

Shi'ism, Culture and Group Membership Amidst Social Change

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Muhammad Fadhel Jamali, *Inside the Arab Nationalist Struggle: Memoirs of an Iraqi Statesman* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2012), 320 pp. ISBN 978-1-85043-762-8

Liyakat Nathani Takim, *Shi'ism in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 295 pp. ISBN 978-0814782965

Abstract

In the modern era, Shi'is in their diverse locations began debating the relationship between their core sectarian identity and their wider political, cultural and religious affiliations. Muhammad Fadhel Jamali, an educator, intellectual and statesman, exemplified the position of the new Shi'i intelligentsia in Iraq whose drive towards political integration and cultural assimilation within the nation-state, as well as in the broader Arab milieu, contrasted with the sectarian identity of the Shi'i masses. Jamali's memoirs provide important insights into the views of the Iraqi Hashemite administration, which negotiated its position between commitment to Arabism and a pro-Western policy. Taking another perspective on contemporary Shi'ism, Liyakat Nathani Takim sheds light on the rich composition of the Shi'i community in the US, which has not been widely studied. His book depicts a shift from the more universal orientation of the Shi'i elite, which emerged during the twentieth century, towards traditional sectarian and ethnic identifications. Yet the book also shows the complexity of Shi'i group membership in a globalized world. While sectarianism is on the rise, Shi'i youth in the West are contemplating their relationship with the broader Muslim milieu and Western society, as well as their loyalty to a national civic framework.

Keywords

Shi'a; Shi'i identity; culture; social change; Arabism; immigration; Iraq; the United States

Questions of identity and group membership are associated with the modern era of individualism, social awareness, pluralism and social change. Interest in the individual and his relation with society gathered pace in the course of the twentieth century and was studied through the fields of psychology, anthropology,

philosophy and political science. This discussion has a unique bearing on the Muslim community with its notion of the all-encompassing *umma*. Yet, in contrast to popular beliefs, the Muslim nation has never been a monolithic society. Medieval Islam exhibited a measured coexistence between theological currents, schools of law and religious sects, within fluid and overlapping divisions. Culture also played a part and found its place in the implementation of Islamic law, incorporating change and diversity into the practice of religion. Nevertheless, despite this heterogeneity, the Sunni majority upheld a notion of orthodoxy which encompassed the four Sunni schools of law, while the Shi'i sect was placed outside the accepted consensus (*ijmā'*).

Modernisation and social change began shaking up these historical conventions as the *umma* was broken into nation-states, controlled by Western powers. In the Arab world, Sunnis and Shi'is started to create new ties outside their former close-knit communities. Shi'is in Iraq, in particular, debated the question of group membership as they were no longer an unacknowledged religious minority living in the Ottoman Empire. Instead, they became a numerical majority in Iraq, and for the first time in history gained the ability to demand socio-political rights. Furthermore, they shared a linguistic and cultural affinity with the Sunni-Arab leadership. Social change added an important dimension to the question of group membership, particularly in the decades following the creation of the Iraqi state.

The embryonic state of Iraq, established in 1920 under a British mandate, began undergoing a process of modernization similar to other Arab states in the region. Even the secluded and disempowered Shi'i population was affected by socio-political developments, which took place in Iraq during the first half of the twentieth century. Migration, urbanization and the expansion of state education facilitated the integration of this community into the new state of Iraq. During this period, Shi'is from the traditional rural population to the emerging modern class began engaging with the wider Muslim arena in the socio-economic, political and literary domains. New ties between the burgeoning Shi'i population and the state weakened the historical power of the clerical leadership. The growth of this budding Shi'i elite of politicians, businessmen and intellectuals threatened the traditional authority of the clerics and their control over the dissemination of knowledge.

Muḥammad Fadhel Jamālī (1903–1997), an Iraqi intellectual, educator and politician, epitomized the changes occurring during this era in Shi'i society. His recollection of this period, written in English and edited by John King, closes this chapter in the modern history of Iraq. It also serves as a yardstick to evaluate the shift in communal membership during this period. King presents the reader with a comprehensible form of Jamālī's memoirs. This is an important personal depiction of inter-Arab relations in the last years of the Hashemite era. It is also

a testimony to a significant shift in communal ties which occurred during this period following a process of modernization. Several decades later, Shi'is in their diverse locations began re-asserting traditional modes of identification, based on ethnicity, sectarian affiliation and the religious authority of the *mujtahids*. On the other hand, the diverse Shi'i communities continued to be exposed to modern change which expanded at this stage further afield, as a result of immigration, globalization, the expansion of higher education and a greater focus on the status of women. Liyakat Nathani Takim's *Shi'ism in America* will provide an insight to the evolution of this process. Takim makes an important scholarly contribution in laying out a detailed depiction of the development of Shi'i society in America in the course of the twentieth century.¹ There is a lack of academic research on the Shi'i immigrant community in America; like the broader popular discourse, current research tends to focus on the Sunni majority living in the US.²

To what extent was Shi'i society in its leadership, authority and communal identification transformed in the course of the twentieth century? And what was the place of culture in altering communal dynamics? Takim's analysis of the development of Shi'ism in the US, contrasted with Jamali's memoirs, provides a window to assess these questions. These two publications offer an insight for understanding the shift in Shi'i communal ties with its leaders, the broader Arab-Muslim arena and the West.

Iraqi Shi'is and the Challenge of Modernization

Jamali's recollection of this period, written from a self-perception as an Arab patriot, brings the relationship between Shi'i identity and nationalism to the forefront. In order to assess this topic, it is important to understand who Muḥammad Fadhel Jamali was and to what extent he represented the Shi'i community during this era. Born in the Shi'i holy city of Kāzīmayn in 1903 to a traditional scholarly family, Jamali studied in the Shi'i center of learning in Najaf and later attended the new Teachers' Training College in Baghdad. Jamali was one of the first Iraqis to be sent to the American University in Beirut on a government scholarship. From Beirut, he travelled to the US where he completed a PhD in education at Columbia University. Upon returning to Iraq in 1932,

¹) The number of Shi'is in the US is estimated at about one-fifth of the American Muslim population of about seven million. See Liyakat Nathani Takim, *Shi'ism in America* (New York & London: New York University Press, 2009), p. 23.

²) See for example, Aminah Beverly McCloud, *Transnational Muslims in American Society* (Gainesville, FL: The University Press of Florida, 2006); Jane I. Smith, *Islam in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).

Jamalī became involved in the education ministry, eventually reaching the position of Director General. In this role, he also travelled to Germany, England and France to learn about the school systems in those countries.

Already a decade earlier, Jamalī had begun a campaign against the education policy of Sāṭi' al-Ḥuṣrī, in the latter's position as Director General of Education. Al-Ḥuṣrī bestowed a particular significance upon the field of education within the newly established state of Iraq. This ex-Ottoman official, who was brought to Iraq by King Faysal, was one of the most outspoken promoters of secular pan-Arab nationalism during this period. Through al-Ḥuṣrī's efforts, state education became an important means to spread pan-Arabism in Iraq and to promote a nationalist loyalty to this new political entity. Jamalī, who replaced al-Ḥuṣrī in the ministry, endorsed the latter's Arab nationalist worldview, and continued to advance this ideology through the school system. Yet he differed from al-Ḥuṣrī in advocating a more practical curriculum and developing a more decentralized educational system. In place of al-Ḥuṣrī's tight, centralized strategy and his conservative approach to education, Jamalī sought to provide more resources to the provinces to ensure that the Shi'is would also benefit from state allocations. Jamalī received the support of the Monroe commission of 1931, invited to Iraq by the mandate government to improve the state of education in the country. This commission, headed by Professor Paul Monroe of Columbia Teachers' College, recommended developing a more practical school curriculum in Iraq, catering to the needs of Iraq's diverse society including its rural component. As a former graduate student of Columbia Teachers' College, Jamalī himself was a member of this commission. In 1936, following a prolonged campaign against his policies, Sāṭi' al-Ḥuṣrī decided to sever his connections with the education ministry.³

To be sure, Jamalī was a staunch Arab nationalist but remained committed to the Shi'i community. By shunning al-Ḥuṣrī's elitist approach and dispersing allocations among Iraq's regions, Jamalī contributed significantly to the expansion of state education among the Shi'i population. This included adding directors of education in the provinces, establishing a secondary school in Najaf and appointing Shi'is to teaching positions and administrative jobs in the ministry of education. Significant expansion in state education among the community

³ On these two figures, see: William L. Cleveland, *The Making of an Arab Nationalist: Ottomanism and Arabism in the Life and Thought of Sati' al-Husri* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1971); Charles Tripp, *A History of Iraq* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 94–96, 132–139; Reeva S. Simon, *Iraq between the Two World Wars: The Creation and Implementation of a Nationalist Ideology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), pp. 83–114. See also: Peter Sluglett, *Britain in Iraq: Contriving King and Country* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), pp. 193–209.

dramatically narrowed the gap between the numbers of Sunnis and Shi'is attending government schools during this period. Jamali, who was married to an American woman, developed during his years of study in the US a progressive approach to education. Concurrently, he also adopted an organic or spiritualistic approach to nationalism influenced by the totalitarian models of Kemalist Turkey and Nazi Germany. From the mid-1940s Jamali moved on to diplomacy and politics. He served as Director General of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and then Minister for Foreign Affairs, under eight Iraqi governments between 1943 and 1958. During this period he held the position of Speaker of the Iraqi Parliament (1951–1953), and was even nominated for a short time as prime minister of Iraq (1953–1954).⁴ In these roles, Jamali furthered a pan-Arab agenda, but also displayed an affinity with the West, as will be demonstrated below.

Yet despite his important contribution to the spread of secular education among the Shi'a, Jamali chose to almost totally ignore these years of his career in his memoirs. He also obscured his sectarian roots in his account of the period. Jamali perhaps realized that his Shi'i heritage could pose an obstacle to promoting Arabism. His memoirs therefore focus on his diplomatic and political roles, from 1943 until Abd al-Karim Qassem's revolution in July 1958, which replaced the monarchy with a republic and put an abrupt end to his public career. Shortly following the revolution, Jamali was arrested and was sentenced to death for allegedly plotting against Syria. Due to outside pressure, he was released in July 1961 and was permitted to leave Iraq for health reasons. In 1962, Jamali migrated to Tunisia, where he remained until his death in 1997, teaching at the University of Tunis and writing his memoirs in 1974.

To understand Jamali, it is imperative to shed light on the process of social change which took place among the Shi'i community in Iraq during this period. Jamali exemplified the emergence of a new secularized Shi'i elite in Iraq during this period. A large migration from the Shi'i countryside to the capital of Baghdad and the port city of Basra began in the first half of the twentieth century. This process followed the rapid expansion of industry and trade in both of these cities and financial hardship in the rural south. Access to state education fostered the emergence of a new bourgeoisie of politicians, businessman and intellectuals, of which Jamali was one. This embryonic lay leadership sought to translate Shi'i numerical majority into political influence. As a result, Shi'is began to involve themselves in the political arena by cooperating with Sunni nationalists against Britain and through separate Shi'i parties. Growing numbers of secularized Shi'is also joined the Communist party as an avenue for integration and

⁴ Ibid.; Phebe Marr, "The Development of a Nationalist Ideology in Iraq, 1920–1941," *The Muslim World* 75:2 (April 1985), pp. 85–101.

equality that cut across the sectarian divide.⁵ Shi'is began steadily penetrating the Iraqi administration, although they still remained under-represented in a system that favoured the Sunni middle class of the *effendiyya* and the ex-Sharifian Ottoman officers, promoted by Faysal. By the end of the Second World War, only three Shi'i politicians were nominated to cabinet posts; in 1948, Ṣāliḥ al-Jabr was appointed as the first Shi'i prime minister.⁶ These politicians, Jamālī among them, exemplified the drive towards socio-political integration which gained ground during this period among the majority of Shi'is in Iraq. Yet the embryonic Shi'i elite not only demonstrated a desire for representation, but a keen affiliation with the ideas that dominated the discourse of their Sunni counterparts. This included the literary ideas of the Arab Nahḍa movement and adopting Arab nationalism, including its anti-colonialist agenda and its support for the Palestinian cause, and in some cases also endorsing socialist ideas.⁷

Jamālī, who was born in the holy Shi'i city of Kāzīmāyn several kilometers northwest of Baghdad, did not need to travel far from his hometown to reach the capital. Yet he had to overcome centuries of sectarian seclusion in order to take part in the dominant Sunni-urban discourse. Before the twentieth century, Shi'is in the Ottoman province of Iraq embraced an Arab affinity as a mark of their cultural or ethnic heritage. Yet it was expressed almost exclusively within the framework of Shi'i communal life and did not cut across a core sectarian membership.⁸

⁵ On these developments, see: Sami Zubaida, "The Fragments Imagine the Nation: The Case of Iraq," *IJMES* 34 (2002): 205–215; Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, pp. 51–52; Rony Gabbay, *Communism and Agrarian Reform in Iraq* (London: Croom Helm, 1978), pp. 48–54; Hanna Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq: A Study of Iraq's Old Landed and Commercial Classes and of Its Communists, Ba'athists, and Free Officers* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978), pp. 418–482, 628–629, 718; Silvia Naef, "Shi'i-Shuyū'i or: How to Become a Communist in a Holy City" in *The Twelver Shia in Modern Times: Religious Culture & Political History*, ed. Rainer Brunner and Werner Ende (Leiden; Boston, Köln: Brill, 2001), pp. 255–267.

⁶ See: Peter Sluglett and Marion Farouk-Sluglett, "Sunnis and Shi'is Revisited: Sectarianism and Ethnicity in Authoritarian Iraq," in Derek Hopwood, Habib Ishow and Thomas Koszi-nowsky (eds.), *Iraq: Power and Society* (St Antony's College, Oxford: Ithaca Press, 1993), pp. 79–86; Michael Eppel, "The Elite, the Effendiyya, and the Growth of Nationalism and Pan-Arabism in Hashemite Iraq, 1921–1958," *IJMES* 30:2 (May 1998), pp. 227–250.

⁷ See: Yitzhak Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2nd Ed. 2003), pp. 109–138; Orit Bashkin, *The Other Iraq: Pluralism and Culture in Hashemite Iraq* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2009), pp. 170–177.

⁸ See Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq*, pp. 142–149, 246; Bashkin, *The Other Iraq*, pp. 170–177; Ja'far al-Shaykh Bākīr Maḥūb, *Māḍī al-najaf wa-hāḍirhā* (Maṭba'at al-Adab, 1958), pp. 387–396; Yitzhak Nakash, "An Attempt to Trace the Origin of the Rituals of āshūrā," *Die Welt des Islams* 33 (1993): 161–181.

In the modern era, the novelty in the Shi'i intelligentsia's embrace of Arabism was that this was not only an ethnic affiliation. Instead, the endorsement reflected an acceptance of the contemporary movement in its cultural and political manifestations, which, at least in theory, was capable of superseding sectarian biases. Yet Jamali, who championed Arabism together with other members of this elite, needed to prove his loyalty to this cause, which was questioned by the Sunni intelligentsia, even though he belonged to the indigenous Arab population of Iraq. This resulted from the fact that Arab thinkers carved a special role for Sunni Islam in the movement's foundation myth, and perceived Shi'ism as both as a deviant sect and as an ethnically foreign element of Persian origin.

Shi'i bourgeoisie such as Jamali envisioned a new dawn in inter-sectarian relations in Iraq, in which their Shi'i roots would not play a role in the socio-political prosperity of the community. Members of this elite managed to a certain extent to overcome the boundaries of their sectarian affiliation. However, many among the common Shi'is endured a much more difficult transition with their move from their tribal and rural setting to Baghdad and Basra. To escape rural hardship, Shi'is moved en-masse during this period from the rural areas to newly-built city slums, which lacked running water and adequate sanitation. These migrants tended to be young, married and lacking elementary education.⁹ Jamali belonged to a small secularized Shi'i elite that had limited influence on the majority of the rural population and urban poor. Nevertheless, this Shi'i intelligentsia was significant since it was the first generation to break away from religion and to challenge the traditional power of the clerics and their monopoly over knowledge. They also provided an example of upward mobility to the Shi'i masses and served as a much needed channel to political resources.

The budding Shi'i intelligentsia adopted a contemporary and critical approach to society and religion. Many among this small intellectual group were educated in traditional Shi'i *madrasas*, but some denounced religion altogether. Others perceived Islam more as a cultural affiliation than as a ritualistic and legal obligation, while some members of this group adopted a reformist approach to religion. Nevertheless, many of these intellectuals still considered themselves socially and culturally as members of the Shi'i community, which they sought to educate and lead towards a more progressive outlook.¹⁰ As mentioned, Jamali played an important role in expanding state education to the Shi'i masses in Iraq. However, at the end of the day, he perceived himself first and foremost as a

⁹) Basal N. Najjar, "The Dynamics of Rural-Urban Migration and Assimilation in Iraq" (Ph.D. Diss., Wayne State University, 1976), pp. 89–91.

¹⁰) Batatu, *The Old Social Classes*, pp. 23–36; Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq*, pp. 125–126.

loyal citizen of Iraq who exercised all effort to promote the Arab cause, in both the Arab and international arenas.

In July 1958 Qassem's revolutionary council proclaimed Jamālī, together with the rest of the Hashemite administration, traitors to Iraq and to the Arab cause. Jamālī wanted to clear his name by presenting a first-hand account of inter-Arab developments in the period when he served as a top statesman in Iraq. In his recollection of these years, Jamālī sought to prove his loyalty to Arabism by delineating his actions to promote the main issues on the Arab agenda of the day. These included his efforts to advance a Syrian-Iraqi federation, his signing of a treaty of alliance with the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, his support of the Palestinian cause through the Arab league and through a diplomatic effort, and his advancement of North Africans' struggle for independence in the international arena. In these efforts, Iraq had to fend off accusations of its betrayal of the Arab cause due to its membership in the Baghdad Pact, and Nasser's propaganda against Hashemite Iraq, which received the support of the Saudi kingdom. It was also difficult for Iraq to promote unity with Syria due to Syria's domestic instability at the time.

The memoirs offer an apologetic recollection of events. Jamālī was compelled to re-iterate his convictions, though from his perspective, he endorsed the cause of Arabism from his early days in the education ministry and through his position as an Iraqi statesman. Therefore, the memoirs are written in a very detailed and comprehensive fashion, covering the role of Iraq in general and his relationship in particular with the different Arab states and parties. It is as though Jamālī found it difficult to comprehend that as a Shi'i who put aside his sectarian origins and embraced Arabism, he was pronounced a national traitor.

It is noteworthy that Jamālī sought to clear his name and proclaim the flag of Arabism, through writing his memoirs in English. This is indicative of Jamālī's strong cultural and political connection with Britain as a mandate official and with the US, where he studied and later adopted some educational ideas. Moreover, he was a diplomat who believed in the ability of international relations and particularly connections with the West to promote political causes and defuse conflicts. Jamālī was also well aware of Western power and did not believe that the Arab world could achieve its political aims without the support of Britain and the US. Yet, for Jamālī, the West was not only the seat of international power, but a place where Jamālī was educated and gained a cultural affinity. In this context, Jamālī justified in his memoirs Iraq's membership in the Baghdad Pact as an alliance to strengthen the Free World against the threat of Communism. Throughout his recollections, he also emphasised the need for international diplomacy to further Arabism, and rejected radical and non-democratic solutions to promote this cause. Yet the revolutionary forces in the Arab world perceived Jamālī and other members of the Hashemite administration as British

collaborators who sold Arabism and national independence for the sake of power. Jamālī wanted to prove that the road to Arabism was through diplomacy and cooperation with the West and not through revolutionary solutions.

Jamālī was representative of the Shiʿi intelligentsia of the time, which endorsed Arabism and made efforts towards socio-political integration in the nation-state of Iraq. During the first half of the twentieth century, even some Shiʿi clerics who adopted a reformist outlook also embraced the cause of Arabism.¹¹ Nevertheless, Jamālī was a member of a small yet significant elite, while the majority of the Shiʿi population in Iraq could not identify with Arabism, as a secular, urban and Sunni-led movement. Jamālī's book brings to English readers a first-hand depiction of inter-Arab dynamics at the close of this colonialist era, in which members of the elite believed in collaborating with the West for the sake of promoting national and regional goals. It provides an important insight to the views of the Iraqi Hashemite administration, negotiating its position between commitment to Arabism and a pro-Western policy.

He also sheds light on the perceptions of the secularized Shiʿi bourgeois of this period, even though Jamālī himself was among the most far-removed representative of these circles. Shiʿis like Jamālī believed at the time that they could be accepted as equal citizens in the state of Iraq and as full-fledged members in some form of a pan-Arab cultural or political entity. At this stage these Shiʿis still endorsed national integration, even though members of the Sunni elite questioned the Arab roots of this indigenous Shiʿi population. Although Jamālī was tried as a member of the Hashemite establishment after Qassem's revolution, Iraq's Shiʿi community as a whole gained confidence. Qassem, who was busy dealing with internal challenges to his rule, did not obstruct Shiʿi efforts to establish independent political representation manifested in the creation of the Daʿwa party in the late 1950s.

Indeed, in the decades that followed the state-building process in Iraq, members of the new Shiʿi intelligentsia began shifting away from a sectarian orientation towards Arabism and more universal orientations. In reaction, members of the traditional religious elite embarked on a process of religious reform to present a viable religious alternative, appropriate for the necessities of a developing community. They maintained the core principles of Shiʿism but softened the former exclusive sectarian orientation. Instead, they focused on a unified message of an enlightened Islam, befitting the modern era of progress and community's drive towards socio-political integration.¹² The Daʿwa movement, which incorporated

¹¹ See: Elisheva Machlis, "A Shi'a Debate on Arabism: The Emergence of a Multiple Communal Membership," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 40:2 (April 2013).

¹² See: Elisheva Machlis, "The Cross-Sectarian Call for Islam: A Sample of Shi'a Reformist Thought," *Journal of Shi'a Islamic Studies* 2:2 (2009), pp. 195–219.

members of the intelligentsia as well as reformist clerics, was a Shi'i political party, yet it presented, at least in its early days, a universal Islamic message. A similar trend existed during this period among the Shi'is of Lebanon. The national pact of 1943 solidified the sectarian basis of Lebanese society through a power-sharing system that divided the political spoils along confessional lines. Yet the Lebanese Shi'i leadership, of both the *mujtahids* and the lay politicians, began endorsing broader religious, cultural and political frameworks in the nation-state and beyond, alongside their commitment to a core communal membership.

A process of social change and exposure to modern ideologies which occurred among the diverse Shi'i communities during the twentieth century led to a shift away from exclusive sectarianism towards multiple forms of identity. This was the case also in Iran in which the intelligentsia gained ground under Reza Shāh (r. 1925–1941) with his modernization drive and forced secularisation project. A lively Iranian intelligentsia flourished in the following decades, debating the relevance of Western thought to the developing nation of Iran, in its history, culture and politics. During the 1960s and 1970s, Iranian intellectuals and religious scholars began expressing an anti-colonialist agenda intertwined with an active and revolutionary reading of religion. They put aside the technical details of religious law and mitigated the sectarian dimension of the Shi'i creed. Instead, they called the Muslim world to rise against its oppressors in the name of an all-inclusive Islam. These revolutionaries introduced a new dialectical exchange between elements of Shi'i Islam, Iranian nationalist sentiments, pan-Islamic notions, and a universal intellectual discourse.

Migration and the Return of Sectarianism

As Shi'is contemplated their relationship with the nation-state and the broader Muslim and international frameworks, Shi'is from diverse locations in the Muslim world were also immigrating en masse to the West. Liyakat Nathani Takim's *Shi'ism in America* adds an important dimension to this discussion on social change and sectarian identity. Shi'is began arriving in the US in the early twentieth century, yet this movement accelerated in the latter part of this century. These waves of immigration stemmed from socio-economic strife as well as from a lack of personal security, particularly from the 1970s and onwards, as Shi'is were escaping wars, civil strife and dictatorial regimes. Shi'is also benefitted from a relaxation of US immigration laws during the 1960s.

Muslim immigration to both Europe and the US gained ground in the second half of the twentieth century. Scholarship on Muslim migration to Europe delineates the socio-political and cultural difficulties these immigrants encountered in their new countries. Even so, the move to the West actually created a greater sense of an Islamic nation. Prior to their migration, Muslims' main connections

were with their fellow nationals. As they began settling into their new homeland, these migrants began to forge contacts with Muslims from different ethnic and national origins to create a new sense of communal life, to safeguard religion, and to fend off cultural assimilation. In essence, the *umma* became more visible in Europe as Muslims from diverse ethnic and national backgrounds began engaging in *da'wa* (proselytizing) in order to revive the practice of religion and combat the Westernization and secularization of society. They established broadly-based Muslim organizations and began debating the place of Islam in a European society.

In contrast with this unifying effort of Muslim forces in Europe, Takim stresses the fragmentation of Shi'i society in the US. Takim, a native of Zanzibar, is the author of many publications on Islam. He currently holds the Sharjah Chair in Global Islam at McMaster University. Takim himself is an immigrant to the US, who brings with him the wide cultural experience of Islam in Zanzibar. In the Shi'i context, Takim provides important information on the Khoja community in the US, which exemplifies this notion of religious diversity. The Khojas of Zanzibar are descendants of immigrants from India that belong to both Isma'ili and Twelver branches of Shi'ism. This community brought with it to the US a rich heritage that combines elements of Indian and African cultures with adherence to Shi'i Islam.¹³

Takim provides a detailed picture of Shi'i life in the US and a significant addition to the study Muslim immigration to the West. Moreover, particularly in the post 9/11 atmosphere and the Islamophobia that accompanied it, there is a growing significance for an informed account, aimed at the general public, of the complex make-up of the Muslim mosaic in America. In particular, the ordinary American does not understand the differences between Sunnis and Shi'is and is unaware of the fact that the latter was a persecuted minority throughout Muslim history. Furthermore, for Osama bin Ladin and his radical Jihadi movement, not only were America and the West the archenemy, but the Shi'i sect was defined as an internal theological foe. In al-Qa'ida's rigid and literalist understanding of religion, Shi'ism was pronounced as a heretical offshoot of true Islam.

Americans are also uninformed about the factors that brought many of these Shi'i immigrants to the US. This includes the large Iranian diaspora, many of whom fled the Islamic revolution. Moreover, as Takim explains, there are also different levels of religious commitment among Shi'is in America; Iranians in

¹³ On this community see: Seyyid Saeed Akhtar Rizvi and Noel Q. King, "Some East African Ithna-Asheri Jamaats (1840–1967)," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 5:1 (1973), pp. 12–22;

Abdulaziz Y. Lodhi, "Muslims in Eastern Africa—Their Past and Present," *Nordic Journal of African Studies* 3:1 (1994), pp. 88–98.

particular tend to be more secular and more open to assimilation. As a minority within a minority, Shi'is in America are challenged in many ways. Members of this sect feel the need to safeguard their beliefs against attacks by radical Sunnis. Concurrently, like their fellow Sunnis, they need to challenge the negative approach towards Islam in the American public discourse. They are also obliged to counter the association between Shi'ism and terrorism linked to Hizbullah in Lebanon, the Islamic Republic in Iran or even Saddam in Iraq, although many American Shi'is actually fled these repressive regimes.

Takim's book provides an important prism through which to observe the separate existence of Shi'i society in America in its complex composition and diverse ethnic groups. In this publication, Takim lays out the unique evolution of different strands within Shi'ism, including the Twelvers, Sufi circles and even small numbers of Hazara Shi'is from Afghanistan. American Shi'is also encompass various social classes such as students, an affluent middle class and unskilled workers. The book offers in-depth insights into the unique development of these multiple sub-communities in America, from its early years until today. It also includes relevant introductory information on the basic principles of Shi'ism and its unique rituals. Takim delineates the institution-building process in America, which included establishing mosques, Islamic schools, as well as religious and communal centers, particularly from the 1980s with the growth of the Shi'i immigration to the US. He also describes the practice of popular Shi'i rituals commemorating the martyrdom of Imam Husayn and their impact on strengthening sectarian identity.

For this research, Takim gathered information through field-work among the diverse Shi'i localities in America, concentrated in major cities in the US such as New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Washington, D.C. and Dearborn, Michigan. The book includes data on this multifaceted community, including its locations and its diverse origins: from Lebanon, Iraq, and Iran to the Indian sub-continent. It also contains an interesting reference to the indigenous Shi'is of Black American origins, many of whom were converts from Sunni Islam. Takim observes that Black Americans were attracted to Shi'ism due to its status as a minority creed and its affiliation with resistance, justice and messianic beliefs. While Black Americans are among the smallest groups of Shi'is in America, Iranians—among whom a sizeable percentage are secular—are the largest group. Although Iranian Americans tend towards assimilation more than other Shi'i communities, they maintain a strong affinity to Persian culture. In place of visiting mosques, secular Iranians attend cultural centers, preserve their language and celebrate the Iranian New Year. On the other hand, Shi'is of Iraqi origins tend to be more traditional and observe a more intense version of Shi'ism.¹⁴

¹⁴ On Iraqis' immigration to the US, see also: Saskia Witteborn, "Identity Mobilization

In his research, Takim stresses the divide along ethnic and linguistic lines among American Shi'is, with their diverse rituals imported from their places of origin. This includes particular cultural nuances related to the commemoration of Husayn, the mode in which each group runs its mosques as well as unique dress codes. Many Shi'is maintained their sectarian orientation with the move to the US and some immigrants brought with them the traditional polemical engagement with Sunni Islam. He also delineates the communal tendency to continue the principle of following the most prominent *marja'* (source of emulation). In this case, American Shi'is adhere to the prominent religious authorities from the Shi'i centers in Middle East, including Ayatollah 'Ali al-Sistānī of Iraq, Ayatollah Muḥammad Ḥusyan Faḍlallah of Lebanon and Ayatollah 'Ali Khamenāi of Iran. This tends to correspond to the leadership-affiliation in the immigrants' home country.

As Takim explains, at least until the mid-twentieth century, Sunnis and Shi'is living in the same neighborhoods would pray collectively and celebrate together. Yet at the end of the century, the sectarian divide became an apparent factor in inter-Muslim relations in the US, with the return of sectarianism to the world of Islam. While both Sunnis and Shi'is living in America are dealing with issues related to culture, education, assimilation, communal membership, institution-building and socio-political rights, the two groups are not making serious efforts to unite in face of these similar challenges. As delineated by Vali Nasr in *The Shia Revival*, the re-emergence of the historical Sunni-Shi'i rift in the center of Middle East geopolitics began in the 1980s following the Islamic revolution, the Iran-Iraq war, the rise of the radical Sunni Jihadi movements and their anti-Shi'i agenda as well as the empowerment of the Shi'is in Iraq in the post-2003 period.¹⁵ American freedom, pluralism and opportunity also played a part, according to Takim, in strengthening sectarian and ethnic affiliations among the Shi'i communities in America. In Takim's eyes, this phenomenon also stemmed from the need of the Shi'i minority to cling to their homeland identity in the face of a secular, non-Muslim society. Shi'is and the broader Muslim community in the US can learn from the Jewish experience on how to build religious and political institutions to serve the interests of the faithful in a new land. Still, the Jewish community, which is far more established and prosperous than the Muslim community in America, did not manage to overcome its fragmentation. Synagogues continue to be divided along ethnic lines and religious life is split between Orthodox,

Practices of Refugees: The Case of Iraqis in the United States and the War in Iraq." *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication* 1:3 (August 2008), pp. 202–220.

¹⁵ See: Vali Nasr, *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006).

Conservative and Reform denominations. Furthermore, in the political domain Israel acquired an important position in the identity of many American Jews. Yet alongside AIPAC (the American Israel Public Affairs Committee) with its unconditional support of Israel, Jews of more liberal orientations are endorsing the growing J Street in its more open-minded views on the Middle East.¹⁶

Globalization, Identity and Communal Membership

At the close of the twentieth century, Shi'is were living in a globalized world. Their communities in the Arab nation-states, in Iran, in the Indian sub-continent and in the West were inter-connected through travel, media and exchange of knowledge. Shi'is who immigrated to the West were able to maintain cultural, economic and political ties with their places of origin, a process facilitated by the development of new media. While many felt foreign and alien in the West, they also began creating economic and political ties to their new country.

Shi'is who were exposed to modernization in the early decades of the twentieth century began undergoing a further step of social change by immigrating to the West. In the 1950s, Muḥammad Fadhel Jamālī represented the integrated Shi'i who was almost oblivious to his Shi'i roots. He was unique even within the small Shi'i intelligentsia in marrying an American woman and in gaining his education in the West. At the same time, the Shi'i masses in Iraq and elsewhere continued to maintain their sectarian identity, which was solidified through popular practices related to the veneration of the Imams. Shi'is who immigrated to the US displayed a return to traditional forms of identification, resulting in the fragmentation of the community. This process, as mentioned, was related to similar developments that occurred in the Muslim world during this period as well as to the freedom of American society, freedom that was denied to many Shi'is in their home countries. In addition to Takim's explanations, it can also be viewed as a measure undertaken to safeguard group membership in the face of a threat to one's culture. Moreover, this phenomenon is related to the question of social status and education, which expands horizons. While members of the Shi'i intelligentsia like Jamālī were able to assimilate into the broader culture and political frameworks, the ordinary Shi'i clung to his core sectarian identity. Similarly, at the turn of the century, the more affluent American Iranians were able to create an exchange between the dominant American culture

¹⁶ For comparison see, for example, Dana Evan Kaplan, *Contemporary American Judaism: Transformation and Renewal* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009); Arthur A. Goren, *The Politics and Public Culture of American Jews* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indian University Press, 1999).

and their Persian roots. At the same time, the unskilled Shi'i immigrant embraced his tribal roots.

Yet as Takim illustrates, the American Shi'i community's transition to the twenty-first century is complex. Indeed, there is a clear emphasis on the out-moded elements of ethnicity and sectarianism. Moreover, Takim explains that Shi'is in America, as elsewhere, present a new religious discourse that takes into account the modern needs of the believers. Faḍlallah, for example, a *mujtahid* who is emulated by the Shi'i Lebanese community in the US and is particularly popular among the youth, provides religious rulings on very contemporary issues, predominantly on topics relevant to women and youth. Other jurists have introduced new readings to the traditional Islamic sources of the Qur'an and the Hadith, which provide the basis for jurisprudence. American Shi'is tend to emulate high-ranking *mujtahids* from the Middle East; in contrast to the larger Sunni community, there is less of a place for a lay leadership. Yet there is also a new understanding for a need to raise a local Islamic-trained leadership more attuned to the needs of Muslims in the US. Shi'is have also begun to engage in outreach activities to reverse the negative image of Islam in American society.

Moreover, as Takim stresses, prominent members of both the Sunni and Shi'i communities are alarmed by the rising inter-sectarian hostility and are seeking dialogue. This agenda is also voiced by the younger Shi'i generation who in many cases was born in the US. There is tension between Sunni and Shi'i students in universities and the sectarian conflict is present on the internet. However, concurrently, there are cases in which Shi'i youth are reaching out to their fellow Sunnis in universities and through internet sites.¹⁷ These youngsters are seeking to find their unique way between the traditional practices of their parents, their own adherence to a more progressive and global Islam, the dominant American culture and their position as loyal citizens of the US.

As a result, while many Shi'is in America are fortressing an exclusive identity, there is also a growing understanding that this community must continue to negotiate its membership in the broader Muslim milieu and even in a Western society. The anti-colonialist discourse is a relic of the past, and Shi'is like Sunnis can become equal partners in a new socio-political discourse with the West, as citizens of these countries or as members of the international community. Indeed, both Shi'is and Sunnis were influenced in the course of history by their surrounding culture which they incorporated into the practice of religion. Today the sectarian factor in the Muslim world has achieved dominance over cultural and ethnic affiliations. Yet, the precedence of the Shi'i intelligentsia of the first half of the twentieth century, with its support of Arabism, demonstrates

¹⁷ See, for example, www.shiachat.com.

that at least in theory, culture can become a bridge between Sunnis and Shi'is. This link can be based, for example, on a shared political affinity in the Middle East nation-states or on the mutual aim of safeguarding religion amongst an immigrant community in the West.