end and they feel calm and spiritually at peace.²⁰ They are then overcome with feelings which, so they claim, cannot be fathomed by anyone who has not undergone this experience. They are overcome with a sense of well-being and security, as if a heavy load of worry and doubt had been lifted from them. They feel happy for having abandoned falseness and come to know the truth.²¹

The steps through which converts are taken are the following:

The first step: The first step in conversion consists of coming to believe that the Prophet's descendants are the rightful imams, that a great

¹⁸) Muḥammad al-Tījānī al-Samāwī, *Thumma htadaytu* (Qumm: Mu'assasat Anṣāriyān li-l-Ṭibā'a wa-l-Nashr, 2nd edition, 1417/1996), p. 123. For more information about converts' vacillations see: Hishām Āl Quṭayṭ, *Wa-min al-ḥiwār iktashaftu l-ḥaqīqa* (Beirut: Dār al-Muntazar, 1421/2000), p. 35; al-Ḥusaynī, *Laqad shayyā'anī l-Ḥusayn*, p. 16.

¹⁹) See, for example: Marwān Khalīfāt, *Wa-rakibtu l-safīna* (Qumm: Markaz al-Ghadīr li-l-Dirāsāt al-Islāmiyya, 1418/1997), p. 18; al-Mutawakkil, *Wa-dakhalnā l-tashayyū' sujjadan*, p. 40; al-Ḥusaynī, *Laqad shayyā'anī l-Ḥusayn*, p. 63.

²⁰) Al-Ḥusaynī, *Laqad shayyā'anī l-Ḥusayn*, p. 357.

²¹) For more details see Āl Quṭayṭ, *Wa-min al-ḥiwār iktashaftu l-ḥaqīqa*, p. 9; Muḥammad al-Tījānī al-Samāwī, *Fa-s'alū ahl al-dhikr* (Qumm: Mu'assasat Anṣāriyān li-l-Ṭibā'a wa-l-Nashr, n. d.), p. 19.

historical wrong was done to them by the Prophet's Companions and the Muslim states which emerged later (the Umayyad and Abbasid caliphates), that 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib had a greater right to take the Prophet's place than Abū Bakr, 'Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb and the other caliphs, and that 'Alī's descendants are the Islamic nation's true leaders, who were deprived of their rightful position.

The second step: After a *mustaḥṣir* has become convinced of 'Alī's legitimacy and of the wrongs committed against his progeny, he begins to study the Shī'ite creed and its religious law, through books on Shī'ite doctrine and jurisprudence.

The converts in the Arab world do not deny their close spiritual links to the *ḥawza* in the city of Qumm in Iran. In fact, in Qumm CDs are distributed which contain the stories of "Arab *mustaḥṣirūn*". Today the *ḥawza* by Zaynab's shrine in Damascus is a major center for converts, who go there to study the Shī'ite creed and strengthen their ties with other Shī'ites. They are provided with books by the Shī'ite imams, and especially with the writings of Sayyid Muḥammad Ḥusayn Faḍl Allāh, which are published by Dār al-Malāk in Lebanon; this publishing house specializes in the publication of his books, the most prominent of which is *Juridical Regulations (al-Aḥkām al-fiqhiyya)*.

Here we should note that converts are not required to pay the "fifth"²² imposed on other Shī'ites, nor is it demanded of them that they follow a specific religious authority. This provides them with a certain measure of security in case they are investigated in certain countries, Jordan for example.²³ They also consistently adopt the Shī'ite practice of "dissimulation" (*taqiyya*),²⁴ i.e. they deny their Shī'ism whenever this can help them avoid trouble.

²² The "fifth" is a tax on everything which a Shī'ite acquires in his life, by war or by other means (such as commerce). The Shī'ites divide the "fifth" into six parts: one for God, one for the Prophet, one for relatives, one for orphans, one for the poor, and one for wayfarers. The first three of these parts, half of the total, are considered to belong to the Prophet's family and the imams. For more details on the "fifth" in Shī'ism, see, for example, N. Calder, "Khums in Imāmi Shī'i Jurisprudence, from the Tenth to the Sixteenth Century A.D.", in *BSOAS* 45 (1982), pp. 39-47; Abdulaziz Sachedina, "*Al-Khums: The Fifth in the Imāmi Shī'i Legal System*", in *JNES* 39 (1980), pp. 275-289.

²³ See the newspaper *al-Bayyina*, issue 478, 12 August 2007.

²⁴ "Dissimulation" is one of the important principles of Twelver Shī'ism, a consequence

Types of Converts

The Shī'ites recognize three types of converts:

- A. *Convinced converts*: This type of convert (*mustabṣir*) has studied and read the Shī'ite religious literature and has become convinced of its truth in the same manner as any believing Shī'ite. As a result he declares his conversion to the Shī'ite creed. Shī'ites greet such a convert with the formula: "May you enjoy the new light. You are welcome among us as a brother. May God bless you with the discernment of your heart."
- B. *Lost converts*: This type of convert has joined the Shī'ite faith because he is not convinced of his own creed's truth. He wants to try out Shī'ism in order to see if he can be convinced of its correctness. To this type of convert Shī'ites say: "Be certain of your faith. Do not leave one creed for another before you have become convinced that your new creed is the right way." Shī'ites consider such converts useless and treat them as pretenders (*mutashayyi*), not as real Shī'ites.
- C. *Sneaky converts* (*mundass*): Such converts claim to have chosen to become Shī'ites out of conviction, but in fact act like hypocrites; they try to ferret out errors made by the Shī'ites in order to destroy the sect. This type is considered by Shī'ites as particularly dangerous and insidious.

The Converts' Situation and Society's Reaction to Them

Al-Bajnūrī²⁵ states that the *mustabṣirūn* can expect to be treated very badly by their relatives and their people, although they do not fear their calumnies. He explains this as follows:

When the veil is lifted from the truth, and a person learns to distinguish between truth and falsity, he will pull up the roots of bigotry and violence

of the political repression to which Shī'ites were exposed, which made the imams decree this a necessary survival measure. For more on this topic see: E. Kohlberg, "Some Imāmī Shī'ī Views on *Taqiyya*", in *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 95 (1975), pp. 395-402; E. Meyer, "Anlass und Anwendungsbereich der taqiyya", in *Isl.* 57 (1980), pp. 246-280.

²⁵ Al-Bajnūrī, *al-Mustabṣirūn*, p. 12.

and choose the path of truth. His bigotry and violence he will then turn towards what is false, even more so than he did towards the truth before having chosen it, because before it was the result of ignorance and poor vision, whereas now he possesses the truth in all its certainty. So he does not heed his people and his tribe, nor will he fear what they can be expected to do, or poverty or misery, because he says: "God is enough for us. How excellent is God." He abandons his position and standing in order to tread the path of truth and certainty, and is ready to withstand any difficulty and travail.

After the fact that a person has converted to Shī'ism becomes known he often faces a very hostile reaction on the part of the society in which he lives. The convert's acquaintances frequently react with accusations that the convert is a heretic who betrayed the principles of his society. They will try to do everything in their power to pressure him into returning to his former faith, usually without success, although occasionally converts will claim to have been forced into adopting Shī'ism.²⁶ 'Alā' al-Ḥassūn notes that the *mustabṣirūn* as a rule manage to remain firm in the face of their molestation by their own society. He attributes this to the converts' sense of power, their belief that their newfound faith makes them capable of overcoming all obstacles.²⁷ The steps taken against a convert can be material; he may be forced into poverty or deprived of his rightful inheritance; sometimes even violence is used by anti-Shī'ite groups. However, to judge by what the converts themselves have written about their experiences, the harassment which they had to endure did not cause them to deviate from their course.²⁸

Sunnī Criticism of Converts to Shī'ism and Rebuttal of This Criticism

Converts to Shī'ism are subject to ferociously written attacks by Sunnīs, especially Salafīs. The attacks, usually on websites, cast doubt on the

²⁶ For some examples of the travails which some *mustabṣirūn* underwent, see al-Samāwī, *Fa-s'alū ahl al-dhikr*, pp. 173f.; Ahmad Sayyid, *al-Ḥaqīqa al-dā'i'a ... riḥlati naḥwa madhhab āl al-bayt ('alayhim al-salām)* (Qumm: Mu'assasat al-Ma'arif al-Islāmiyya, 1417/1996), pp. 23ff.; al-Mutawakkil, *Wā-dakhalnā l-tashayyū' sujjadan*, pp. 66f.

²⁷ 'Alā' al-Ḥassūn, *al-Taḥawwul al-madhhabī* (an analytic study of the *mustabṣirūn* journey to the creed of the Prophet's family) (Markaz al-Abḥāth al-'Aqā'idīyya, <http://www.aqaed.com/shialib/books/03/tahavvuoll/index.html>, accessed 27 February 2009).

²⁸ Ibid., p. 280.

reality of the conversions. The Salafis argue that some of the so-called converts simply do not exist, that they are imaginary figures created by the Shī'ites for the purpose of disseminating their creed. They claim that the books which *mustabṣirūn* are supposed to have written were in fact composed by Shī'ites for missionary purposes. More specifically, one of the personages whose existence has been denied is the Syrian *mustabṣir* Muḥammad Mar'ī al-Amīn al-Anṭākī, author of *Li-mādhā khtartu madhhab al-shī'a* ("Why I Chose the Shī'ite Creed"). The Salafī propagandist 'Umar al-Dawsarī has investigated al-Anṭākī's claim that he studied at al-Azhar University and his conversion from Ṣūfism to Shī'ism. He reports that his research has revealed that a person by the name of al-Anṭākī does not exist, at least not in the list of al-Azhar graduates, and that the book supposedly written by him was in fact written by an anonymous Shī'ite writer for the purpose of disseminating the Shī'ite creed.²⁹

Al-Dawsarī also claims to have investigated another *mustabṣir*, 'Iṣām al-'Imād, who supposedly studied at the *ḥadīth* faculty of King Saud University in Saudi Arabia and later converted to Shī'ism. Al-Dawsarī reports that his researches revealed that this university did not have a "*ḥadīth* faculty" at all. A third convert whom he investigated was a certain al-Tijānī, who claimed to have been a Sunnī leader at the al-Zaytūna Mosque in Tunis. Al-Dawsarī perused the student lists at the mosque and did not find his name. His conclusion: Shī'ites invent people in order to disseminate their creed.

The converts of course reject these claims and counter the attacks against them. They frequently also explain what motivated them to convert to Shī'ism. Thus, for example, Muḥammad Mar'ī al-Amīn al-Anṭākī explains his conversion as having been due to a number of factors:

- A. He realized that conversion to Shī'ism satisfied his conscience, as a creed to which the former *shaykh al-Azhar*, Muḥammad Shaltūt, gave his approval in his most famous legal ruling.³⁰

²⁹) See the website: www.alsrdaab.com/vb/showthread.php?t=35233 (accessed 27 February 2009).

³⁰) This ruling (*fatwā*), given on 17 Rabī' I 1378/1 October 1958, states, among other things, that "the Ja'fari school, known as Imāmī Twelver Shī'ism, is a school according to

- B. He became convinced of the worthiness of the creed of the Prophet's family, since it derives from the imams, who received it from their ancestor the Prophet, who received it from Gabriel, who received it from God himself.
- C. Since God's revelation came down in their family, the members of the family know best what was revealed.
- D. Many verses in the Qur'an support the claims of the Shī'ites, for example, the Verse of Sovereignty (Q 5:55): "God only is your patron, and His Apostle and those who believe, who are steadfast in prayer and give alms, bowing down"; the Verse of Purification (Q 33:33): "God only wishes to take away from you the horror as people of His House and to purify you thoroughly"; the Verse of Imprecation (Q 3:61): "And whoso disputeth with thee after what has come to thee of knowledge, say, 'Come, let us call our sons and your sons, and our women and your women, and ourselves and yourselves: then we will imprecate and put God's curse on those who lie'"; the Verse of Love (Q 42:23): "Say, 'I do not ask for it a hire—only the love of my kinsfolk'", and others.
- E. There are transmitted traditions (*ḥadīth*) and reports which prove the worthiness of the Prophet's family, among them the following: the Ḥadīth of Knowledge, in which the Prophet is quoted as saying: "I am the city of knowledge and 'Alī is its gate; whoever wants to enter the city, let him come to the gate";³¹ the Ḥadīth of Rank, according to which the Prophet said to 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib: "You have with respect to me the same rank as Aaron had with respect to Moses, except that there will be no prophet after me";³² the Ḥadīth

whose precepts one may validly worship, just like the Sunnī schools. It is well for Muslims to know that." For more details see: Muḥammad Sa'īd al-Ṭarabjī, "Fatwā Shaltūt", in *al-Mawsim* 60 (2007), pp. 69-76; Maḥmūd Shaltūt, "Risālat al-Azhar", supplement to *al-Azhar*, January 1959 issue.

³¹ For details on this *ḥadīth* see, for example, Rashīd al-Dīn Muḥammad b. Shahrāshūb, *Manāqib al-Abī Ṭālib*, vol. 2 (Qumm: Mu'assasat al-'Allāma li-l-Nashr, 1959), p. 34; al-Ḥasan b. Yūsuf al-Muṭahhar al-Ḥillī, *Nahj al-ḥaqq wa-kashf al-ṣidq* (Qumm: Mu'assasat al-Hijra, 1986), p. 221.

³² Shī'ites use this *ḥadīth* as evidence for 'Alī's exalted rank, for his right to act as the Prophet's successor, and for his having inherited all the Prophet's virtues except for the power of prophecy. For more on this *ḥadīth* see: al-Ḥasan Yūsuf al-Muṭahhar al-Ḥillī, *Kashf*

of Ghadīr Khumm: “To whomsoever I was master, ‘Alī is his master, by God, befriend whoever befriended him, show enmity to whoever was his enemy, help whomever helped him, abandon whomever abandoned him, and turn to the truth wherever it revolves”;³³ the Ḥadīth of the Day of Warning;³⁴ “The Prophet said, pointing to ‘Alī: ‘This is my brother, my executor, my successor, listen to him and obey”’; and, finally, the *ḥadīth* in which the Prophet says: “‘Alī is of me, and I am of ‘Alī, and nobody can discharge my duty except myself and ‘Alī.”

Al-Tījānī in his rebuttal to critics of his conversion to Shī‘ism states that a number of factors drove him to take this step, including the afore-mentioned *ḥadīths* which show that ‘Alī was the Prophet’s rightful successor.

The *mustabṣir* scholar and journalist Idrīs al-Ḥusayn, author of *Laqad shayya‘anī l-Ḥusayn* (“Ḥusayn Converted Me”) speaks in his book about the steps which the Prophet took to ensure ‘Alī’s status as leader of the Muslims in the future, among them the afore-mentioned *ḥadīths*, especially the Ḥadīth of Warning, or the Day of the House, in which the Prophet announced in the presence of the leaders of the tribe of Quraysh that ‘Alī would be their leader and his successor. Here is a concise account of the incident as reported in Muslim sources:

When Q 26:214, “but warn thy clansmen who are near of kin”, was revealed, the Messenger called his relatives, including Abū Lahab, and said:

O sons of ‘Abd al-Muṭallib, I swear to God that I know of youth among the Arabs who brought more virtue than you have, but I have brought you the

al-yaqīn fī faḍā’il amīr al-mu’minīn, ed. Ḥusayn al-Darkāhī (Teheran: Mu’assasat al-Ṭab‘ wa-l-Nashr, 1411/1990), pp. 280ff.

³³) For more details on this *ḥadīth* see ‘Abd al-Ḥusayn al-Amīnī, *al-Ghadīr fī l-kitāb wa-l-sunna wa-l-adab* (Qumm: Mu’assasat Dā’irat al-Fiqh al-Islāmī, 2004), part one; L. Veccia Vaglieri, “Ghadīr Khumm”, *EF*, 2, pp. 993f.

³⁴) A number of sources report that the Prophet Muḥammad invited his family to a banquet, at which he proposed that they embrace Islam. He said that whoever believed in him would be his successor after his death. No one answered him except for ‘Alī. This *ḥadīth* has been given the name of the Ḥadīth of the Day of the House, the Warning of the Day of the House, or the Call on the Tribe.

good of this world and the next. God, may He be strong and exalted, commanded me to invite you to it. So who amongst you believes in me and will help me in this matter, and be my brother, my executor and my successor?

The people were silent and did not respond, except for 'Alī, who said: "I, o Messenger of God, will be your helper in the matter for which God has sent you." After he repeated this three times he looked at them and said: "This is my brother, my executor, and my successor amongst you, listen to him and obey him." The people laughed and said to Abū Ṭālib: "He has commanded you to listen to your own son and obey him; indeed, he placed him over you as a ruler."

Al-Ḥusaynī comments on this:

That was the first situation of the Messenger in his call for Islam, in which 'Alī was definitely placed at the head. This happened at the Warning of the Clan, the first step of his mission which coincided with the presentation of 'Alī's imamate, showing the integration between the mission and the imamate.³⁵

A rebuttal of the claims put forward by the Syrian *shaykh* Hishām Āl Quṭayṭ in his *al-Mutaḥawwilūn* was written by the Saudi scholar Khālīd al-Badīwī, in his book entitled *A'lām al-taṣḥīḥ wa-l-i'tidāl*. He bolstered his arguments with the views of several prominent Shī'ite scholars, some of whom abandoned the Shī'ite creed and others who renounced its exaggerations.³⁶ The political and communal implications of conversion to Sunnism in Iraq were brought in by Usāma Shihāda, who claimed that 250,000 Iraqi Shī'ites converted to the Sunnī creed during the 1990s, most of whom were murdered by the Shī'ite militias after the fall of Baghdad.³⁷

³⁵ Muḥammad al-Kuthayrī, *al-Salafiyya bayna ahl al-sunna wa-l-imāmiyya* (Beirut: Markaz al-Ghadīr li-l-Dirāsāt al-Islāmiyya, 1997), pp. 685-694.

³⁶ For example 'Alī al-Qaḍībī of Bahrain, a Shī'ite who became a Sunnī and wrote a book entitled *Rabiḥtu l-ṣaḥāba, lam akhsar al-bayt* ("I Gained the Companions without Losing the Prophet's Family", 1983). The book's title tells us that his conversion enabled him to combine love of the Prophet's Companions with admiration for his family, in the manner of Sunnīs everywhere. For more details see Shihāda, *al-Mushkila al-shī'iyya*, p. 103.

³⁷ Shihāda, *al-Mushkila al-shī'iyya*, p. 102.

Books Which Influenced the *mustabşirūn* and Contributed to their Conversion

A number of books which converts read before their conversion had an effect on their decision to adopt the Shī'ite creed. The most prominent of these is Sayyid 'Abd al-Ḥasan Sharaf al-Dīn al-Mūsawī's *al-Murāja'āt* ("Reviews"), which convinced numerous *mustabşirūn* of the worthiness of the Prophet's family. Thus al-Tijānī al-Samāwī says of this book: "I read al-Sayyid Sharaf al-Dīn al-Mūsawī's book *al-Murāja'āt*. After a few pages I felt irresistibly drawn to it, and did not leave it except when necessity called." Elsewhere he writes: "The book's honest presentation of the Shī'ite world surprised me. I found in it the object of my desire, since it is not like those books in which the author writes what he wants, with no one opposing him or objecting to what he has to say." Al-Tijānī adds: "I went through the book several times. It opened for me horizons which showed me the right path and prepared my heart to love the Prophet's family."³⁸ According to another convert, Muḥammad Mar'ī al-Anṭākī, "every one of our brother Sunnīs should peruse the *al-Murāja'āt* and other Twelver Shī'ite books. These should be read carefully from beginning to end, for in them they will find convincing arguments."³⁹

Other books which have been popular among converts are al-Amīnī's *al-Ghadīr*, al-Sayyid Muḥammad Bāqir al-Ṣadr's *Fadak fī l-tārīkh*, al-Shaykh Muḥammad Riḍā al-Muẓaffar's *al-Saqīfa*, as well as books by Ja'far Murtaḍā al-Āmilī, al-Sayyid Murtaḍā al-'Askarī, al-Sayyid Abū l-Qāsim al-Khū'ī, al-Sayyid al-Ṭabāṭabā'ī, al-Shaykh Muḥammad Amīn, and others.

Missionary Activities of the *mustabşirūn*, Presentation of their Conversion Experience

Following his conversion to Shī'ism a *mustabşir* will often begin explaining the Shī'ite creed which he has embraced to those around

³⁸) Al-Samāwī, *Thumma htadaytu*, p. 30.

³⁹) Al-Anṭākī, *Li-mādhā khtartu madhhab al-shī'a*, p. 53.

him. He defends his newly-found faith, responds to criticisms of it, and undertakes to spread it.⁴⁰ The dissemination of the Shī'ite faith by *mustabṣirūn* is done in a variety of styles; some prefer a direct, even provocative approach,⁴¹ while others use a softer style in their missionary work.⁴²

In the past five years Shī'ite newspapers, journals, and especially Shī'ite websites, in particular those belonging to religious figures of authority, proudly exhibit lists of *mustabṣirūn*, perhaps out of a desire to attract people to the creed. Thus, for example, a website devoted to converts, www.aqaed.com/mostabser/, provides its readers with information about the lives of converts, the countries in which they live, their previous religious denomination, books they wrote, as well as eighty-eight complete texts written by *mustabṣirūn* for the purpose of convincing their readers to convert to Twelver Shī'ism. A perusal of the list of converts reveals that they come from a variety of nations, and that most are college graduates, some even with a Ph.D. degree, such as Dr. 'Iṣām al-'Imād from Yemen, Dr. Muḥammad al-Tijānī al-Samāwī from Tunisia, and Dr. Muḥammad Bayyūmī Mahrān from Egypt; there are also converts with advanced degrees in religious studies. It would thus appear that the managers of these sites want to demonstrate that the *mustabṣirūn* are not just simple people, but that even highly-educated people trained in the sciences have chosen to convert to Shī'ism after having given the matter very serious thought.

A number of converts have written about their experience in order to make others aware of the evidence which convinced them to change their religious loyalties. According to 'Alā' al-Ḥassūn⁴³ converts gave the following reasons for their decision to write about their experience:

- A. Some reported that they were approached by people who wanted them to explain the reasons for their conversion. A number of books

⁴⁰) Al-Mutawakkil, *Wa-dakhalnā l-tashayyū' sujjadan*, pp. 69f.

⁴¹) For example, the converts Ḥasan Shihāda and Ṣāliḥ al-Wardānī; for more details see al-Ḥassūn, *al-Taḥawwul al-madhhabī*, pp. 286f.

⁴²) For example, Muḥammad al-Tijānī al-Samāwī and Idrīs al-Ḥusaynī; see al-Ḥassūn, *ibid.*

⁴³) Al-Ḥassūn, *al-Taḥawwul al-madhhabī*, p. 297.

- resulted from this, in which converts explained their actions, and also added some biographical details about themselves.
- B. Some writers declared their desire to promote Islamic unity and give it a firm foundation.⁴⁴
 - C. The converts' experiences could serve to provide answers to perplexing questions.
 - D. Their reports might stimulate interest in and sympathy for Shī'ism among other Muslims.⁴⁵
 - E. Writing for posterity.⁴⁶
 - F. Presentation of the Shī'ite truth and its oppression by fanatics.⁴⁷
 - G. A desire to convince Muslims to convert to the "true religion" (i.e. Shī'ism) without fanaticism.⁴⁸

In addition to an account of the reasons which convinced them of the truth of Shī'ism and led to their conversion, the converts also mention the Shī'ite personalities which had the greatest influence on their decision. Some also give accounts of the reactions to their conversion among their acquaintances, and how they remained steadfast in their new faith despite the pressures and difficulties they had to face.

Research on this topic revealed 114 books by converts from many countries, whose full texts can be found on the afore-mentioned website. Here we can mention only a few of these: *Akhīran ashraqat al-rūḥ* by the Syrian Lamyā' Ḥamūda; *Intiṣār al-ḥaqq* by the Yemeni 'Iṣām al-'Imād; *Bi-nūr Fāṭima htadaytu* by the Sudanese Mun'im Ḥasan; *Sabīl al-mustabṣirīn al-ṣirāt al-mustaqīm wa-safīnat al-nājīn* by Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn al-Ḥusaynī; *Shāṭi' al-ḥaqq* by the Lebanese Muḥammad Jān Wahbī Abū Jawda; *Li-mādhā khtartu madhhab al-shī'a ahl al-bayt* by the Syrian Muḥammad Mar'ī al-Anṭākī; *Wa-staqarra bī l-nawā* by the Yemeni Muḥammad b. Ḥamūd; *Min al-ḥiwār iktashaftu l-ḥaqīqa* by

⁴⁴) Al-Samāwī, *Li-akūna ma'a l-ṣādiqīn*, p. 7.

⁴⁵) Al-Wardānī, *al-Khid'a .. riḥlatī ma'a l-sunna ilā l-shī'a*, p. 186.

⁴⁶) Ḥasan, *Bi-nūr Fāṭima htadaytu*, p. 7.

⁴⁷) Qāsim As'ad Waḥīd, *Ḥaqīqat al-shī'a al-ithnay 'ashariyya* (Qumm: Mu'assasat al-Ma'ārif al-Islāmiyya, 1421/2000), p. 16.

⁴⁸) Idrīs al-Ḥusaynī, *Hākadhā 'araftu l-shī'a .. tawḍīḥāt wa-rudūd* (Beirut: Dār al-Nakhīl al-'Arabī li-l-Ṭibā'a wa-l-Nashr, 1418/1997), p. 7.

the Syrian Hishām Āl Quṭayṭ; *Wa-min al-nihāya kānat al-bidāya* by the Palestinian Bāsil Muḥammad al-Khaḍrā'; and *Wa-rakibtu l-safīna* by the Jordanian Marwān Khalifat.

Interestingly enough, most of the writings by converts shun any discussion of controversial issues on which Shī'ites and Sunnīs are divided, such as the imamate, dissimulation and the Qur'ān, and the attitude towards the Prophet's Companions, especially Abū Bakr and 'Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb.

There are websites devoted to the assistance of converts and to their protection from critics. Thus, for example, the Center for Doctrinal Studies under Fāris al-Ḥassūn disseminates Shī'ite books for free over the internet to every *mustaḥṣir*. The Center runs a program called "The *mustaḥṣirūn* speak to you", consisting of hundreds of recorded lectures by converts about the reasons for their conversion. Lately the Center has begun disseminating audio and video cassettes and CDs with biographical details about a thousand converts from different parts of the world who have written about their experience.

Factors Contributing to Conversion

Most if not all *mustaḥṣirūn* converted because they gained an inner conviction that Shī'ism is the true faith. The tendency to convert, however, has received support from the outside as well.

A. Iranian Cultural Chancelleries, Especially in the Countries of the Middle East

Sunnīs have accused the Iranian cultural chancelleries in numerous Middle Eastern countries such as Syria, Lebanon and Sudan of acting to disseminate the Shī'ite creed instead of restricting themselves to cultural activities. These chancelleries are in fact run by the office of the Islamic Republic's Supreme Guide 'Alī Khāmīnā'ī in Teheran, although they are ostensibly merely attaché offices in Iranian embassies.

In fact, the Iranian government has been spending large sums for the dissemination of Shī'ism and for the support of Shī'ite missionaries and activists. Thus in the year 2003 it allocated about 215,620 billion

Iranian riyals (about 2.3 billion dollars), a budget which was increased seven-fold in 2004.⁴⁹

In a press release which appeared on 31 October 2006 on the Middle Eastern news website of the Arab Orient Center in London, the prominent Syrian Islamic jurist and thinker Dr. Wahba al-Zuhaylī noted that the Iranian cultural chancellery uses material enticements, in the form of cash, houses and cars, to convince people to embrace Shī'ism, and that "hundreds of Syrians from Dayr al-Zawr, al-Raqqā, Dar'ā and the Ghūṭa region near Damascus have already given in to the Iranian chancellery's enticements and converted to Shī'ism". The overseer of the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria 'Alī Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Bayānūnī stated to the Quds Press news agency that "the whole Shī'ite conversion movement in Syria is nothing but an attempt to arouse confusion in order to modify Syria's social structure".

Syria's "breakaway" vice president 'Abd al-Ḥalīm Khaddām has criticized the Iranian ambassador in Damascus in the press and in announcements made by the oppositional Front for National Salvation. He accused him of fomenting conversion to Shī'ism in Syria and of promoting the interests of converts there. Khaddām added: "The Iranian ambassador in Damascus travels throughout Syria with greater freedom than the Prime Minister."⁵⁰ In an interview to UPI Khaddām claimed that the Iranian ambassador exploits the fact that there are so many poor people in the country:

He comes to a region and says that the Prophet's Companion so-and-so passed through here and we must build a shrine. So he builds a shrine and a *hawza* and distributes funds to some of the poor. His objective is to build an Iranian party inside Syria, by way of what may be called conversion to Shī'ism.

Observers have noted how the close ties between Iran and Syria, and the strategic alliance between the two which has existed since 1980, have enabled Iran to be active in Syria. The events and receptions which the chancellery in Damascus holds on Iranian national holidays such

⁴⁹) Shihāda, *al-Mushkila al-shī'iyya*, p. 16.

⁵⁰) Ubayy Ḥasan, "An al-tasannun wa-l-tashayyu' fī Sūriyā: radd 'alā l-wahhābiyyīn wa-man yaḥdhū ḥadhwahum", *www. Aljaml.com/node/11387* (accessed 27 February 2009).

as the annual celebration of the victory of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, and on religious occasions such as the anniversary of the death of al-Ḥusayn on the Day of ‘Āshūrā’, are attended by high-level Syrian and Iranian officials.⁵¹ Iran also encourages Iranian pilgrims to come and visit the shrine of Lady Zaynab in Damascus. The number of such pilgrims has risen from 27,000 in 1978 to 202,000 in 2003. This has equally increased Iranian influence in Syria⁵² and promoted conversion to Shī‘ism.

B. The Lebanon War in the Summer of 2006 and the Wave of Admiration for Ḥizbullāh Leader Ḥasan Naṣr Allāh

The Second Lebanon War in 2006 generated a wave of admiration for Ḥizbullāh’s leader Ḥasan Naṣr Allāh, and his organization’s popular image in the wake of its role in fighting against Israel has engendered sympathy towards Shī‘ites in the Islamic world in general and brought an increase in the conversion of Sunnīs to Shī‘ism in a number of Arab and other Muslim countries. Iranian influence has also increased, following what has been called Ḥizbullāh’s “achievements” and its “victory” in the war. Thus the young Syrian Shī‘ite cleric Muṣṭafā al-Sāda, reports that many Sunnīs come to Shī‘ite religious institutions and ask about the possibility of conversion: “George Bush has done us a great service by uniting the Arabs”, he says. Al-Sāda adds that he knows seventy-five Sunnīs in Damascus who have converted to Shī‘ism since the beginning of the hostilities in Lebanon in mid-July of 2006. The war, so he explains, has given a boost to conversion to Shī‘ism in recent years. From another perspective, we have the testimony of the Syrian Wā’il Khalīl, twenty-one-years-old, a student of international law at Damascus University: “For the first time in my life I saw a war in which the Arabs were victorious.” Khalīl, a Sunnī, began to observe Shī‘ite customs and rites and plans a full conversion to Shī‘ism.⁵³

⁵¹ “Al-Tashayyu‘ fī Sūriyā: jihāt mukhtalifa tuḥāwil nashr al-tashayyu‘ bayna l-kurd fī Sūriyā”, www.syriakurds.com/2007/sheasy/sb019.htm (accessed 27 February 2009).

⁵² Muḥammad al-Ḥasnāwī, “al-Nufūdh al-irānī fī Sūriyā”, 13 October 2005, www.araee.com/modules.php?name=News&file=print&sid=6680 (accessed 27 February 2009).

⁵³ Allan Nickmeyer, “Mawjāt taḥawwul min al-madhab al-sunnī ilā l-shī‘ī fī sūriyyā, bi-sabab al-i‘jāb bi-Naṣr Allāh”, 19 November 2007, www.m-alhuda.com/showthread.php?t=665 (accessed 27 February 2009). See also Aḥmad al-Ayyūbī, “al-Ikhtirāq al-irānī

Ever since the war the pictures of Ḥasan Naṣr Allāh and Khāminaʿī are more commonly seen on the streets of Damascus than those of the region's political leaders. Pictures in which Syrian President Bashshār al-Asad appears together with Ḥizbullāh's Secretary General Ḥasan Naṣr Allāh can be seen on the city's shop windows, cars, busses, even building walls. Syrian intellectuals claim that this is a manifestation of nationalist rather than religious or denominational feeling;⁵⁴ they consider Naṣr Allāh as a national, not a religious or sectarian, symbol.⁵⁵ It would thus appear that the pro-Shīʿite sympathies of this group are a passing fad, more in the nature of a show of emotional excitement than a religious conversion based on firm belief.⁵⁶

C. *The Impact of the Iranian Revolution*

For several years, the numbers of Sunnī converts to Shīʿism—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 relation between Sunnism and Shīʿism in nearly every regard.⁵⁷

D. *The War in Iraq and the Shīʿite Takeover after 2003*

This event not only led to growing Iranian influence in the region but also spilled hundreds of thousands of refugees into the neighbouring countries, many of them Shīʿite.⁵⁸

li-l-ʿālam al-ʿarabī: ḥaqīqa wa-arqām abʿād wa-dalālāt”, 19 November 2007, www.syriakurds.com/2007/sheasy/sh012.htm (accessed 27 February 2009).

⁵⁴ “‘Ulamā’ dīn yanfūna nashr al-tashayyū‘ al-irānī fī Sūriyā”, *al-ʿArabiyya*, 19 November 2007, www.aljaml.com/node/9168 (accessed 27 February 2009).

⁵⁵ See, for example, what the Syrian researcher Nabīl Fayyāḍ has to say on the minorities issue in *al-ʿArabiyya*, *ibid.*

⁵⁶ “Al-Shīʿa fī Sūriyā: ḥuqūq dīniyya muṣāna fī mujtamaʿ muṣādar”, www.arabic.cnn.com/2007/middle_east/4/2/shiite.syria/index.html (accessed 27 February 2009).

⁵⁷ For more details see: Rainer Brunner, “‘Then I Was Guided’. Some Remarks on Inner-Islamic Conversions in the 20th and 21st Centuries”, in *Orient* 4 (2009), p. 10.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

E. Political Backing of Shī'ite Missionaries in some Countries

Some countries, Syria for example, provide political encouragement to Shī'ite missionaries and facilitate their activities. Thus at the beginning of the 2006/2007 school year the Shī'ites in Syria were permitted to open a religious school in the city of al-Ṭabaqa in which more than two-hundred students were enrolled. They were able to obtain a government license to open the school, despite the fact that in the whole country there are only two schools for Sunnī jurisprudence, one in Damascus and the other in Aleppo, and the latter only obtained permission to open in 2007, after decades of attempts. The aforementioned Shī'ite school is not the only one of its kind in Syria; another opened recently in Idlib. Rumor has it of late that Iran has obtained permission from the Syrian authorities to establish a large Iranian university in Syria, with all faculties.⁵⁹

F. Academic Enticements

Iran provides academic enticements to converts in the form of scholarships to universities and the *hawzas* of Qumm and Teheran, including for advanced studies. Students pay no tuition fees and are given a monthly stipend.

G. Economic Enticements

Shī'ite missionaries are not averse to paying money to converts, or to provide occasional assistance in commercial or official matters. In Syria, for example, Shī'ite missionaries focus on tribal leaders, especially in the al-Jazīra region which borders on Iraq, in order to gain control over the subjects of these leaders. They provide encouragement to new converts by marrying them, or providing them with a temporary wife, as well as with basic consumer goods such as oil, sugar and rice, in addition to a grant of 2,500 Syrian pounds to any convert who names his son Ḥasan or Ḥusayn, especially in the Idlib region. Every girl named Zaynab is given a present, and university students named 'Alī are paid special attention. Other enticements include loans to the poor under

⁵⁹ 'Abd al-Satīr Āl Ḥusayn, *Tahdhīr al-barriyya min nashāṭ al-shī'a fī Sūriyā* (Cairo: Dār al-Thaqalayn, 2007), p. 66.

the guise of Muslim solidarity, loans which do not have to be repaid; free visits to Iran for tribal leaders, especially in the al-Raqqā region, at the invitation of the Iranian ambassador to Syria; and similar invitations to Syrian notables, such as the teachers at the schools of religious jurisprudence. One of these journeys was of a group of tribal *shaykhs* led by Ḥamīd al-Jarbā, head of the Shamr tribe; among the other participants were Fayṣal al-ʿArīf, leader of the Khafāja tribe, and ʿAwwād al-ʿAwāmīla, leader of the al-Wahab tribe from the village of al-Buwayhij. The participants in these journeys return loaded with presents and bloated pockets. Yet another form of enticement is free health care for converts in the Iranian charity hospitals in Syria, such as the Imam Khomeini Hospital in Damascus, the Red Crescent Hospital in Aleppo, and the Charity Hospital in Aleppo. Libraries in the guise of bookshops provide yet another form of enticements; they lend and hand out books, and give prizes (of 1,000 Syrian pounds per book) to those who read them.⁶⁰

H. Shīʿite Satellite Television

These play a major role in conversion to Shīʿism in many countries. Since the occupation of Iraq by the Coalition the number of such stations has grown to twenty. They broadcast sermons, Shīʿite stories, pictures, and lectures, for the purpose of disseminating the Shīʿite creed and influencing public opinion. Among the most prominent of these stations are al-Fayḥā,⁶¹ al-Anwār,⁶² al-Kawthar,⁶³ and Ahl al-Bayt.⁶⁴ The stations host well-known preachers such as Muḥammad al-Wāʿilī and

⁶⁰ Al-Ḥasnāwī, “al-Nufūdh al-irānī fī Sūriyyā”.

⁶¹ An Iraqi satellite TV channel which currently broadcasts from ʿAjmān TV. Registered in Dubai, it began broadcasting on 20 July 2004. It employs about forty workers and broadcasts a number of programs in addition to the news. For more details see the station’s website on <http://alfayhaa.tv> (accessed 27 February 2009).

⁶² A Shīʿite satellite channel broadcasting from Kuwait, with a Kuwaiti government license; it broadcasts Shīʿite religious content to subscribers, especially lament poems over Ḥusayn’s death in the months of Muḥarram and Ṣafar. For more details see the station’s website on www.alanwartv.com (accessed 27 February 2009).

⁶³ A Shīʿite station broadcasting from Iran. It began its Arabic-language broadcasts in 1980 as the “Saḥar Satellite Station” for one hour daily; today it broadcasts eighteen hours a day. For more on this station see its website on www.alkawthar.ir (accessed 27 February 2009).

⁶⁴ Its full name is “the Ahl al-Bayt Islamic Satellite Channel”, broadcasting from Karbalāʾ since 14 October 2005. For more details see its website on www.ahlubayt.com (accessed

‘Abd al-Ḥamīd al-Muhājir. In recent years one station in particular has had a major impact on public opinion; this is Ḥizbullāh’s al-Manār.⁶⁵ Although it has numerous viewers whose main motivation is the attraction they feel to Ḥizbullāh in the wake of its military confrontation with Israel in 2006, the station provides a distinct Shī‘ite perspective.

I. The Role of the Internet in Conversion to Shī‘ism

There are literally dozens of websites specializing in Shī‘ite missionary work. The two sites *al-Mustabṣirūn* and *al-Mutaḥawwilūn* contain lists of hundreds of Sunnī converts to Shī‘ism who as indicated above have written books about their conversion experience. At the same time, there also exist Sunnī sites in which Shī‘ite claims are rebutted, and which present stories of former Shī‘ites who have converted to the Sunnī creed. Two such sites are *al-Bayyina* and *al-Rāṣid*.⁶⁶

Conclusion

In the preceding pages we saw that the term *mustabṣir* in the modern Shī‘ite usage denotes a convert to Shī‘ism, who has become convinced of the truth of the Shī‘ite demand for loyalty to the Prophet’s family. The word itself, as we have seen, is quite ancient and attested to in the earliest periods of Islam.

We have identified five kinds of motives which, from a Shī‘ite point of view, drive people to convert to Shī‘ism: the lack of depth of the Sunnī creed, the influence of the imams of the House of the Prophet, encounters with followers of the Shī‘a and belief in its creed, the pow-

27 February 2009). The station is supported by the Great Ayatollah al-Shaykh Nāṣir Makārīm al-Shīrāzī, and the Great Ayatollah al-Sayyid Muḥammad Taqī al-Mudarrisī.

⁶⁵ A Shī‘ite station founded by Ḥizbullāh in 1991. Since 2000 it has been broadcasting via satellite seven days a week, 24 hours a day. It employs hundreds of workers and broadcasts worldwide. For more on this station see Dīna Maṭar, “What It Means to Be Shiite in Lebanon: Al-Manar and the Imagined Community of Resistance”, in *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture* 3/2 (2006), pp. 22-40.

⁶⁶ Muḥammad Abū Rummān, “al-Tashayyū‘ fī l-Urdunn”, *al-Ghad* (Jordanian newspaper), 4-5 October 2006.

erful evidence for its truth possessed by the Shī'a, and the effect of Shī'ite books and the writings of other converts.

Various stages could be noted through which converts pass until they finally change their religious allegiance. The actual process of conversion, we saw, takes place in two phases. At first the prospective convert comes to believe in the idea of the imamate, and in the wrongs which Shī'ism has suffered; then he studies the Shī'ite doctrine and system of religious law.

The *mustaḥsirūn*, from the Shī'ite perspective, can be divided into three types: convinced, lost and sneaky ones. Converts to Shī'ism can expect to face various types of harassment and attack from their own relatives and clansmen, as well as from Salafīs, especially through the Internet, where they publish claims that some of the supposed converts do not exist, and that their writings and personalities were fabricated by Shī'ites for the purpose of disseminating their creed. The conversion accounts, on the other hand, equally stress the steadfastness of the converts in the face of the harassment they endure after their conversion.

The study also surveyed websites connected to the *mustaḥsirūn*, in which one finds their names and nationality, and the reasons for their conversion which they give in their writings. From the given names and biographies it can be gleaned that most converts are educated and well-versed in religious matters, indicating that conversion was based on their gradual conviction of Shī'ism as the true religion. We also saw that these sites take great pride in the converts. Books also played a role in convincing *mustaḥsirūn* to convert to Shī'ism, especially al-Sayyid al-Ḥusayn Sharaf al-Dīn al-Mūsawī's *al-Murāja'āt*. Converts, so we saw, also participate in the dissemination of the Shī'ite creed.

Chief among the other factors which played a role in the increase in the number of converts is the support provided by the Iranian cultural chancelleries in a number of Middle Eastern countries, especially in Syria and Sudan. The Lebanon War of 2006 and the wave of admiration it engendered for Ḥizbullāh's leader Ḥasan Naṣr Allāh is another factor. In addition, there are various enticements which Shī'ite missionaries offer throughout the Middle East, such as financial aid and help in commercial matters. Shī'ite satellite stations and websites were also found to have played a considerable role in providing encouragement to conversion.

To conclude, the terms *mustabşir* and *istibşār* have come to possess a very specific meaning in modern times, and describe a well-defined and quite common phenomenon, which has been on the increase of late, especially in a number of countries in the Middle East. However, despite all that has been said above, the number of converts among the population as a whole has remained clearly limited, and the worry expressed by Sunnīs, especially Islamists, is in our opinion overstated and quite baseless, and this is likely to remain so for the foreseeable future.