

CHAPTER ONE**The Arab Shi'a**

The Forgotten Muslims

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The Shi'ite Identity

To speak of the Shi'a of the Arab world is to raise a sensitive issue that most Muslims would rather not discuss. To some it is a nonexistent issue, but to many more it is simply best ignored because it raises disturbing questions about Arab society and politics and challenges deep-rooted assumptions about Arab history and identity. Sunnis by and large prefer to avoid the subject, and even many Shi'a are uncomfortable with it. Yet beneath the superficial denial lies a tacit acknowledgment that the Shi'a present an unresolved problem in the Arab Muslim polity—from the start of Islamic history—that can profoundly influence the traditional ways of ordering society and government in the Arab world.

To be Shi'a in the Muslim world is of course part of an identity issue that cuts to the heart of politics and society in the Arab and Muslim world. The world is replete with identity issues, and their salience has been on the rise over the past decades, especially after the end of the Cold War. The same is true in the Middle East where identity is as often as not linked to religion as much as to ethnicity. Not is the issue of being Shi'a or Sunni the only identity issue in the Muslim world, or necessarily the determining identity. Other religious identities in the region also come into play: Muslim versus Protestant, Catholic, Orthodox,

Zoroastrian, Druze, `Alawi, or Jew. Nor is religion necessarily the paramount identity. Indeed, all individuals have multiple identities—tribe, clan, region, nationality, religion, gender, profession, class, race, language, culture, and so on. Some identities are marked by international boundaries that separate a Jordanian from an Iraqi, a Saudi from an Iranian. Other identities can cut across national boundaries. But all of these distinctions can be important to one's position and status in society and can affect economic or social well-being or access to power and privilege. (In an informal survey carried out by the authors among Iraqi Shi'a, for instance, they were asked to list the components of their identity in order of importance. Invariably, at the top of the list was the Iraqi identity; this was followed by the Arab identity or the Muslim; Shi'ism was usually the fourth component. Not all Shi'a would adhere to this ranking, however.)

In the end, external circumstances tend to determine the salience of one facet of an individual's identity over another at any given time. Discrimination against a particular feature of one's identity reinforces that feature in relation to others. It is an unfortunate characteristic of much of Muslim world politics that the issue of Shi'ite identity should remain a key element in political and social affairs in most countries. The Shi'ite identity need not be that important an issue, but it does acquire heightened significance when it becomes a factor in the attitudes of non-Shi'a. In other words, the responsibility for the salience of Shi'ite identity in society and politics lies not with the Shi'a alone, but at least as much with the Sunnis who dominate social and political attitudes in all Arab states except Syria and Lebanon.

The "problem of the Shi'a" is not simply the usual issue of a minority in society. In fact the Shi'a are not even numerical minorities in several countries in the region: in Iraq and Bahrain they constitute a clear majority, but nonetheless they still suffer "minority" status. The Shi'a represent a plurality in Lebanon, where only in recent years they have gained a degree of political power commensurate with their numbers. Regardless of their numbers, the dilemma of the Shi'a is in many ways more complicated than a minority

issue, because it is far more subtle, unstated and virtually unmentionable. Christians, for instance, are a recognized religious minority while the Kurds in Iraq are a recognized ethnic minority; they both occupy an acknowledged niche in society, however underprivileged and uncomfortable that may sometimes be. Theoretically at least Christians and Kurds can sue for specific protections and rights from the state without rubbing salt in the wound or upsetting the established social order. This is far from the case with the Shi'a.

The sensitivity of the Shi'ite issue runs deep and touches upon the earliest discords in Muslim society. The *umma* of Islam (the totality of the international Muslim community) in theory is homogeneous and united, so that emphasis placed upon differences within it are often quickly condemned as schismatic. The Shi'a, merely by proclaiming their brand of Islam, their difference—even their existence—present a sensitive problem that assails the core of Muslim unity and undermines the traditional historiography of the Muslim state, which seeks to present Muslim history as an unbroken and untarnished continuity. In the past, Arab and other Muslim governments have been loath to address this issue head on, preferring to ignore or disguise it as part of the "unfinished business" of Islam. However, evasiveness does not serve to solve the problem and may no longer even be an option.

At the heart of the "Shi'a problem" is a series of stereotypical beliefs in traditional Sunni thinking, many of which arise from the myth of the unity of the *umma*. In the framework of unity, Shi'ism is the dreaded "mother split" in Islam, especially destabilizing because it occurred so early in the history of Islam. In the stereotypical depiction, the Shi'a represent a schismatic religious group, whose Islam is unorthodox and suspect, whose attitude toward the state is unreliable, who prefer to maintain a communal life separate from Sunnis, and whose *spiritual* loyalty, at least, lies outside the Arab states toward Shi'ite Iran. None of these stereotypes is accurate, but all have an element of truth in them at certain times and under certain circumstances.

The West also looks at the Shi'a in stereotypical terms, as a homogeneous group marked by religious zeal, violent methods and radical acts, and all of whose members antagonistic to the United States. This oversimplified picture is based on the sensational manifestations of Shi'ite self-assertion, which reached their peak in the decade following the Iranian revolution. The tidal wave of the Iranian revolution, as it washed over Lebanon, Iraq, and the Persian Gulf region, has understandably predisposed the West to view Shi'ism as fanatical and aggressive, and to ignore the distinctions that exist between Iranian and Arab Shi'ism, and within Arab Shi'ism itself. Such a broad-brush notion was facilitated by the paucity of substantial scholarship on the Shi'a, and more particularly of Arab Shi'a, prior to the rise of Khomeini's Iran. Thus the approach of the West to Shi'ism was impressionistic rather than analytical, based on snapshots that missed the larger canvas of the Shi'ite world, and was propelled by reaction rather than investigation.

The reality of the Shi'a in the Arab world is far more complex. As this study aims to show, there are common denominators of religious beliefs, cultural lore, and historical memory that create a sense of community among the Shi'a, especially those in the Arab world. We must also recognize, however, that the Shi'a are not an undifferentiated mass: there is diversity of belief and purpose, as well as differences in adherence and commitment to the common denominators. Moreover, even though many of the problems experienced by the Shi'a across the region are similar, they are not identical but rather are modulated by the different histories and circumstances of the communities in individual countries. This has created divergent approaches and responses by the Shi'ite communities toward the broader societies in which they live.

Constituents of Identity

The "Twelver Shi'a" are so named because they

recognize twelve Shi'ite Imams (spiritual community leaders) as guiding the Shi'ite community until the last went into occultation late in the ninth century, to reemerge one day according to God's plan.) They are also called Ja'fari, after Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq, the sixth Imam and a great scholar who laid down the principal traditions and doctrine of Shi'ism. The Twelver Shi'a represent about 10 to 15 percent of the Muslim, predominantly Sunni, world. It is difficult to give precise figures for the Arab countries, but it is acknowledged that they form significant minorities in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Oman, a plurality in Lebanon, and a majority in Iraq and Bahrain. The history of *tashayyu'* (Shi'ism) began, according to many interpretations, immediately after the death of the Prophet Muhammad as a political protest over the issue of who was to succeed the Prophet and how succession was to be determined. This proto-Shi'ism evolved into a recognizable and separate doctrine only from the ninth century onward. Shi'ite centers of learning developed in Iraq and Iran during the `Abbasid period, then more vigorously under the tenth-century Buyid dynasty in Iraq and the Hamdani in Syria, both of which had Shi'ite sympathies. Thus the early spread of Shi'ism in Iraq, Lebanon, and Bahrain, as well as Iran, long predates the official establishment of Shi'ism in Iran, which came only under the Safavids as late as the sixteenth century. Indeed the Safavid Shah Isma'il (and subsequent Persian rulers) invited Shi'ite *`ulama* (religious scholars) from Jabal `Amil in Lebanon and from Bahrain to Iran to enlist their aid in the formidable task of propagating the creed across the length and breadth of Sunni Iran.

With the long history of Shi'ite communities in the Arab world and their distribution across regions, states, and national identities, it is legitimate to ask whether there is such a thing as an encompassing shared Shi'ite identity. It presupposes a broad common ground that transcends geography, history, politics, and even ethnic origin. While it is accepted that ethnicity does have the power to retain cohesion, it is less clear whether sectarian adherence has a similar force. The evidence suggests that there are both intrinsic and exogenous factors that contribute to

Shi'ite identity. Common religious, social, political, and economic factors have characterized the experience of Shi'ite communities, and, notwithstanding local or individual variations in these elements, they create common ties and contribute to the shaping of a Shi'ite identity.

The Shi'a share with Sunnis a belief in the tenets of the Muslim faith as set out in the Qur'an, the Sira (account of the Prophet's life) and Hadith (collected and edited sayings) of the Prophet Muhammad, and adherence to the five "pillars" of Muslim religious observance. However, significant interpretative divergences and devotional additions set Shi'ite practices apart. At its origins the split among the Muslims occurred over the political question of who should succeed the Prophet in leading the umma of Muslims. The partisans (the literal translation of "Shi'a") of `Ali believed that succession should go to Muhammad's family via the Prophet's bloodline, represented first by `Ali (the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law) and subsequently by `Ali's descendants from his wife Fatima, the daughter of the Prophet. As Twelver Shi'ism took shape and crystallized, twelve descendants in particular were regarded as Imams and by right were owed allegiance as the leaders of the community in their lifetime and veneration after their death. The Shi'a believe in the infallibility of the twelve Imams and in their direct divine inspiration—doctrines that the Sunnies view as contrary to the teachings of Islam, some even as idolatrous or non-Muslim. Further, belief in the temporary occultation of the twelfth and last Imam, in the ninth century, led to the millenarian Shi'ite Doctrine of the Return, when the hidden Imam will reveal himself and lead the faithful against the forces of evil. In the absence of the Twelfth Imam, the affairs of the faithful are referred to surrogates, learned 'ulama, *maraji' al-taqlid* (literally "sources of emulation," singular *marji*), who have mastered Islamic jurisprudence and have the authority of interpreting Islam's texts and dicta in terms of contemporary life.

The central drama of Shi'ism is the tragic slaying of Husayn, the third Imam and grandson of the Prophet, at the hands of the `Umayyads in a hopelessly uneven

battle near Karbala in Iraq in 680. The "martyrdom" of Husayn, which Fuad Ajami calls the "Karbala paradigm," has become the leitmotif of Shi'ite interpretation of the world, around which much of Shi'ite ritual and iconography revolves. From this drama springs the double helix of martyrdom and dispossession that runs through Shi'ite history, spreading offshoots of belief in *`adl* (God's justice), a millenarian struggle at the end of time, and the deliverance of humanity by the reappeared Twelfth Imam. The tragedy of Husayn's martyrdom is literally revived and reenacted yearly at the anniversary of the massacre, *`Ashura*, when full vent is given to grief, remorse, and lamentation in processions, drama, and music. What is ambivalent is whether the lamentation is for Husayn alone or for the burden of all the Shi'a and their accumulated history of rejection and defeat.

Far more than the Sunnis, the Shi'a have transformed their beliefs into an exuberant culture of religion as powerful as the doctrine itself. Thus a reference system of texts, rituals, folk practices, popular legends, and religious observances, many of which are peripheral to the doctrine, has been woven into the fabric of Shi'ite collective consciousness, endowing it with a rich and distinctive iconography. Ahl al-Bayt (People of the Family of the Prophet) are especially venerated and loved by the Shi'a. The graves of members of Ahl al-Bayt, and especially of the twelve Imams, are holy shrines with emotive and spiritual power, giving cities like Najaf, Karbala, Qom, and Mashhad a special sanctity. Visits to the shrines of the Imams in these cities, especially Karbala and Najaf in Iraq, are as important as the pilgrimage to Mecca, more frequent, and far more festive. For Shi'a from Bahrain or Lebanon who find it too arduous or expensive to travel to Mecca with millions of others at the specified time of year, Karbala and Qom are more accessible and welcoming and provide a locale to meet Shi'a from around the Muslim world. Pious Shi'a visit these shrines frequently, seeking benediction and the intercession of the Imams for personal problems. Burial in the Iraqi city of Najaf, near the first Imam, *`Ali*, is the desideratum of every Shi'ite believer, and the city once derived a substantial portion of its revenue from burial of the dead brought from as far

away as Pakistan and India.

Like the medieval Christian church, the Shi'ite year is marked by seasons of commemorations, devotions, and observances that are most often performed communally. Study circles, oratory, and charitable distribution also mark such festivals as the Ghadir Khom, when Muhammad, according to Shi'ite belief, designated `Ali his successor. The Muslim month of Muharram is a period of intensified religious observance and piety and expanded gatherings at *husayniyat*, or Shi'ite community centers. The most important event in the Shi'ite calendar is the yearly `Ashura procession, commemorating the martyrdom of the third Imam, al-Husayn. Processions of thousands of men present a public display of drama and lamentation, in some places including a passion play depicting the story of Imam Husayn's martyrdom—despite the fact that human representation is forbidden in Islam. Flagellants with bare bloodied backs and chests are common sights in these processions. Public recitations of the writings of the Imams were until recent years the equivalent of Friday prayers for the Sunnis. In Shi'ite eyes, then, the practice of Shi'ite community life and ritual is an exceptionally rich and warm tradition. To many Sunnis, however, it represents unorthodox accretions that defy the injunctions of Islam and border on the heretical.

But some observant Shi'a point out that Shi'ism in and of itself isn't a religion at all, it is simply "a way to think about Islam." In other words, there is full agreement about the nature of the Prophet's revelations, but there is no agreement about what happened after his death. The line of argument maintains that the revelations are by definition sacred, but that the history of Islam itself is not sacred, despite many efforts by subsequent Islamic scholars to equate their collegial interpretation of Islam with the faith itself. One may have differing views about the relative merits of the leadership of the early umma after the Prophet without departing from Islam. What the Shi'a depart from is the interpretation and *implementation* of Islam into the political order; this is not about Islam, but about implementation. Implementation cannot be equated with revelation.

This line of thinking further argues that the Shi'a have no political agenda for the future other than to protect the welfare and interests of the Shi'ite community. This goal makes no reference to Sunni Islam and should not be threatening to Sunnis.

An additional major element of the Shi'ite identity is the *marji'iyya*, or institution of juridical referral on matters affecting religious practices, social relations, and theology. It is specific to Twelver Shi'ism, especially the dominant Usuli school, and closely connected to the principle of Imamate, or guidance of the Muslims. The principle of Imamate stems from the belief that God, who had sent the Prophet Muhammad and the Qur'an to Muslims to enlighten, instruct, and lead them in the true path of His worship, would not leave his umma, or nation, without guidance after the Prophet's death. God's love for the umma, and His concern for the welfare of every Muslim in life and in the hereafter, dictates that in every age Muslims must have guides, imams, to continue the essential function of instructing the umma in the path of righteousness. Those given the power to interpret God's law in its contemporary significance and relevance were known as *mujtahid*, or interpreters.

Every practicing Shi'i had to follow the directives of one or more mujtahid in almost every aspect of their life. Mujtahids were also venerated for their justice (*'adl*), the purity of their lives and their personal piety, and were exemplars for devout Shi'a. Financially, the highest class of mujtahids, the maraji', commanded considerable resources. A practicing Shi'ite is required to pay a tax, (*khums*), and a charitable contribution (*takat*), to a marji' for distribution to the needy. Many wealthy Shi'a also make endowments (*awqaf*) usually in the form of income-producing property, that are administered by mujtahids or maraji'. These financial contributions have in fact become a measure of the importance of a marji' and the size of his following. Maraji' could establish seminaries and other schools, support students of theology and lesser clerics, build orphanages, and finance publications, as well as give alms to the poor and needy. The financial resources were not only a measure of the importance of a marji', they also helped to expand the influence of the marji'.

Finally, as the representative or deputy of the Imam, the *maraji'* also carried political weight, although the precise nature of his political role remained somewhat nebulous. The twelve Imams were regarded as the divinely ordained leaders of the *umma* in both the spiritual and temporal realms. The Muslim rulers who came after `Ali were illegitimate because they had usurped the leadership of the *umma* from the Imams and governed in *dhulm* (injustice); these rulers can be tolerated by the Shi'a or challenged, but they cannot become the ultimate authority over the conscience of the Shi'a. Thus the issue of who can have legitimate political authority over the Shi'a after the occultation of the twelfth Imam was left unsettled. The *maraji'*, as representatives of the hidden Imam, and because of their expertise and justice, were most suited to rule the *umma* in the absence of the Imam. Thus in the early 1970s Ayatollah Khomeini published a landmark book that developed the concept of *wilayat al-faqih* (the governorship of the juristconsult) to resolve the uncertainty, but the concept has not been universally accepted by the senior `ulama of Shi'ism. Nevertheless, the *maraji'*, as the highest authority over the Shi'ite community, have had considerable political sway even when they did not hold the reigns of powers, and they were consulted by practicing Shi'a on political issues, including opposition to the government, jihad, formation of political parties, and other purely political questions. The apogee of clerical political rule of course occurred in Iran after the revolution of 1979.

The *maraji'* therefore exercise authority over their followers and act as a binding force uniting their emulators and followers, who can be regarded as belonging to the same school and following the same mentor. However, this unity is somewhat diminished by the important fact of the multiplicity of *maraji'*. In practice, there have always been several mujtahids in any given era, and only rarely was there a supreme *marji'* to whom all deferred. In part this proliferation was necessitated by the wide geographic spread of Shi'ism and the difficulties of communication when Shi'ite communities needed a local authority to respond to their pressing questions, and the multiplicity of mujtahids presented limited scope for

friction However, the concentration of mujtahids in cities like Qom, Tehran, and Najaf, as well as vastly improved communications, does create occasions for conflict among mujtahids and, by extension, among their cohorts (followers).

A practicing Shi'i can choose his or her mentor freely among the maraji' and can even choose a different marji' for different needs, although this rarely happens, for once a personal bond is established with a marji' loyalty usually stays firm. Because the maraji' occasionally disagree both on secondary and even major issues, their divisions are reflected in divisions within the Shi'ite community as a whole. One of the salient examples of such differences was the activist political role adopted by Khomeini in the 1970s and 1980s, contrasted with the apolitical stance of several senior maraji', including Ayatollahs Khoei in Iraq and Rouhani in Qom. These senior clerics, who had a higher religious station and together commanded a far wider religious following than Khomeini, were never sympathetic to his concept of *wilayat al-faqih*. Such major disagreements are an additional factor in the divisions within the worldwide Shi'ite community.

The prominent role of the maraji' has emerged only over the past few centuries but has become a vital part of Shi'ism's ability to apply interpretation to modern conditions, giving Shi'ism, in principle, a more liberal approach to interpretation of Islam than the Sunnis have. Indeed, once a marji' has died, his interpretations and farwas are no longer binding upon his followers and can be reinterpreted by his successor.

The maraji' provide spiritual leadership to the Shi'a across national boundaries and act as focal points for consensus among their followers as well as guides in times of crisis, especially when other forms of higher authority are absent or suspect. Thus during the 1920 popular revolt against the British in Iraq, the maraji' in Nejaf, Karbala, and Kadhimein were consulted, particularly Muhammad Taqi al-Shirazi, on the validity of armed struggle, even though the revolt was not exclusively religious or Shi'ite but was regarded as an Iraqi national movement against British colonialism.

Because this complex reference system has taken root in the tradition, culture, and very social life of Shi'ism its power to delineate Shi'ite identity extends far beyond mere theological belief or those who are strict observants to include the large numbers of doctrinally, faint-hearted Shi'a. Many "cultural Shi'a" participate in the rituals and folklore of the community not necessarily out of theological fervor but because these have become the vernacular of community self-expression—much as Jewish holidays have a strong cultural hold over relatively secular Jews. Thus Shi'ism has created a language, both literal and metaphoric, through which a broad spectrum of Shi'a can communicate with each other and interpret the world.

But the question of who is a Shi'i is a matter of some dispute within the community itself. For most Shi'a, the definition of Shi'ism is a compound of religious, cultural, historical, and social attributes, usually acquired by the circumstance of birth, and it is ultimately a definition determined by the individual. For some the stress may fall on the religious component, for others on the cultural and racial components. However, not all Shi'a accept such an elastic definition. For strict religious observants, Shi'ism is a religious faith and a way of life based on that faith. Shi'ism as an identity is inseparable from adherence to the religious faith, and it is the active practice of Shi'ism that express identity. In this purist definition, cultural and historical Shi'ism (for example, being Shi'ite by birth) that is not rooted in religious belief does not constitute sufficient ground for being considered Shi'ite. In this view, nonpracticing Shi'a and "cultural Shi'a" are therefore outside the fold and cannot be considered part of the community. This conservative view is usually glossed over in face of the indiscriminate pressures placed on the Shi'ite community by the sociopolitical environment, but it remains nevertheless an incipient source of tension, already visible in countries such as Lebanon where there is now a sufficient margin of maneuver for the Shi'a to allow themselves the luxury of squabbling ever appropriating the Shi'ite platform.

In geographic terms, Shi'ism has in one sense

remained on the peripheries of the Arab world, but in another sense it lies in the absolute heart of the Persian Gulf with its communities clustered around the oil-rich shores of eastern Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, southern Iraq, Kuwait, and to a lesser extent the UAE, Qatar, and Oman. Only Lebanon is the obvious exception to this regional clustering. In the twentieth century, Shi'ism has been absent from the centers where Arab history was being made: Cairo, Damascus, Baghdad, Riyadh, or Jeddah. But this geographic proximity in the Gulf region has facilitated movement among Shi'ite areas, resulting in intermarriage and ties of kinship. Indeed, many Shi'a refer to the Gulf coastal region as the Shi'ite heartland, in which they live in a relatively consolidated fashion. While from the Sunni perspective the Shi'a seem to live on the periphery, even from the point of view of Islam, this is not so. These regions are intimately linked to the early years of the expansion of Islam into southern Mesopotamia and the Gulf coast. Indeed, this is proximity to the roots of Islam, not distance. Although increasingly in the second half of the twentieth century the rise in urbanization and mobility has expanded the range of the Shi'a into major Arab cities, the areas along the Gulf coast remain the home base.

In addition to intrinsic elements of identity that develop naturally from common beliefs and practices, Shi'a also possess an ascriptive identity, that is, elements of identity that are ascribed by others to the Shi'a. As early as the ninth century the Shi'a were labeled Rafidha, or "rejecters," by mainstream Sunni Muslims, referring to their rejection of the line of succession established after the death of Muhammad, and thus the entire basis of legitimacy that successive Muslim dynasties built on (even though the legitimacy of most of those dynasties were based on the realities of power and not theological or moral grounds). More than that, the label has unmistakable undertones of heresy, implying a rejection of mainstream (Sunni) Islamic doctrine and probable religious deviation. And it is only a short step from *al-rafidha* those who reject, to *al-marfudhun*, those who are rejected, indicating ostracism of the Shi'a from the main body politic, or umma, of Islam.

Shi'ite identity was thus formed as much by external pressure applied on the community by the surrounding environment as by any intrinsic qualities. With only brief intermissions, the Shi'a have endured varying degrees of ostracism, discrimination, or persecution. The stigmatization of the Shi'a was validated on the three issues of theology, politics and, in modern times, state allegiance. Shi'ite veneration of the twelve Imams; their belief in the power of intercession; and their visits, prayers, and sacrifices at the shrines appears to contradict the principle of unitarianism or oneness of God (*tawhid*) that is cardinal in Islam and lends Shi'ism a suspiciously unorthodox color in the eyes of Sunnis. At the extreme, Shi'ism came to be seen not as a separate school of Islamic thought but as a heretical movement that undermines the principles of Islam.

Politically, the Shi'a are perceived as dissenters from the start, unwilling to endorse the system of *khilafa* (succession) and the established order, therefore, Shi'ism is a *fitna* (sedition), designed to tear apart the solidarity of the umma. Lastly, Shi'ism is accused of being a non-Arab movement, an ideology fashioned and promoted by *Mawali* (non-Arab Muslims) to undermine Arab culture and the Arab character of Islam, and indeed to undermine Islam itself, the supreme product of the Arabs. This latter charge has been resurrected in modern history in the term *Shu'ubiyya* (anti-Arabism) used against Shi'ism by writers on Arab nationalism.

The engagement of the Shi'a in public affairs has thus been, and continues to be, constrained by these charges. The political participation of the Shi'a was limited to failed insurgencies under `Umayyad and `Abbasid rule and brief periods of tolerance under local sultans in the tenth and eleventh centuries; otherwise political estrangement was the norm for the Shi'a during much of Muslim history. The Shi'a consequently retreated from public life and affairs of state and were in turn marginalized in the affairs of the great Muslim empires, with the significant exception of Iran starting in the sixteenth century.

The implications, ramifications, and consequences

of the status of the Shi'a as *rafidhalmarfudhun* (those who reject and those who are rejected) form the matrices of any study of Shi'ite identity in the Arab world today. The position of the Shi'a in the states and societies in which they live is the historical legacy of their rejection of the legitimacy of government, the reciprocal rejection by Sunni authority of the Shi'a, and their consequent sense of dispossession and alienation. The concepts of *`adl* and its opposite, *dhulm* (injustice or oppression), figure prominently in Shi'ite theological, social, and political thinking. To the classical understanding of justice in its juridical sense, *`adl* in the Shi'ite lexicon adds the theological dimension of "following the just will of God" and "acting according to God's righteous will." Politically, this is translated into the notion that the only legitimate government is one that follows the righteous will of God; social justice and the equality of Muslims are also manifestations of divine *`adl*. By these standards, most Muslim governments have only practiced *dhulm* in nearly all respects.

Reinforcing the cultural-religious dimension of Shi'ite identity is their social identification as the poor and uneducated, the underclass of the Arab world stretching from south Lebanon to Bahrain. The Shi'a regard themselves as living under *dhulm*, reinterpreted into the very modern understanding of authoritarian government that denies their rights and practices discrimination. The Shi'a point to a pattern of neglect and poverty resulting from discriminatory practices of governments from Ottoman times into the modern era. The Shi'a, from Lebanon to Bahrain, formed the peasantry and poor rural sector of their societies. For decades they remained outside the advance of urbanization and modernization that began in the Arab world after World War I and accelerated after World War II. The benefits of modernization manifested in education, health services, communications, job opportunities, and a higher standard of living were very late in reaching Shi'ite areas, and the relative poverty and underdevelopment of the Shi'a in southern Lebanon, southern Iraq, and in the Bahraini villages is still striking today. Until the 1960s, these regions formed a hinterland of quiet and forgotten deprivation, largely dependent on agriculture, which itself was a

declining sector of economies increasingly dependent on oil, financial services, and industrialization.

The Shi'ite sense of discrimination and the unfairness of their lot in society is a widespread and powerful feature of Shi'ite self-awareness and solidarity, felt by even those Shi'a who have a minimal attachment to the religious doctrine. One Shi'ite scholar commented ironically that perhaps Shi'a "ought not to complain," that their doctrine has taught them that persecution will be their lot, that they are not destined to rule until the Mahdi comes. This kind of belief, in his view, poses a genuine philosophical dilemma to Shi'a. Should they simply suffer passively in silence? Or should they "help history along" by building the strength of the Shi'ite community and preparing the groundwork for the Mahdi's arrival?

Many Shi'a who would otherwise identify themselves in nonsectarian terms understand that they are classified by others as Shi'a first, regardless of their own self-definition. To the extent that this is a label that is stamped on them by the outside world, they are powerless to change it. Shi'a interview for this study complained that there is no escape from the label of Shi'ism, and that even if a Shi'i were to convert to Sunnism, he or she would remain a Shi'i in the eyes of Sunnis. On a popular level, this sense of ingrained discrimination extends into the folklore: in Lebanon, common folklore claims that the Shi'a have tails; in Saudi Arabia, the Shi'a are thought to spit in their food before eating it; devout Wahhabis believe that shaking hands with a Shi'i spoils a Muslim's ablution. Many Wahhabis believe that most Shi'a secretly aspire to smear the Ka'ba (the central shrine of pilgrimage in Mecca) with human excrement during the Hajj (pilgrimage). In Iraq, an article in the official Ba'th newspaper after the Gulf war accused the Shi'a of the south of sexual perversions and depravity, among other moral defects. Although these are extremes of folk prejudice, they indicate the impasse that the Shi'a find themselves in; in the final analysis, it is not how one defines himself but how society around him defines him that determines his identity and his relations. As a result, Shi'ism became a way of seeing the world as dominated by dhulm, with the Shi'a

destined to be the permanent outsiders, enclosed upon themselves and fearful of exposure. From this ensued a long tradition of political quietism and withdrawal from public affairs, confining the Shi'a to a physical and social hinterland where they could be forgotten in a dark corner of Arab consciousness.

Divisions Among the Shi'a

Shi'a are divided as a community by a broad number of factors. Some of these factors are imposed by external circumstances, the most obvious of which are the political borders between Arab states in which large Shi'ite communities live. Despite the fact that the Shi'a have little say in shaping public life in their states, their own conditions are inevitably affected by the historical and economic developments taking place in their immediate environment. For example, in the 1920s, while Iraqi Shi'a were opposed to the British mandate and led an uprising against British presence in Iraq, the Shi'a of Bahrain were appealing to the British authorities on the island for protection from the abuses of the ruling family and tribes. This reality, coupled with regimes exercising tight security controls, means that easy and casual travel across borders in the region is not always easy. Communications between the Shi'ite communities have been even more restricted in recent years because of the security concerns of regional governments, while the opportunities for the Shi'a to establish cross-border support and cooperation have become more difficult.

Shi'ite communities are further divided by the tenor of relations between the regimes of the countries in which they live. The nature of relations between Iran and Iraq represent the most vivid example of this problem. With broad tensions existing between the two states actually degenerating into eight years of war between them in the 1980s, the Shi'a were caught in the middle. In the war for Kuwait the Kuwaiti Shi'a were impelled into conflict with an Iraqi army, a majority of whose enlisted troops are Shi'a. While Iran

sought to use Iraqi Shi'a as a fifth column in the Iran-Iraq war, and Iraq may have hoped to at least neutralize the Kuwaiti Shi'a, in fact in both cases the Shi'ite communities acquitted themselves well in demonstrating overall loyalty to the state in which they reside. Needless to say, the Shi'a have almost no voice over relations among states with large Shi'ite populations.

But most of the differences among the Shi'a derive from internal community reasons. The many shared components of Shi'ite religious and cultural identity and common suffering indeed serve to bind the community to some degree and may appear to create a close-knit, coherent force, with shared purpose and destiny. In reality, however, shared beliefs and experiences have limited power to overcome inherent differences. The Arab Shi'ite community is diverse and in some cases divided upon itself, limiting its ability to act in concert and making it more difficult to define, let alone achieve, common goals. Several of the factors that bind the Shi'a can also separate them. While religious doctrine is a shared attribute, it can also be a subject of discord; the institution of *marji'iyya* is both a tie and a source of clash; class and economic status separate the Shi'a of one community, and political orientation can be a cause for antagonism.

Variations in Religious Commitment

The primary source of difference among the Shi'a is the degree of religious Adherence. Not all Shi'a practice Shi'ism equally, or are equally committed to the theology of Shi'ism. Since the 1970s there has been an increase in the number of Shi'a who observe the practical injunctions of Islam such as prayer and fasting, perform acts of piety such as joining the circles of recitations from the Qur'an or the traditions of the Twelve Imams, and commemorate the holy `Ashura. The Husayniyat, the Shi'ite centers that serve as places of prayer, celebration, and community meetings, have undergone a revival in attendance. However, there are significant qualifications to this

trend. First, the increase in religious commitment among the Shi'a is part of an overall Islamic revival, and there is no evidence to suggest that the Shi'a have turned to religion in greater numbers than other Muslims have. Second, as is the case among Sunnis, the increase in Shi'ite religiosity is by no means universal or uniform. Religious belief among the Shi'a lies along a spectrum that ranges from strict observance to indifference, and the disparities cause a serious rift within the Shi'ite community.

The degree of Shi'ite theological adherence raises the issue of identity once more. To what extent can one claim Shi'ism without believing firmly in the tenets of Shi'ism? Does religious laxity lessen the intensity of a Shi'i's identity? These questions are perennially asked and encountered by the Shi'a. In addition, since the beginning of the twentieth century, the Shi'a have been subject to many influences more or less alien to Shi'ism. One is exposure to Western culture, institutions, and education. Another is the powerful influence that socialist ideologies exerted on Shi'ite communities throughout the region from mid-century on. A third is the various forms of Arab nationalism espoused by large numbers Shi'a: Nasserism, Ba'thism of different varieties, and other smaller movements. These political constructs sidestep religion and at least superficially purport to transcend it. As a consequence of these new intellectual allegiances, religious ties are much looser for many Shi'a today than they were at the beginning of the century.

Overt agnosticism is rare because of the stigma and heavy penalty placed by Islam on apostasy. Within that red line, however, there are infinite gradations of belief in Shi'ite theology. At the most elementary level, most Shi'a proclaim their belief in Islam and in the broad principles specific to Shi'ite doctrine, such as the legitimacy of `Ali's bid for the Caliphate, the special status of the Twelve Imams, and the just cause of Husayn's martyrdom. But not all would accept the principle of infallibility attributed to the Twelve Imams, and some may regard the adulation of Husayn and the other Imams as unwarranted excess. Shi'ite leftists deemphasize

religion as a factor of cohesion and stress instead the importance of political repression in binding the community. Leftists are often skeptical about the religious basis of discrimination, attributing it instead to the need to preserve class interests and political supremacy. This doctrinally "lapsed Shi'ism" is often assailed by devout Shi'a, who, at the extreme, maintain that religious commitment is an indispensable element of identity, and that nonpracticing Shi'a are not Shi'a at all and cannot be included in the community. Strong adherents of Shi'ism tend to portray themselves as the true representatives of the Shi'ite community, the standard-bearers and vanguard of Shi'ite liberation.

Political Differences

Opinions regarding the nature of the state, the prerequisites for the legitimacy of government, and the role of Islam in politics form another marrix for dispute among the Shi'a. Nor are these disputes solely between the hardline Islamists and the secularists, but they arise internally within each camp. Political Islam, at its most fundamental level, believes that Islamic Shari'a (law) should be enshrined as the law of the land and the sole source of legislation. Many Shi'a are opposed to Islamization of the state at such a level. At one pole of the argument stand the maximalists of Islamization, for whom only an Islamist state based on the Shari'a and the Qur'an has legitimacy; at the other end are the staunch secularists who insist on the separation of mosque and state, on keeping Islam a private choice and practice. In between the two extremes lie many gradations of opinion,

On the surface it may appear that the political split overlaps with the divisions over religious adherence, but in fact the two fault lines do not necessarily coincide. While it may be true that Shi'a whose religious sentiment is weak tend to be political secularists, many among them recognize the necessity of establishing Islam as the religion of the state—not necessarily synonymous with an "Islamic state"—and of acknowledging the value of its moral precepts in public life. Similarly, not all ardently religious Shi'a are political Islamists in the sense of insisting on unwavering adherence to the Shari'a in the conduct of public

affairs. Some devout Shi'a, in keeping with the quietist tradition, view their Shi'ism as a matter of personal piety that should be segregated from politics.

There is also a purist objection, arising from the theological dilemma of government in Shi'ism. The strict Shi'ite view holds that just—that is, Islamic—government can only be instituted by a designated Imam with divine guidance, and that all other governments are tainted. Therefore, it is futile to call for or proclaim an Islamic government in the absence of the Imam, and the Shi'a have to make do with defective government until the fullness of time. The most compelling reasons, however, to moderate Shi'ite views on political Islamism are the practical obstacles arising from domestic and regional factors.

Where Shi'a are the minority they cannot hope to impose an Islamic state even if the Shi'ite community wished to do so, and a similar attempt in states where Shi'a are a majority raises the obstacles to Shi'ite accession to dominant political power even higher in the eyes of minoritarian Sunnis. Furthermore, the difference in attitude toward the nature of the state is echoed in the political platforms adopted by secularists and Islamists respectively. The Shi'ite Islamists hold to a specifically Shi'ite platform that emphasizes the grievances of the community and calls for redress and reparations for the Shi'a, although it is often linked to other national issues such as adequate representation, equality under the law, and equal opportunity. The Shi'ite secularists, while not denying Shi'ite grievances, are less prone to adopting a specifically Shi'ite rhetoric and situate the problem in the broader context of overall state failure affecting the entire population. What at first glance looks like subtle nuance is in fact a deep split in the political approaches of the two Shi'ite groups on how to solve Shi'ite problems. However, it is noteworthy that there is an emerging third platform on the Shi'ite political scene, which advances a Shi'ite secularist, or at least non-Islamist, agenda, but that nevertheless is committed to promoting Shi'ite interests and redressing grievances. This remains a pioneering platform trying to break new ground, and it is not clear whether it will acquire legitimacy or following, but it further splits the Shi'ite political position.

The Marji'iyya

Among practicing Shi'a, the *marji'iyya*—the institution of spiritual (and perhaps political) guidance—represents a further issue for divergence. The status of *marji' al-taqlid* (guide for emulation) in Shi'ism is attained by divines through a fluid process of acquiring high theological eminence and amassing a substantial following among the population. There are no rules for election or designation of a *marji'*, and thus several can emerge concurrently. Because there is no single universally accepted *marji'*, a devout Shi'a can choose any one of several spiritual leaders. This multiplicity of *maraji'* has been particularly the case since the death Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran in 1989 and Ayatollah Khomei in Iraq in 1992.

Although the principal areas of guidance provided by *maraji'* are on issues of theology, religious practice, and private conduct, their influence in reality touches on a wide sphere of activity that affects relations between individuals and the community and with society at large. By extension, a group of Shi'a who follow the same *marji'* are likely to define their relations to the social and political order similarly in line with the teachings of their *marji'*. This in turn can create differences among groups of Shi'a not only in theological and personal matters, but also on public issues. For example, in the 1980s, the followers of Khomeini had a pronounced activist, revolutionary outlook toward political life and the engagement of Shi'ism in the public arena. At the same time, the followers of al-Khomei pursued a more quietist tradition that stressed the traits of personal piety and a neutral stand on public affairs. The two ayatollahs also represented rival centers of learning, the one in Iran, the other in Iraq, which also had implications for the geographic orientation of their followers. Centers in Iran, especially Qom, have grown at the expense of the Iraqi centers, attracting an increasing number of Shi'ite religious scholars from the Arab world, and raising problems of allegiance for the Shi'ite communities. Since the death of Khomei and Khomeini, the rivalries among the several *maraji'* and their emulators has only intensified, even inside Iran itself, while a new contender for the role of *marji'*, Sayid Muhammad Fadhlallah, has emerged in Lebanon. In Saudi Arabia the Shi'a are divided between followers of the "Line of the Imam" or the teachings of Ayatollah Khomeini, which are revolutionary in character, and the teachings of Ayatollah Shirazi, who has preached caution in the political arena.

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