

THE PROJECT ON SHI'ISM AND GLOBAL AFFAIRS

# Legacies of Islamic Ecumenicism

*Taqrib*, Shi'a-Sunni Relations, and Globalized Politics  
in the Middle East

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**Weatherhead Center**  
FOR INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS  
HARVARD UNIVERSITY

REPORT

May 2021

**The Project on Shi'ism and Global Affairs**  
**Weatherhead Center for International Affairs**  
1737 Cambridge Street  
Cambridge, MA 02138  
Phone: (617) 495-4420  
Fax: (617) 495-8292  
Website: <https://shiism.wcfia.harvard.edu>

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Cover Photo: The interior of the 'Askari shrine complex in Samarra, Iraq that houses the tombs of Imams Ali al-Hadi and Hasan al-'Askari, the tenth and eleventh Imams of Twelver Shi'a Muslims. The shrine of the Imams has traditionally been maintained and frequented by the local Sunni-majority population. The 'Askari shrine was bombed twice by al-Qaeda militants in 2006 and 2007 in an attempt to provoke sectarian violence but has since been rebuilt and is a thriving source of transnational pilgrimage today.

*September 13th, 2020. Credit: ImamHussain.org, [Reda Al-Rassam](#) (CC BY-SA-4.0)*



The Project on Shi'ism and Global Affairs would like to thank the Henry Luce Foundation for its continued support and sponsorship.

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## **Editor**

### **Mohammad Sagha**

Associate & Research Director of History and Identity  
Project on Shi'ism and Global Affairs  
Weatherhead Center for International Affairs  
Harvard University

PhD Candidate, Islamic History and Civilization  
Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations  
University of Chicago  
Email: [msagha@uchicago.edu](mailto:msagha@uchicago.edu)

# Acknowledgements

This report is the product of the combined efforts and involved work of several individuals who helped see this edited collection through to publication. Firstly, I would like to thank **Payam Mohseni**, the Director of the Project on Shi'ism and Global Affairs, for his strategic guidance throughout the compilation of this report and beyond. I would also like to thank the students and researchers who excelled in conceptual and detail-oriented edits for this report, including **Michel Nehme** and **Ali Shehzad**.

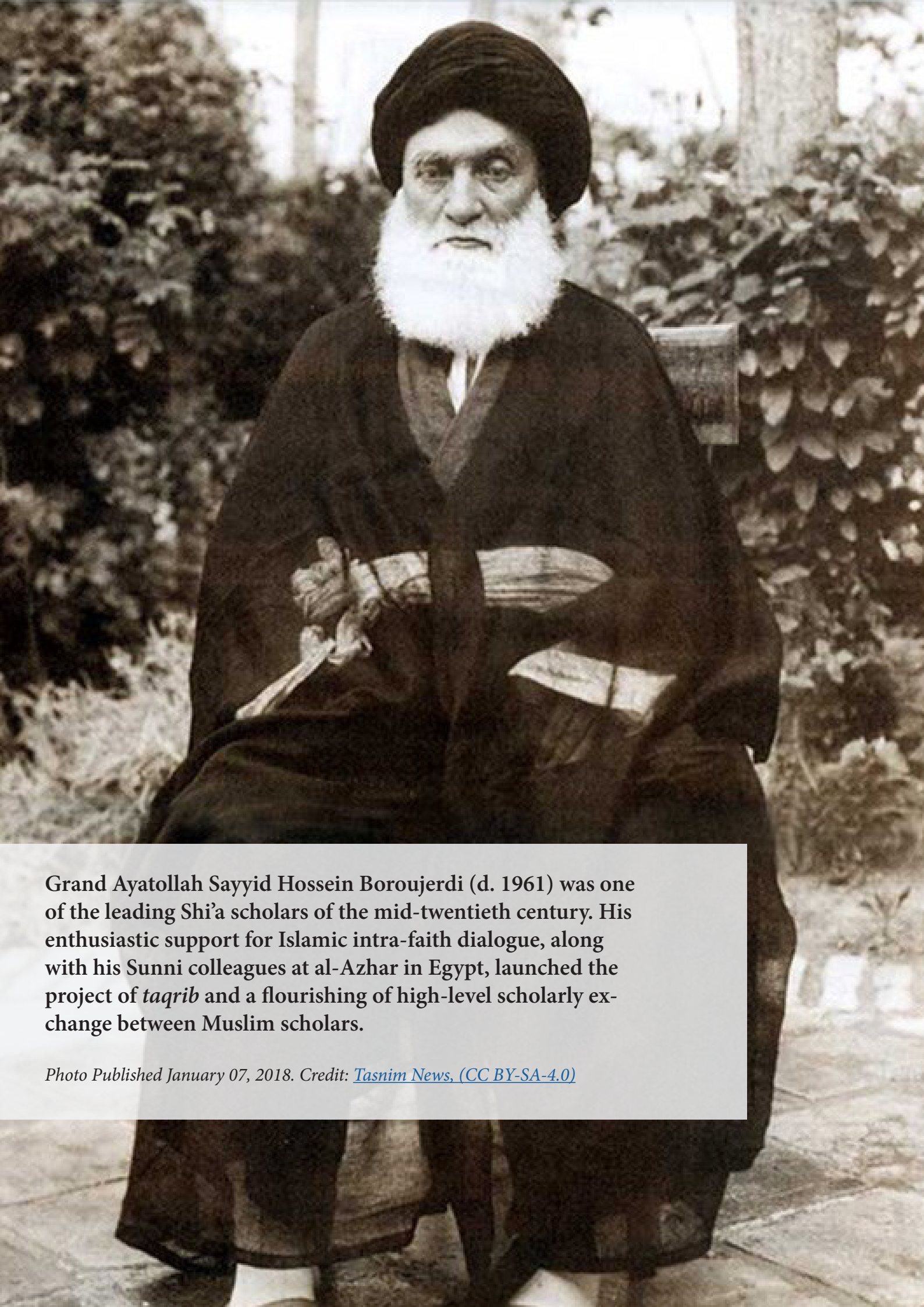
I would also like to thank **Sayyid Ali Abbas Razawi**, who provided constructive theoretical feedback during earlier drafts of the report. Additionally, **Mohamad Bashar Arafat** kindly provided us with his unique photo archive of historic visits between prominent Syrian and Iranian scholars and clerical leaders, some of which have been featured in this report. Finally, of course, I would also like to sincerely thank the scholarly contributors to this report who have shared their sharp insights and timely analysis with us. Their work represents a unique contribution to the current field and can significantly contribute to our understanding of the complex dynamics of religion, politics, *taqrib*, and the future of Islamic intra-faith relations.

Mohammad Sagha  
Harvard University & University of Chicago



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Grand Ayatollah Sayyid Hossein Boroujerdi (d. 1961) was one of the leading Shi'a scholars of the mid-twentieth century. His enthusiastic support for Islamic intra-faith dialogue, along with his Sunni colleagues at al-Azhar in Egypt, launched the project of *taqrib* and a flourishing of high-level scholarly exchange between Muslim scholars.

*Photo Published January 07, 2018. Credit: [Tasnim News, \(CC BY-SA-4.0\)](#)*

# Introduction

## Muslim Clergy, Politics, and the Challenges of Sectarianism in the Middle East

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*Mohammad Sagha, Harvard University & University of Chicago*

In recent years, the Middle East has experienced a number of important developments and changes which have warranted extensive global attention. Often, this attention is focused on issues of civil strife, state breakdown, mass uprisings, state rivalries, authoritarian governance, terrorism, sectarian tensions, and other pressing topics. Noteworthy developments in the Middle East—to name just a few specific examples over the last two decades—include the 2003 American invasion of Iraq; the massively destructive Syrian and Yemeni civil wars following the Arab Spring uprisings in 2011; the ongoing U.S.-Iran tensions over regional order; and the rapid spread of a deeply violent sectarian al-Qaeda organization and offshoots such as ISIS in security vacuums across the region including in Iraq, among other events.

Within mainstream media in particular, the subject of sectarianism and sectarian violence has become an important lens to explain conflict and rivalries in the Middle East. Many of these approaches, however, tend to be reductionist and misidentify various sources of conflict. This overall focus nevertheless has highlighted the importance of religion and sects in the socio-political dynamics of the region. While there has been a renewed focus within academia on sectarian violence, conflict, and tensions between Shi'a and Sunni Muslims in the Middle East, less attention has been paid to historical and contemporary approaches to confessional diversity and conflict de-escalation within Islam—and one project in particular: the *taqrib* ecumenical movement.

The *taqrib* (Arabic for “proximity”) project was originally established as a joint endeavor between the leading Shi'a Grand Ayatollahs in Qom and their Sunni clerical counterparts in al-Azhar in the early 20th century. This movement focused on Islamic intrafaith relations and was the

most recent large-scale iteration of Shi'a-Sunni ecumenical relations in the Middle East, at the forefront of which was the role of the Muslim scholarly class, clergy, and many formal institutions of learning in the Islamic world.<sup>1</sup> This project resulted in a sustained scholarly dialogue, joint publications, and flourishing engagement with classical Islamic sources such as Quranic commentaries and *hadith* sciences and involved many of the leading Sunni and Shi'a Muslim intellectuals of the time in the region.<sup>2</sup>

One of the well-known results of this project was the famous *fatwa* (religious edict) in the mid-twentieth century by the head of al-Azhar in Egypt—perhaps the most highly regarded center of learning in the Sunni world—recognizing the Shi'a Ja'fari legal school as the “fifth” legal school within Islam, granting it an equal status alongside the other four established schools of Sunni law. Shaykh Muhammad Abduh (d. 1905), one of the key forerunners of the *taqrib* project and the head of al-Azhar during his time, also edited and widely publicized *Nahj al-Balagha*, a compendium of Imam Ali b. Abi Talib's *hadith* narrations. During this time, moreover, the president of Egypt - the largest Sunni Arab state - Gamal Abd al-Nasser, helped provide some of the seed money for the Islamic Center of America in Dearborn, Michigan through the intercession of the Center's Imam, Shaykh Jawad Chirri, a Shi'a Lebanese-American scholar.<sup>3</sup> The mosque catered mainly to the local Lebanese Shi'a community, and is today the largest Islamic Center in North America.

The idea of *taqrib*, it should be noted, while a large-scale international project aimed at reconciling Muslims, is only *one episode* in the larger ecumenical relations between Sunni and Shi'a Muslims. The idea of rapprochement, proximity, and constructive didactic scholarly exchange between Sunnis and Shi'as can be argued to be as ancient as the apparent confessional split within Islam itself: Muslims of different persuasions have always been engaged in dialogue with one another. One can even further argue that intra-faith relations have largely been successful to the extent that a near unanimity of Sunni and Shi'a clergy consider the other to be legitimate Muslims representing valid yet differing interpretations of Islam.

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<sup>1</sup> For an in-depth study of the history of *taqrib* by Rainer Brunner: *Islamic Ecumenism in the 20th Century: The Azhar and Shiism between Rapprochement and Restraint* (Leiden: Brill, 2004).

<sup>2</sup> For a rich account of these larger interactions, see: Sayyid Hadi Khusrawshahi, *Qisat al-Taqrīb: Umma Wahida Thiqafa Wahida* (Tehran: Al-Majma' al-'Alami li-l Taqrīb, 2007). I thank Ibrahim Kazerooni for bringing this reference to my knowledge. For some specific written examples, among numerous other works, see the well-received publication of a leading Shi'a Ayatollah published in Cairo on a canonical *hadith* found among Sunni and Shi'a books: Qavvām al-Dīn Vishnavī-Qummi, *Hadīth Thaqaalayn* (Cairo: Dar al-Taqrīb bayn al-Madhahib al-Islamiyya), 1371 H.

<sup>3</sup> See: Linda Walbridge, *Without Forgetting the Imam: Lebanese Shi'ism in an American Community* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1996), 46; Mohammad Sagha “Resources for Engaging with Difference” in *Engaging Sectarian De-Escalation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Kennedy School Belfer Center, August 2019), 123-126.

This report focuses on the *taqrib* movement by featuring several articles by leading scholars in academia as well as by Sunni and Shi'a clergymen whose careers intimately involved them in impactful Shi'a-Sunni dialogue. Despite being relatively understudied—although there have been notable works on the clergy in recent years—Muslim clergy (*ulema*) and Islamic scholarly institutions are quite influential actors in interpreting the Islamic tradition in meaningful ways. Formal institutions of religious learning and the educated clergy—across both the Shi'a and Sunni Middle East—have extraordinary influence in the region. These Muslim clergy have millions of followers, vast student alumni networks, media influence, transnational educational institutions, and billions of dollars at their disposal annually. Therefore, they significantly impact how many communities in the Middle East actually understand and embody Islam in their daily lives.

The Muslim clerical community is of course quite large, diverse, and varied. Not all of them agree with ecumenism within Islam or with the *taqrib* movement; however, notable clerical figures and institutions within the Sunni and Shi'a *ulema* are among its key supporters. Among this larger global body, leading clerics and Muslims scholars were the main drivers behind global sectarian de-escalation initiatives, such as the groundbreaking Amman Message of 2005.<sup>4</sup> This international conference saw almost unanimous agreement among all Sunni, Shi'a, and Ibadi Muslims that their confessional counterparts were fully within the fold of Islam. Hosted by the Jordanian King Abdullah b. Hussein, the conference re-affirmed the basic tenets of Islamic orthodoxy as had been the norm throughout most of Islamic history. The signatories included the Grand Muftis of Egypt, Lebanon, Oman, Syria, the President of al-Azhar seminary and university, the Grand Ayatollahs Ali Sistani, Ali Khamenei, Fazil Lankarani, Ishaq Fayyad, and many other leading scholars, clergy, and important academic figures in addition to heads of state and politicians.

Therefore, it should come as no surprise that clerical voices are crucial in shaping attitudes regarding orthodoxy and normative Islam for hundreds of millions of Muslims residing in the Middle East and beyond. Moreover, just as states in the region constrain the Muslim clergy, so too do Muslim clergy constrain and shape interstate relations. The study of the *taqrib* ecumenical

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<sup>4</sup>For more on this important initiative, see: "The Three Points of the Amman Message," *The Amman Message*, <https://amman-message.com/>.

movement therefore is intimately intertwined with the larger regional and global political context. Interstate relations, geopolitics, and variant ideological and intellectual debates all impact the clerical class, which is interconnected with these larger and cross-cutting currents.

The authors featured in this report highlight many of these aforementioned interconnections and raise salient and pertinent questions regarding both the history and future trajectory of Islamic ecumenicism and the *taqrib* movement. In his article “Between Wounded Vanity and Geopolitics,” Rainer Brunner discusses the heavy shadow of geopolitics and historical grievances cast upon ecumenical discussions between Muslim denominations and the serious intellectual divisions which can curtail meaningful Shi’a-Sunni reconciliation. Moreover, he covers the historical context of intellectual engagement between leading Sunni and Shi’a thinkers of the Middle East, illuminating how geopolitical competition between entities in the region has been a defining factor in such dialogue, at least since the start of the Safavid-Ottoman state rivalry in the 16th century. More recently, the defining competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia acts as a larger barrier against deeper intra-faith relations.

As a scholar and clergyman with a long experience in interfaith and intra-faith relations in the Levant as well as in Muslim diaspora communities, Bashar Arafat provides a different lens in approaching Sunni-Shi’a relations. In his article, “The Efforts of the Late Grand Mufti of Syria,” Arafat acknowledges the difficulties in Shi’a-Sunni relations while delving into the annals of history to shed light upon a recent precedent for reconciliatory religious leadership. Arafat focuses upon the practical measures taken by the former grand Mufti of Syria, Sheikh Ahmad Kuftaro, who had succeeded during his tenure in supporting rapprochement between Sunnis and Shi’as through his inclusive notions of pluralism, exploring intellectual differences of opinion and respect for the legitimacy of diversity within Islam. Kuftaro’s efforts were all the more instructive given the deep political cleavages in the Levant during his time, including a vicious civil war in Lebanon (1975-90), which took on a sectarian cast, as well as rampant violence between the Sunni Islamist Muslim Brotherhood and secular Syrian pan-Arabist government. Despite this polarizing regional context, Kuftaro was able to navigate sensitive intrafaith issues and leverage his standing as a deeply respected leading Sunni scholar of the Muslim world

to further Sunni-Shi'a dialogue at the highest levels.

David Commins' article, "Saudi Arabia: Legacies of *Taqrib* and *Takfir*" expertly points to the legacy of Wahhabism in the statecraft of Saudi Arabia and how critical the role of theological excommunication was (and remains) as a core component of the religious outlook of the Saudi state. Commins analyzes the interplay between the Saudi royal family and Wahhabism and the historical trajectory and shifting dynamics of Wahhabi activists with the Saudi state. Commins further discusses the close interplay of domestic and foreign policy concerns of the Saudi ruling family—in which they balance Wahhabi interest groups with the interests of the ruling family and the Saudi state—in determining the nature of sectarian rhetoric and treatment of Shi'a populations within the country as well as the larger region. In recent years, as has been well documented, Saudi foreign policy has come to increasingly impact the overall sectarian challenges and religious identities in the Middle East and beyond. The challenge and legacy of Wahhabi thought will continue to shape and influence the constraints as well as the future trajectory of the policies of the Saudi state.

Next, Ibrahim Kazerooni's article, "The Promises and Challenges of *Taqrib*," highlights the long history of ecumenical discussions stretching from the early Islamic period, including during the Abbasid caliphate, and the legacy of historical Muslim scholars such as Shaykh al-Mufid (d. 1022) and others who actively engaged in such theological and doctrinal discussions across sectarian divides. Kazerooni also discusses the more contemporary enterprises of Sunni and Shi'a scholars who endeavored greatly to create intra-Islamic rapprochement, especially in the face of the threat of colonialism. The author is deeply concerned about the current state of affairs and sees the specter of sectarian violence and propaganda, spread throughout the region, as a serious impediment to the immediate future of *taqrib*, which he argues has difficult prospects ahead.

Finally, in the article, "From Cairo to Samarra: The Transnational Scholarly Reception of *Taqrib*," I argue mainstream Shi'a and Sunni clerical institutions face similar structural challenges in the modern period as both are striving to establish a widespread Islamic orthodoxy in the face of serious challenges from rival secular ideologies. These Muslim clergy, regardless of sectarian affiliation, are also challenged internally

by extremist movements found within Sunni and Shi'a Islam such as Wahhabism, "*takfirism*" (anathematization), and extremism ("*ghuluww*"), which threaten to outflank the orthodox centers of Sunnism and Shi'ism as represented by their respective Islamic clerical and scholarly classes. Often, these shared challenges lead to closer institutional proximity between Shi'a and Sunni clergy. In order to highlight the shared circumstances and contexts impacting the Muslim clergy, I focus on leading contemporary Sunni and Shi'a scholars including Shaykhs Ali Gomaa (the former Grand Mufti of Egypt), Said Ramadan al-Bouti (the former head preacher of the Umayyad Mosque), and Grand Ayatollahs Ja'far Sobhani and Makarem Shirazi among others to bring out, in their own words, their beliefs regarding *taqrib* and their visions for peace and Muslim reconciliation.





Imam Muhammad Ramadan al-Bouti was the head preacher of the Umayyad Mosque of Damascus until his assassination at the hands of al-Qaeda affiliate Jabahat al-Nusra in 2013. He was one of the most well-known Sunni scholars in the Muslim world and a prominent proponent of *taqrib* and Shi'a-Sunni ecumenical dialogue.

April 1, 2013. Credit: [Wikicommons, Naseem al-Sham \(CC BY-SA-3.0\)](#)

# Author Biographies

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**Mohamad Bashar Arafat** was born and raised in Damascus, Syria. He received a degree in Islamic Studies, Arabic Language, Islamic Law from Damascus University. Under the guidance and mentorship of the late Grand Mufti of Syria, Sheikh Ahmad Kuftaro, he studied Qur’anic interpretation, wisdom of the “Shari’a” and the Islamic spiritual teachings for 15 years. He served as Imam in Damascus from 1981-89 and was then invited to the U.S. where he was Imam of the Islamic Society of Baltimore from 1989-93, founded An-Nur Institute for Islamic Studies and Arabic Language in Baltimore in 1993, cofounded An-Nur Mosque in Carney and was the Imam there from 1995-97. Since moving to Baltimore, he has been heavily involved with interfaith work, both nationally and internationally, promoting better understanding between Muslims and people of other faith traditions. He taught courses on Islamic Studies and Comparative Religions at several prominent universities in Maryland and Washington, DC. Imam Bashar is the Founder and President of Civilizations Exchange and Cooperation Foundation (CECF).

**Rainer Brunner**, Director of Studies at the CNRS (PSL Research University Paris, Laboratoire d’Études sur les monothéismes) in France, is a Doctor of Islamic Studies. He specializes in intellectual history of Shi’a Islam, Islamic modernism in the nineteenth century, Islam and Europe, and the issues related to the Muslim presence in a secular context. He received his Habilitation in 2004 and his PhD in 1996 both from the University of Freiburg. He is the author of *Die Schia und die Koranfälschung* (2001) and *Islamic Ecumenism in the 20th century: The Azhar and Shiism between Rapprochement and Restraint* (2004). He edited *Islam: Einheit und Vielfalt einer Weltreligion* (2016). He is the Editor of *Die Welt des Islams* (Brill).

**David Commins** is Professor of History at the Dickinson College, USA. His research interests include the modern history of the Middle East, with a special focus on Islamic thought and political movements. His most recent book is *Islam in Saudi Arabia* (2015). He has also published: *The Gulf States: A Modern History* (2014), *The Wahhabi Mission and Saudi Arabia*

(2009), *Historical Dictionary of Syria* (2013).

**Ibrahim Kazerooni** was born in the city of Al-Najaf in southern Iraq into a family of theologians. The paternal side of his family has been prominent Shi'a clerics. Ibrahim began his religious studies at an early age and continued until his life took an unexpected turn. In 1974, he was arrested by Saddam Hussein's regime and imprisoned for more than 5 months. After being released, he left Iraq and spent a few years in the Middle East, traveling to Lebanon, Syria, Turkey, and Iran. While in Iran, he completed his theological studies. Fearful of Iraq's secret police, he fled to England and began his secular education. In addition to Islamic Theological studies in both Najaf (Iraq) and Qum (Iran), Ibrahim holds BEng., Mining/Petroleum Eng., MBA in Management, Master in Global Studies (DU), and a Masters in Theological Studies (Iliiff School of Theology). He gained his Ph.D from the Iliiff School of Theology at University of Denver. He is a Fellow at the Center for the Study of Human Trafficking (Korbel School of International Studies, DU) Currently, he is an adjunct faculty at the University of Detroit Mercy and Imam of the Islamic Center of America in Dearborn.

**Mohammad Sagha** is an Associate and Research Director for History and Identity with the Project on Shi'ism and Global Affairs at the Weatherhead Center for International Affairs at Harvard University and a PhD candidate in Islamic History and Civilization at the University of Chicago. He is also a Co-Director of the Shi'i Studies Group at the University of Chicago. Previously, he was an Iran Project Associate and the Iran Project Coordinator at Harvard Kennedy School's Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs. He is additionally an editor for *SHARIAsource* at the Islamic Legal Studies Program at Harvard Law School. Sagha's research focuses on the origins of Muslim sectarian identity and political institutions, the historical development of Islamic political thought, and the geopolitics of the modern Middle East. His interests also span the influence of Late Antique Sassanian-era religious currents on later Muslim sectarian identity and intellectual thought. His dissertation is entitled: "Hidden Empires: Revolt, Leadership and Underground Networks in the Emergence of Early Shi'i Muslim Sectarian Identities," in which he examines revolutionary politics, debates on orthodoxy and heterodoxy, and Islamic political institutions from the Abbasid Revolution until the capture

of Baghdad by the Iranian Buyid dynasty and the high period of the “Shi’a centuries.”

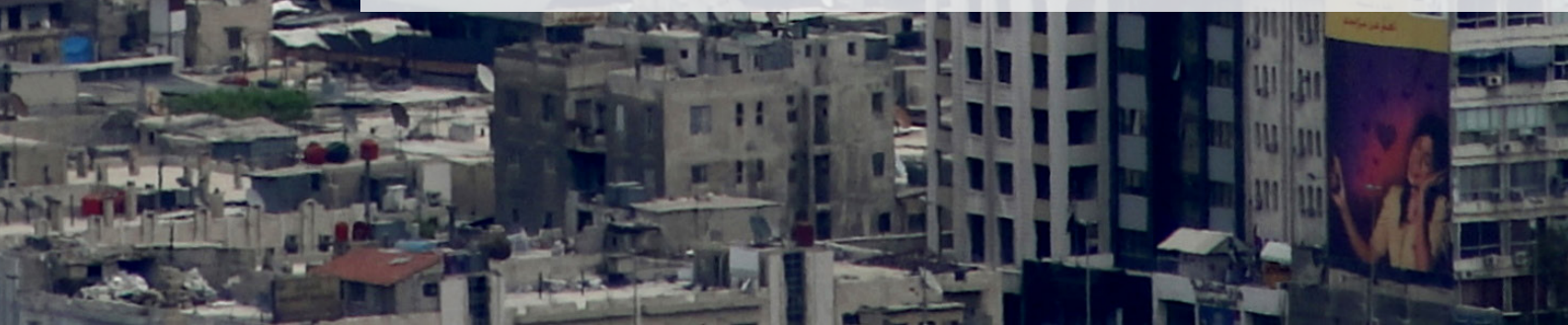
*The statements and views presented in this report are solely those of the individual authors and do not imply endorsements of other views and assessments of this report.*





The famed Great Mosque of Damascus, also known as the Umayyad Mosque, serves as the location for the Friday prayers in the city. The site has a long history, including housing a Roman temple and a Christian church, and was expanded by many Muslim dynasties throughout time.

April 8, 2010. Credit: [Wikicommons, Bernard Gagnon \(CC BY-SA-3.0\)](#)



# Between Wounded Vanity and Geopolitics

## Chances and Limits of an Islamic Ecumen in the 20th and 21st Centuries

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*Rainer Brunner, Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS), Paris*

In Islam, as in probably other religions as well, it has always been easier to be a polemicist than to strike a conciliatory tone. On the one hand, the idea of tolerance as a positive value is a modern conception; formerly, it would rather have been regarded as a neglect of duty. And on the other hand, an often quoted tradition ascribed to the Prophet foresaw that the Islamic community would split into 73 groups, all of which, save one, destined to hellfire. This may have been apocryphal, as so many other *hadiths*, and it moreover quoted the Biblical traditions of the table of nations and the Tower of Babel (*Genesis*, 10-11). But it also reflected the real history of the Muslim *umma* marked by countless power struggles and was thus a welcome opportunity to condemn their respective opponents as unbelievers. For none of the pre-modern authors of mutual polemical pamphlets showed any doubt about belonging themselves to the saved group – and they could count on posthumous fame: Medieval treatises such as those by the Sunnite Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328) or by his Shiite counterpart al-Allama al-Hilli (d. 1325) received until today numerous reprints and can be found on the Internet with a few mouse clicks.

What is more, since the assumption of power by the Safavids in Iran at the beginning of the 16th century at the latest, another aspect has become characteristic of Muslim sectarianism: its dependency on political conditions and on its geopolitical utility as a form of religiously disguised aversion. In their fight against the Shiite Safavids, the Ottomans explicitly claimed to be the protective power of Sunnite

Islam. Under these prevailing circumstances, nobody was interested in sitting at the same table with the other side. The first to arrange for such a meeting was the military commander Nadir Shah who, during the post-Safavid turmoil at the beginning of the 18th century, had seized power. In 1743, he convened a religious conference at the Shiite shrine town Najaf in Southern Iraq, the aim of which was supposed to be, on the face of it, to recognize Shiism as a legal school on a par with the four Sunnite schools. This sounds friendlier than it was meant – and than it was understood by contemporaneous observers. For in reality, it meant a degradation of Shiism which was even increased by the demand that the Shiite scholars should henceforth renounce several central elements of their doctrine, particularly the cursing of the first caliphs and the practice of temporary marriage. As to Nadir Shah, he did not care so much about theological considerations; for him it was more important to unify his troops that were divided along sectarian boundaries. The Shiites decided to put a good face on the matter, undermine the agreement wherever they could and wait for the violent passing of Nadir Shah a few years later after which everything quickly sank into oblivion again.

For a long time, sectarian strife in Islam was only an internal problem. This changed from the 19th century onward when it became clear that the Muslim world did not have the means to counter the growing penetration by the European powers. In the wake of the pan-Islamic movements since the 1870s, however, the idea of an ecumenical rapprochement did not yet play a significant role. While the calls of the pan-Islamic activists were full of invocations of the supposed unity of all Muslims, they prudently avoided to overly mention sectarian differences. Those few opportunities before the Second World War when Sunnite and Shiite dignitaries met in order to discuss in an ecumenical spirit came to nothing after a short while. A symptomatic example in this regard is the reaction of the important reformist intellectual Muhammad Rashid Rida. His meeting with the Iraqi Shiite scholar Muhammad al-Husayn Al Kashif al-Ghita during the General Islamic Congress in Jerusalem in 1931 had caused quite a sensation. High expectations were all the more caused by the fact that the Iraqi Shiite had ostentatiously extended his hand and called for avoiding hatred and enmity among Muslims. As to Rashid Rida, he had belonged, around the turn of the century, to those who promoted a sectarian rapprochement, before he turned into becoming an eloquent supporter of the extremely

anti-Shiite Wahhabis who were about to conquer large parts of the Arabian Peninsula and to establish the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. After the meeting in Jerusalem, he soon backed off again from the Shiites, especially when he deemed his own merits insufficiently acknowledged in comparison to those of Al Kashif al-Ghita. Finally, a few critical remarks on the writings of his Iraqi counterpart paralyzed the initiative in a reliable and lasting way.

The forum that seemed to be the by far most appropriate to attract broad public attention for ecumenical thinking in modern Islam was the “Society for the Rapprochement of the Islamic Schools of Thought” (*Jama’at al-Taqrīb bayn al-Madhāhib al-Islāmiyya*) that was established in Cairo in 1947. The moving power in the background was the Iranian Ayatollah Hoseyn Borujerdi, who at the time was accepted as the supreme juridical authority among Shiites. He sent a young cleric, Mohammad Taqi Qommi, to Egypt in order to set up this association. The venue was chosen with careful consideration; on the one hand, it was considered to be a safe haven, precisely because there were no Shiites to a mentionable degree in the country, because sectarian tensions were therefore not high on the agenda, and because it was the seat of the Azhar University, a widely respected Sunnite institution of great radiation. On the other hand, the Azhar had been founded in the 10th century by the Shiite Fatimides which undoubtedly added a symbolic value. In fact, the society had a formative influence on the ecumenical debate within Islam and achieved a spectacular success in summer 1959, when the Azhar rector, Mahmud Shaltut, issued a *fatwa* to the effect that Shiism had to be acknowledged as a legal school with equal rights as the Sunnite schools. He even went so far to explicitly approving of mutual conversions among Sunnites and Shiites. This was not much more than what had already been at issue at the meeting in Najaf in 1743, but in the meantime it had been realized that acknowledging equal schools of law and refraining from mutual accusations of heresy was the maximum of what could reasonably be expected from an ecumenical dialogue in Islam.

The publications of the society were generally noble in tone, but more often than not somewhat helpless in substance. Neither Sunnite criticism of the Shiite Imamate nor Shiite polemics against the Sunnite caliphs and companions of the Prophet were even mentioned. Those two deepest chasms between the two groups were carefully avoided, as it was recognized

that this would automatically have led to renewed strife. Instead, the association limited itself to general appeals – that it was vital to know more about each other in order to diminish existing prejudices, that there was unity in all fundamentals of religion while the conflicts were only about secondary legal issues, that Islamic ecumenism did neither mean a fusion or extinction of the existing sects nor efforts at mutual conversion, but only a rapprochement of their points of view. But since even this modest attempt to close ranks could not do without a lightning rod, the image of the external “enemies of Islam” was thoroughly cherished. In particular, it was directed against colonialists, Zionists, Orientalists, in brief: against the West, which was accused of having caused the split of the Muslim *umma* in the first place and of acting in keeping with the motto “divide and rule”.

But it was not only this thinly veiled apologetic basic attitude which caused trouble to ecumenical thinking. Two other aspects were even more important: first, it was, without exception, a matter of endeavors by individuals, not by institutions. While a number of Azhari scholars were indeed active in the ecumenical debate, the Azhar as an institution mostly kept its distance, except for the brief tenure of Shaltut as rector from 1958 onward. It is characteristic in this regard that temporary discussions about establishing a chair on Shiite jurisprudence did not generate any tangible results. The dissociation went even so far that in 1952 Muhibb al-Din al-Khatib became editor-in-chief of the official Azhar journal. Al-Khatib was a protagonist of the Salafiyya current and an outspoken polemicist against the Shiites, who now used all means at his disposal to open fire on Shiism: he edited classical and modern anti-Shiite treatises, on which he then wrote himself long and positive reviews which appeared in the Azhar journal under his editorship.

Even more momentous, as far as the subsequent fate of the ecumenical association was concerned, was the second aspect: the complete dependence of the scholarly debates on politics, notwithstanding the permanent protestations that one intended to keep aloof from all political traps and snares. Shaltut’s 1959 *fatwa* can only be understood against the backdrop of President Nasser’s policy with regard to Iraq. In his fight against the communist tendencies promoted by Iraqi President Qasim against Nasser’s claim to pan-Arabic hegemony, the Egyptian president played the sectarian card, knowing full well that the Shiite scholars in Iraq

and Iran, too, were allergic to Communism. But when, in summer 1960, the Iranian Shah mentioned in passing that Iran kept diplomatic relations with Israel long since, this meant the immediate end to the ecumenical spring: when Nasser immediately broke diplomatic relations with Iran, the Cairene association collapsed from one day to the other. The polemicists who at once and in detail piped up easily gained the upper hand in the following years.

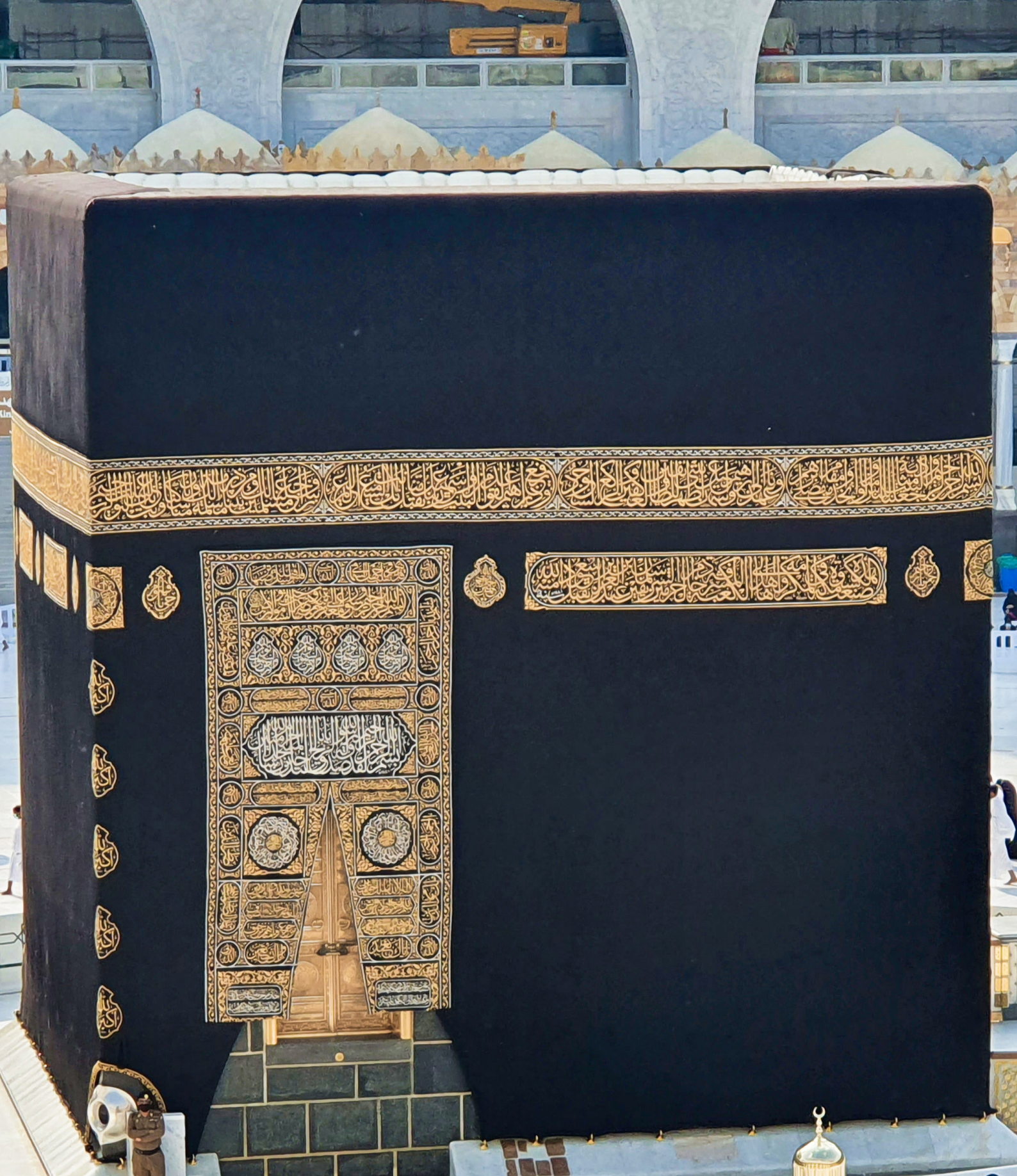
The Iranian Revolution in 1979 was a decisive watershed in many realms of Muslim history in the 20th century, including ecumenical relations where prospects did not become brighter in its wake. While it is true that Iran posed as a standard bearer of Islamic unity from the beginning, the revolution's Shiite character was too distinct so as to be acceptable to Sunnites after the waning of the initial revolutionary enthusiasm – especially when it became clear that the Sunnite minority within Iran was anything but well-liked by the new regime. The Tehran-based “World Forum for Proximity of Islamic Schools of Thought” (as it is called on Wikipedia; *al-Majma' al-'alami li-l-taqrib bayn al-madhahib al-islamiyya*) considers itself to be the natural successor of the Cairene association. Since its establishment in 1990, it organized 33 international conferences which are documented in detail on its website *taghrib.org*. Nevertheless, its practical results are rather meagre, its proximity to the Iranian government being too close in order to overcome reservations outside Iran against real or supposed proselytizing activities. Besides this, several approaches to revive the ecumenical debate in Cairo by re-establishing the older association also failed to leave a lasting impact.

The greatest transnational attention was caused by an ecumenical conference in the Qatari capital Doha in January 2007, in the midst of the Iraqi civil war and half a year after the summer war between Israel and the Lebanese Hezbollah when Hezbollah General Secretary Hasan Nasrallah won the hearts of “the Arab street” in masses. Yusuf al-Qaradawi, one of the most influential Sunni scholars and the powerful advocate of a Sunni “middle path” (*wasatiyya*) used this gathering as an opportunity for an unmistakable positioning. What was needed, he repeatedly stated, was straight talk instead of glossing over. As long as the Shiite proselytizing efforts persisted, any thoughts of an Islamic ecumene was inconceivable. What is more, the Shiites had finally to stop their ritual cursing of

important figures of early Islamic history, such as the second caliph ‘Umar, as it was impossible to reach an agreement between a Sunnite saying “‘Umar, may God have mercy upon him”, and a Shiite saying “‘Umar, may God curse him”. This example quoted by Qaradawi was no pure invention: during the Iraqi civil war after 2006, there were newspaper reports to the effect that many Iraqis had their easily identifiable names (such as ‘Umar for Sunnites, or ‘Abd al-Husayn for Shiites) changed for more “neutral” names, such as Ahmad or Muhammad, in order to increase their chances of survival at the inevitable checkpoints.

Ecumenical thinking has always only played a minor part in modern Islam. The polemical reflexes that had been trained over the centuries and once more considerably strengthened after 1979 could never really be overcome in a decisive manner. Over the past more than thirty years, even in Egypt state repression against the numerically hardly perceivable Shiite minorities and press campaigns about the “correct” judgment of the Prophet’s companions and their traditions has taken place. On the other side, Iran has taken many steps, since the Revolution, to patronize Shiite institutions in Syria and other countries, and thereby establish sectarian structures. This could hardly be interpreted as a confidence-building measure, and as early as 2004, the Jordanian King ‘Abdallah had warned of a developing “Shiite crescent” in the Middle East. It comes as no surprise therefore that today, after nearly ten years of “Arab Winter,” the front lines of numerous conflicts in the region can be identified along sectarian borders and that many conflicts are to a large degree proxy wars between Saudi Arabia and Iran. The prehistory of these modern wars is long, and there is no reason for optimism. The Semitic scholar Israel Friedländer had come to the conclusion, in an article about “Muhammadan constructions of history” published in 1911 that Islam suffers from “digestive trouble”, as it is so obsessively focused on the protagonists and the (supposed) events of the early history of Islam that it simply forgot the art to forget. One may find his choice of words irritating today, but there are hardly any ifs and buts about his diagnosis per se.





The Holy Ka'ba in the city of Mecca, where millions of Muslims make pilgrimage annually.

December 4, 2020. Credit: [Wikicommons, Professor Mortel \(CC BY-SA-2.0\)](#)

# Saudi Arabia:

## Legacies of *Taqrib* and *Takfir*

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*David Commins, Dickinson College*

Saudi Arabia is the cradle of the Wahhabi mission, the most influential Sunni sectarian movement of modern times. The mission began in 1740 when an Arabian preacher named Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab issued a call to purify worship of polytheism. In his view, popular customs surrounding holy men and shrines were not minor violations of the duty to worship God alone, but the actions of infidels. In essence, his message implied excommunicating other Muslims—*takfir*—and stirred fierce controversy, with clerical adversaries rejecting the charge of infidelity. They expelled him from two towns before he found refuge with the Al Sa’ud clan. Sheikh Muhammad lent religious legitimacy to the clan’s campaign of Arabian conquests in return for the clan’s commitment to imposing his sectarian agenda.

As an expression of Sunni sectarianism, Wahhabism shares traits of similar, much earlier religious movements of the eleventh and twelfth centuries analyzed by A. Kevin Reinhart.<sup>1</sup> First, they exhibit pluralism in law—the Wahhabi mission follows the Hanbali law school while acknowledging the validity of the other three law schools. Second, they reject pluralism in theology—adherence to Wahhabism’s theology is the litmus test for inclusion in the ranks of believers. Third, they harbor hostility toward other Muslims—classic Wahhabi treatises frame a discourse justifying excommunication of other Muslims and enmity toward infidels.

In recent times, Wahhabism is known for fostering sectarian enmity toward Shiism. It is noteworthy, however, that for much of its history, Wahhabi clerics regarded other Sunnis as infidels. When the first Saudi state (1744 to 1818) conquered much of Arabia in the name of wiping out polytheism, its enemies were other Sunnis (including Hanbalis who rejected Sheikh Muhammad’s preaching), recast as infidels

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<sup>1</sup> A. Kevin Reinhart, “On Sunni Sectarianism,” in *Living Islamic History: Studies in Honour of Professor Carole Hillenbrand*, edited by Yasir Suleiman and Adel Al-Abdul Jader, Edinburgh University Press, 2010.

according to Wahhabi doctrine. Under the second Saudi state (1824 to 1891), Wahhabi clerics strove to exclude corrupt outside influence by declaring a ban on travel to infidel lands, referring not to Europe, but to neighboring, mostly Sunni, Arab territories.

It was only under the third Saudi state (1902 to present) that Wahhabi clerics tempered their stance toward other Sunnis, but only those with similar theological commitments. The shift toward rapprochement did not come about from a revision of their sectarian doctrine, but because Abdulaziz ibn Saud considered openings to the outside world vital to his bid to consolidate power. He subordinated Wahhabi doctrine to dynastic interests, and they went along with it grudgingly because they needed his power to enforce their authority over religious life.

In the 1950s and 1960s, Al Sa'ud's rivalry with Arab nationalist regimes spurred Saudi support for the creation of pan-Islamic organizations where Wahhabi clerics rubbed shoulders with Sunnis whom their ancestors would have deemed infidels. The clerics were able to use pan-Islamic organizations to proselytize, building a campaign that is commonly regarded as "exporting Wahhabism" and has injected a sectarian spirit in Muslim societies. When it came to ecumenical efforts at rapprochement with Shiism, such as *Jama'at al-Taqrīb*, the clerics refused to budge, and Shiism remained a target for the impulse to pinpoint and vilify threats to Islam abroad and at home.<sup>2</sup> Unsurprisingly, Saudi Shiites have long endured discrimination in religious and social affairs. They worship in their own mosques, but public celebration of their religious holidays is prohibited. In public schools and Sunni mosques, teachers and preachers condemn Shiites as infidels plotting to destroy Islam from within.

The sectarian, anti-Shiite thread in Wahhabi discourse has loomed much larger since the Iranian revolution in 1979, but has waxed and waned according to shifts in regional and domestic politics. Religious mistrust of Shiites came to mesh with political mistrust of them as agents of foreign subversion. Inspired by the revolution, Saudi Shiites came into the streets in November 1979, defying the ban on commemorating the Ashura holiday to protest discriminatory policies. In the 1980s, the Iran-Iraq war and bombings of oil installations by militant pro-Iranian Shiites heightened sectarian tensions. Those tensions diminished in the 1990s because of Iran's

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<sup>2</sup> Brunner, *Islamic Ecumenism*, 322-324

shift to a pragmatic approach to regional relations and because dissident Saudi Sunni activists of the Awakening movement posed a more imminent threat to Al Sa'ud than the Shiite minority. The climate for Saudi Shiites further improved after Al Qaeda's September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States led Al Saud to encourage moderation in public religious discourse. Crown Prince Abdullah initiated National Dialogue conferences to promote pluralism and tolerance, including one meeting in 2003 where Wahhabi clerics gathered with Shiite counterparts. The National Dialogue initiative, however, faded in the wake of the United States' invasion of Iraq later that year.

While the American leadership imagined Iraq would become a pro-western democracy, the invasion instead paved the way for sectarian Shi'ite political parties to dominate Iraq and to open the door to Iranian influence. Suddenly, Saudi Arabia and other pro-western Arab rulers envisioned a "Shiite crescent" stretching from Lebanon through Syria and Iraq to Iran and the Gulf. The sectarian narrative eclipsed the National Dialogue spirit and found energetic support from Wahhabi clerics.

In early 2011, the Saudi authorities, alarmed at the wave of uprisings sweeping through the Arab world, invoked the sectarian threat by branding calls for political reform as an Iranian plot to weaken Sunni Islam. Similarly, Riyadh justified military intervention in Bahrain to suppress popular protest as a necessary step to combat Iranian subversion. When popular uprisings in neighboring Syria and Yemen turned into civil wars, the sectarian framework portrayed Iran as seeking regional domination to undermine Sunni Islam, notwithstanding the specious implication that Syria's Alawis, Yemen's Zaydis, and Iran's Twelvers share a common religion, and conveniently forgetting that Saudi Arabia had no religious qualms about lending strong support to Yemen's Zaydi monarchy in the 1960s against Nasserist forces.

In the midst of heightened regional tensions and sectarian rhetoric, Saudi Arabia underwent a royal succession in 2015 that resulted in the abrupt promotion of Muhammad bin Salman to heir apparent. The crown prince indicated his wish to pursue economic and social transformation. Lifting restrictions on women driving and public entertainment gave some indication of what he meant by wanting the country to observe "moderate

Islam.” He also took some highly controversial steps, plunging Saudi Arabia into Yemen’s civil war and using extraordinary measures to suppress dissent, from taking businessmen hostage to the killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi and continuing to stifle Shiite activists. Whether his reform agenda includes abandoning demonization of Shiites at home and in the region remains an open question.

Wahhabi sectarianism has long served Al Saud as a resource to legitimize the clan’s claim to power. That turning the sectarian dial up or down is a means to political ends is amply evident in the thaw between Wahhabis and other Sunnis as well as in the fluctuation in the fortunes of Saudi Shiites.





The Grand Mufti of Syria, Ahmed Kufaro (left), meets with Hujjat al-Islam Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani at the Iranian Embassy in Damascus during the latter's 1982 visit to Syria, including to the Mosque of the Grand Mufti in Damascus.

1982. Credit: Mohamad Bashar Arafat

# The Efforts of the Late Grand Mufti of Syria, Sheikh Ahmed Kuftaro

## On *Taqrib* & Bridging the Sunni-Shi'a Divide

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*Mohamad Bashar Arafat, Civilizations Exchange and Cooperation Foundation (CECF)*

In Damascus, I was honored to grow up in the same neighborhood as the late Grand Mufti Sheikh Ahmad Kuftaro and where his mosque located at the foot of the Qasioun mountain. As an elementary student, I always liked to attend the first part of the Grand Mufti's lectures after Friday prayer which also included a beautiful Qur'anic recitation and religious songs before the lecture. When he would begin speaking, I would go to play soccer in the scenic small alleys between my home and his mosque. As I got older, I began to appreciate his engaging lectures, his delivery, and his charismatic personality. After middle school, I decided to respond to his call when he asked his followers to register their kids in the newly established Shari'a Institute for Preaching & Religious Guidance.

After graduating in 1978, he advised all of us to then register in the Faculty of Shari'a at Damascus University since his previously mentioned private institute was not accredited by the government at that time. The Grand Mufti wanted us, as the first class of graduates, to experience living with scholars, to learn spirituality, and to study the exegesis of the Qur'an and the spirit of the Shari'a. At the same time, he also wanted us to get a degree from the only accredited university back then, Damascus University. He thereby wanted for us to combine the traditional way of gaining knowledge with securing a degree from the globally accredited government institution. As one of his personal

assistants in the early 1980s, I fondly remember when the times when he used to receive delegations. I volunteered to take photographs and use my own small cassette recorder to record the meetings. Upon returning home, I would transcribe the meetings.

Sheikh Kuftaro called for cooperation between religious communities. Even before he was elected to be the Grand Mufti of Syria and taught in the main mosques of Damascus, everybody in the country knew that he was interested in bridging the gap of ignorance within Syrian society. He was an advocate for the true understanding of the spirit of Islam that calls for unity, especially when it comes to sectarianism. His teachings focused on the etiquette of personal interaction; he particularly cared about how people spoke with or perceived each other given certain stereotypes which may have existed in society. He was particularly known for his outreach to Christian communities in Syria and was also a leading figure in outreach to Shi'a communities. He used to explain that we are all one family and we are all Syrians whether we are Sunnis or Shi'a. His message was not just limited to Syria, but he would carry it with him wherever he travelled including other countries in the Middle East.

When he was elected as the Grand Mufti of Syria in 1964, he increased his efforts in an official capacity. He was a symbol of love, reconciliation, outreach, and *taqrib* (ecumenical unification) efforts between the schools of thought and emphasized that these differences within the Muslim community, whether Sunni or Shi'a, should not be a cause for division. He would always say: "*differences should not lead to division.*" He would tell us that even during the time of Prophet Muhammad (s.a.w.), his disciples used to have different opinions on the same issue. These kinds of differences should not lead to cold relationships within the Muslim community that could develop into hatred, physical harm, conflicts, wars, and eventually bloodshed.

In all his lectures where the issue of Sunnis and Shi'a was mentioned, the Grand Mufti would remind us that this issue began as a "political difference," not a religious or theological issue. He would always bring us back to the distressing division between Ali ibn Abi Talib and Mu'awia ibn Abi Sufyan, around 1400 years ago, over the issue of the Caliphate. The Mufti would explain how this division gave birth to the two groups of

Sunnis and Shi'as. Later, different schools of thought, based on these initial divisions, began to crystallize more concretely and take shape. Eventually, this difference took on sectarian importance. Uninformed individuals on both sides promoted these disagreements as a religious difference and began identifying them as distinct religions—one for the Sunnis and one for the Shi'a.

The Grand Mufti would always remind us that we, Muslims, are one *ummah* (community). He would emphasize that we “worship one God. We read the same Qur'an, and we believe in the final prophet, Prophet Muhammad (s.a.w.)” To demonstrate this, the Grand Mufti would often use the example of Imam Ja'far ibn Muhammad al-Sadiq, who was the teacher of Al-Nu'man ibn Thabit, also known as Abu Hanifa. Abu Hanifa is known as the founder of the Hanafi “school of thought,” which is one of the four major schools of thought in Sunni Islam. Sheikh Kufaro would tell us that we should not be so naïve as to let this political issue create disunity among us today. Where is Mu'awia today? Where is Ali? They have been dead for more than 1400 years, so why are we fighting over an issue that is more than 1400 hundred years old?

#### *Sheikh Ahmad Kufaro's Visit to Iran and Respecting Diversity in Islam*

The Grand Mufti used to tell us about his first visit to Iran during the time of the Shah when he was invited to give a talk in Qom. He shared this story of his lecture many times: “If the Sunnah is to follow the path of Prophet Muhammad (s.a.w.) then we are all ‘Sunnis.’ If being Shi'a is to love the household of the Prophet, then we are all Shi'a.” After that, a seminarian student stood up and asked the Grand Mufti a question: “Do you love the household of the Prophet?” The Grand Mufti, in his unique style, replied: “No!” He intentionally paused for a second to see the negative reactions on the faces of the attendees. Then he continued his answer by saying: “I'm really not worthy of the honor to be among those who love them! But I wish that I was a shoe on their feet or a dust particle on their shoes. If we do not love the household of the Prophet, we are not true Muslims!” The Grand Mufti always told us how the mood changed from astonished listeners to those who raised their voices in a chant out of joy.

Sheikh Kufaro also used to share some of his experiences with us from

his meetings with Ayatollah Hussein-Ali Muntazeri, then the appointed deputy of Imam al-Khomeini in Iran. He shared an anecdote with us in which Ayatollah Muntazeri asked the Grand Mufti about the possibility of teaching the Ja'fari school of thought at the Shari'a Faculty of Damascus University. The Grand Mufti's response was: "I was expecting you to tell me: 'How about removing all four schools of thought, not about adding another school of thought to the four and make them five!'" He continued: "To me, these schools of thought that are becoming 'untouchable' are mostly the opinions and the *ijtihad* (the intellectual-legal reasoning) of those respected scholars and their understanding of the Shari'a. It was their students, who made all of those opinions into a '*Madhhab*' (i.e. a school of thought)." Today, we should encourage unity, not division. We should not make the issue of these schools of thought so sacred that it prevents us from meeting and exchanging with one another. This kind of division has caused the death of many innocent people over the years on both sides. He would quote chapter five, verse 32 of the Qur'an: "Therefore We ordained for the Children of Israel that he who slays a soul unless it be (in punishment) for murder or for spreading mischief on earth shall be as if he had slain all mankind; and he who saves a life shall be as if he had given life to all mankind."

In general, the Grand Mufti would also always emphasize that we should not fall into the trap of talking about the mistakes of the *sahaba* (the disciples or companions) of the Prophet Muhammad. They were human beings and thus subject to error. None of them were infallible and Allah (God) is the One who will judge between Ali and Mu'awia. It is our duty to be respectful towards both and to leave their mistakes to the Almighty.

I remember the Grand Mufti often welcomed Shi'a scholars visiting from Iran, Lebanon, and the region as guests to his Friday lecture in Damascus. He would give them his podium in the mosque to speak and address more than 10,000 people who were listening during his Friday lectures. During Friday prayer, while his Shi'a guests prayed next to him, he would lift part of the carpet and pray on the mat made from straw. Other times, he had a piece of white paper on the place of his prostration (thereby respecting the ritual practice of Shi'a law). After they left, he would explain to us that this is how you should treat each other, by respecting their differences. He would go on to explain some of the *fiqh* (ritual law) issues are

misunderstood such as *sujud* (prostration). He would say that according to Shi'a scholars and the schools of thought of the Household of the Prophet, *sujud* should be on the ground or things made from the earth (such as wood, clay, or straw). He said, "That is why you saw me flipping the carpet and putting my forehead on the mat." He would go on to explain that the Sunni perspective is that this carpet and the wool used to make it, comes from sheep and sheep are fed from the earth. So, it is ultimately from the earth. Concerning *Salat* (Prayers) he would explain why Shi'a Muslims combine the daily prayers (*Dhuhr* and '*Asr*') and the night prayers (*Maghrib* & '*Isha*'). His contention was always that these *fiqh* differences need to be respected.

The Grand Mufti would explain that these issues are mainly personal opinions, and these differences do not legislate for us to hate each other. His teachings and his presence were a gateway to peace, security, and stability in the country. Such was his disdain for the term that he never allowed any of his students or others to mention the word "sectarianism" in his presence. He never allowed the use of any sectarian language or any act that showed disrespect to the Shi'a or to other religious minorities in the country. He would share with us how President Hafiz al-Asad would respect him for his stances and positions on this issue.

He would say that the peace, security, and cohesiveness within the Syrian society and the region that has had a problem with Israel since 1948, is more important than any religious difference. He also spoke about global powers' interests in the region. He publicly condemned the Iran-Iraq war as a senseless war in which only people who are benefiting from this war are the enemy of Sunnis and Shi'as. He warned that this "manufactured" war is focused on starting a Sunni-Shi'a conflict in the region.

He constantly cautioned us from letting "sectarian strife" take hold in Syria reminding us of the lessons learnt from almost 15 years of civil war in Lebanon (1975-1989) and warned us not to fall in the same trap. It should be noted that the Grand Mufti would constantly receive comments and criticism from other Muslim scholars for advocating for *taqrib*. These were due to some of the rising voices from Iran that talked about a sectarian agenda for the region. The Grand Mufti was always in favor of addressing these comments coming from different sources in Iran or its proxies in

the region. He would clearly separate between *taqrib* and other hidden agendas. He was truly a key to the national security of the country and he would say we might agree and we might disagree on minor issues with our Shi'a brothers, but "we should not let this kind of disagreement become a division that leads to hate. Hate leads to killing and bloodshed and this is what our enemies are waiting to see." Likewise, the Shi'a scholars who visited Sheikh Kufaro always emphasized and stressed the importance of unity.

### *Conclusion*

When the Grand Mufti passed in 2004, his son, Dr. Salahuddin Kufaro, served as his successor at Kufaro Foundation. He brought a lot of media attention to the activities at Kufaro Foundation and actively continued his father's legacy of interfaith, *taqrib*, and attempting to bridge the divide between Sunnis and Shi'a. To this end, he held numerous seminars and conferences and invited such figures as Dr. Muhammad Sa'id Ramadan al-Bouti who attended and supported some of these activities in Syria. Dr. Salahuddin was known to be very vocal in his outreach and would not hesitate to criticize anyone who incited or provoked sectarian strife in Syria from either the Shi'a or the Sunni side. He continued conducting *taqrib* programs until he was arrested by the government in July 2009 on alleged corruption charges. He was cleared in 2010 but was not permitted to return to his position as Director of Kufaro Foundation or conduct any of his activities.

When Grand Mufti Sheikh Ahmad Kufaro visited me in the United States in the early 1990s, after I became an Imam in Baltimore, he cautioned the communities in the United States against bringing the problems of the Middle East and other countries of the Muslim world into America, especially the sectarian strife and tension. He emphasized that his message in Syria of unity and cooperation was also to be used in America.

In my opinion, we are now paying the price for the lack of follow-up on the teachings of the great scholars of the Ahl al-Sunnah and the Shi'a in the 20th century. They worked very hard to bridge the gap of misunderstanding and ignorance. They worked on reviving the schools of thought while also promoting *taqrib*. I remember the Grand Mufti always talking about

reviving the curricula of the religious schools and adding additional subjects about unity and coexistence. We have seen how some other hidden agendas, pushed by other powers, used this issue repeatedly to breathe fire into it. This huge fire is now destroying many countries and killing or displacing millions of people in Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, and Yemen.



Shaykh Mahmud Shaltut was a prominent Egyptian Sunni scholar, theologian, and the Shaykh of al-Azhar from 1958-63. He was a strong proponent of *taqrib* and issued a famous edict (*fatwa*) proclaiming the Shi'a Ja'fari law school a legitimate law school of Islam.

1957. Credit: [Wikicommons, Bibliotheca Alexandrina \(Copyright Law 354 of 1954\)](#)

# The Promises and Challenges of *Taqrib*

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*Ibrahim Kazerooni, The Islamic Center of America & University of Detroit Mercy*

The goal of the endeavor of *taqrib* is to search for the commonality and overlaps that exist between various juridical schools in Islam and to explore the possibility of groundbreaking dialogue that bridges the divide and narrows the divergence that has come to exist between the various schools of thought in Islam. The importance of the concept of *taqrib* has become urgent especially in the light of the political upheaval ensuing from the occupation of Iraq and the war in Syria, where a unique narrative has gained currency among academics and the general public, which is that the crisis in the Middle East is inherently a sectarian issue that has been there from time immemorial.<sup>1</sup> This kind of narrative not only is factually inaccurate,<sup>2</sup> but also is politically useful for the colonial powers, especially the United States in this case, to deny any responsibility for the crisis of sectarian violence that they themselves have deliberately created as part of the official policy in the region.<sup>3</sup>

The first question that needs to be addressed is “what is *taqrib*” or what is the working definition in which we are to operate when we speak of *taqrib* or the ecumenical strategy between Shi’a/Sunni juridical schools. So what do we mean by “*taqrib*,” and how is such an endeavor expected to unravel a long history of hostility between the followers of these schools? Before we address the “what and how” of this enterprise, a brief history of *taqrib* would be helpful. If one were to trace the history of *taqrib*, one would find that the root of coming together and eliminating all elements that may lead to segmentation within the Muslim society can be found in the Holy Quran. The Holy Quran commands Muslims to

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<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, similar arguments have been presented in the case of Palestinian crisis.

<sup>2</sup> Up to the early second century of the Islamic Calendar there were no clearly defined sects labeled as one or the other. We notice the genesis of such an attempt by the end of the 1st century. Up to then the identifying marker for each group was their support for Ahlul Bayt, or the Bani Ummaya and they lived as part of the general Muslim society.

<sup>3</sup> For deliberate fanning of the fire of sectarian divide as part of the official U.S policy in the region, see “*The Redirection*,” by Seymour Hersh, *The New Yorker*. 25 Feb. 2007.

unite and not to permit fracture that leads to dysfunctionality.

Any student of early Islamic history will have no doubt that the central goal of Islam was and remains committed to establishing a viable social order on earth that will be just and morally inclined. There is no doubt that the Quran began with a severe denunciation of the economic and social inequalities that existed then because they were the most rampant outward signs of a segmented society. The Holy Prophet knew that there was no possibility of success in delivering his message if the segmentation of the ignorant *Jahili* (pre-Islamic cultural) society was not to be confronted immediately. The Holy Quran points to this issue repeatedly: “Hold fast all of you to the rope of God, all together, and be not divided. Remember the blessing of God upon you when you were enemies and He joined your hearts, such that you became brothers by His blessing. Quran (3:103).”<sup>4</sup>

Informed by this need and Quranic commandment, the Shi’a Imams instructed their followers not to permit theological differences to drive a wedge between them and other Muslim communities. When Imam Ja’far al-Sadiq was asked by one of his disciples as to how to conduct themselves with those who are ideologically opposed to them, he responded: “Visit them, pray in their houses of worship, attend their funerals and have a collegial relationship with them and keep the line of dialogue and conversation open.”<sup>5</sup>

Historically what prevented a greater merger of the Muslim community was not the absence of desire or the shortage of literature, but the policy of the political establishment that fanned the fires of sectarian tension for their own political interest. This is seen in the work of Abbasid caliphs such as Al-Mansur and Al-Ma’mun, and later in the attitude of the Ottoman and the Persian courts.

It is an historical fact that the attempt to bring various Islamic schools together and develop some form of communications between them is not a new issue. The desire for debate and discussion between various juridical schools in Islam had existed from early history, and such attempts have gone through various phases. The initial incentive for learning about the

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<sup>4</sup> Ar.: واعتصموا بحبل الله جميعا ولا تفرقوا واذكروا نعمت الله عليكم اذ كنتم اعداء فالف بين قلوبكم فاصبحتم بنعمته اخوانا

<sup>5</sup> See ‘*Man laa Yahdhrahul Faqih* V.1 p 383 (صلوا في مساجدهم وعودوا مرضاهم و اشهدوا جنازتهم...). Similar *Hadiths* are available from Imam al-Rida.

other schools' theological or juridical position was polemical: to find how the "opponents" arguments could be refuted. The most prominent among such arguments and possibly the first is the debate in Masjid al-Haram between Ibn Abbas, the well-known early Muslim scholar, and Nafi' ibn Al-Azraq, the leader of Khawarij at the time.<sup>6</sup>

Such polemical contestation was not limited to verbal disputes; the compilation of many books took place under the general rubric of "*al-Jadal*," (dialectic disputation) which over time became a genre in inter-relational authorship. The broad rubric of such activities, although not intended for bridgebuilding, nevertheless exposed each school to the others' theological or juridical reasoning.<sup>7</sup> Another example of such a genre is the debate between Shaykh Mufid (a renowned Shi'i scholar of the 4th century H) and his contemporary Shaykh Abu Bakr al-Baqilaani a renowned Sunni scholar, or the debate between Shaykh Mufid and Qadi Abul-Jabbar al-Mu'tazili. During the Abbasid period such activities took on a more political and cultural orientation. The Abbasid caliph demanded from a few scholars to compile a book of refutation against other schools in Islam to be used as a manual for such activity. We also know that Al-Ma'mun organized elaborate debate circles in his court and invited Muslims as well as Jewish and Christian scholars to attend the discussions.

If we were to fast-forward to the late 19th and middle of the 20th century, we would find several intellectual figures that played a critical role in rekindling the old desire for bridgebuilding. Among them was Sayyid Jamal al-Din Al-Afghani, who travelled extensively in the Middle East, Northern Africa and Europe, and published a journal called "*Al-Urwat al-Wuthqa*," which contained many articles exploring the possibility of starting such projects.<sup>8</sup> Another prominent member and strong advocate of bridgebuilding between Muslim Schools at the turn of the century was Shaykh Mohammad 'Abduh, the Imam of al-Azhar at the time, and a close associate of Afghani and one of his students, Rashid Rida.

Among the more contemporary figures that played a central role in laying the foundation of (دار التقريب بين المذاهب الاسلامية) "*The Institute for Bridgebuilding between Muslim Schools of Thought*" and a leading figure

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<sup>6</sup> The issues raised in the above discussion have been compiled and known as (مسائل ابن الازرق), or Questions of Ibn al-Azraq.

<sup>7</sup> This led to the authoring of a number of books by scholars of both schools on the rules and foundation of "*Jadal*" such as *al-Kaafiya fi-l Jadal* by al-Juwayni as well as other works by prominent authors.

<sup>8</sup> For fuller account of the Sayyid's life see, Hadi Khosroshahi, *Sayyid Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (Asadabadi) wa-l Sahwa fi-l Mashriq* (Tehran, 1991).

in getting this project off the ground, was Shaykh Mohammad Taqi al-Qumi, who travelled to Egypt from Iran<sup>9</sup> over seventy years ago to begin working on the “Center for Bridgebuilding Between Various Schools of Islam.”<sup>10</sup> Another well-known player in the early phase of this project was the renowned Sunni scholar and Sheikh of Al-Azhar Mahmud Shaltut (1893-1963)<sup>11</sup>. By recognizing the Ja’fari Juridical School as the fifth valid school for Muslims to follow, Shaykh Shaltut assisted the project immensely.<sup>12</sup>

The mission statement agreed upon in the first meeting of the founding members, stated that the goal of this organization was to clear the fog of suspicion and ignorance that had come to prevail over the relationship between the followers of the different schools of thought in Islam. This goal, modest as it might appear, nevertheless faced strong challenges due to the prevailing political hostility between followers of these schools and their respective governments. Undeterred by the prevailing political hostility, the founding members, as part of the strategy for ecumenical work, planned to organize conferences, publish ecumenical journals and facilitate gatherings between religious and community leaders in different parts of the Muslim world.

The center published its first ecumenical journal, “The Message of Islam” (رسالة الاسلام) on 1949. This journal was published quarterly and went out of print in 1972. In total, 60 issues of this journal were printed. The contributors addressed diverse issues related to the Muslim world, and gradually, this journal became an important means for cooperative efforts to resolve diverse theological issues that had caused tension and misunderstanding between Muslims of diverse theological persuasions.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> An Iranian theologian from the city of Qum (Iran) who visited Cairo in 1938 and had lengthy meetings with prominent Egyptian intellectuals of the time. In these meetings it became clear for him that he needed to become proficient in Arabic. To do that he travelled to a village in South Lebanon and resided there for eight months. For a full account of Shaykh Qumi, see: Sayyid Hadi Khosroshahi, *Qisat al-Taqrīb: Umma Wahida Thiqafa Wahida* (Tehran: Al-Majma al-Alami li-l Taqrīb, 2007). After the end of the project in Cairo, Qumi went to live in Paris, France and died in a tragic car accident in Paris

<sup>10</sup> The center for *taqrīb* or ecumenical bridgebuilding between different Muslim Juridical schools was established in 1947 in Cairo, Egypt with the support of twenty prominent scholars of Sunni, Zaidi and Shi’i persuasions; among them Mahmud Shaltut, Shaykh Abd al-Majid Salim, Shaykh Mohammad Ali Alavieh, Shaykh Mohammad Taqi Qumi, Syed Abdul Hussein Sharafuddin, Shaykh Mohammad Hussein Al Kashif al-Ghataa, a very charismatic Grand Scholar of Iraq who was held in high esteem by Sunni grand scholars of the time, Shaykh Mustafa Abd al-Razzaq, and from Yemen Shaykh Ali al-Mu’aed. Of course, one should not underestimate the pivotal role that Ayatollah Boroujerdi, the grand Scholar (Marja’) in Qum played in providing the moral support for Qumi, as well as communicating with Imam Shaltut, the resident Imam of al-Azhar, to encourage all parties to support the project of *taqrīb*. One of the least recognized Shi’i figures in this project is Shaykh Mohammad Jawad Chirri (1905-1994) the founder of Islamic Center of America in Detroit and later in Dearborn, Michigan. For further detailed discussions, see: Rainer Brunner, *Islamic Ecumenism in the 20th Century: The Azhar and Shiism between Rapprochement and Restraint* (Leiden: Brill, 2004).

<sup>11</sup> For full account of his life see: Abdulkarim Biazar Shirazi, *Shaykh Mahmud Shaltut* (Tehran: Al-Majma’ al-Alami li-l Taqrīb, 1996).

<sup>12</sup> His famous *fatwa* was issued on 17 Rabi Al-Awal 1378 H over 65 years ago.

<sup>13</sup> Brunner, *Islamic Ecumenism*

One of the most significant challenges that the founders faced—particularly in the early stages of their work—was to define exactly the meaning of *taqrib*. From the start, those opposed to the creation of such projects began distorting not only the goal but also the meaning of *taqrib* for lay people, who had no idea or comprehension of what this project was about or stood for. The opponents stated that this project was intended to convert Sunnis into Shi'as or the reverse, depending on their constituents, leading to a huge resentment by the public against this project.<sup>14</sup> Naturally those political institutions, which have always been wary of the coming together of Muslim communities, fanned the sectarian fires by presenting *taqrib* in the most negative way possible.

At this point it would be helpful to briefly refresh our understanding of *taqrib*. Let us begin by stating what *taqrib is not*. For all intents and purposes, we do not believe *taqrib* to be an attempt to proselytize any community; this is not feasible or even possible. Herodotus (484-425 BC) captured the inherent challenge before us when he stated: “For if one were to propose to all men a choice, bidding them select the best customs from all the customs that there are, each race of men, after examining them all, would select those of their own people, thus all thinks that their own customs are by far the best.”<sup>15</sup>

The statements by leading figures in this field clearly underscore the inherent challenge before them. Yusuf al-Qaradawi<sup>16</sup> stated:

The goal of this project is not to eliminate theological differences between various schools in Islam; as this is not practicable or even possible. The *hadith* “differences [in] my community are a blessing” (*ikhtilaf ummati rahma*) clearly underlines the need for differences of opinion within the Muslim community. What is intended from this project is to bring Muslims of various persuasions together and to remove the misunderstanding between them.

In a manner reminiscent of most pan-Islamists of the time, Mohammad Abduh stated: “Muslims must take all the necessary steps to prevent division and discord within their communities that serves foreign and

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<sup>14</sup> It is claimed that the famous *fatwa* of Shaykh Shaltut was to be given by his predecessor Shaykh Salim but had to be shelved because of anticipated strong reaction from the Sunni laity.

<sup>15</sup> *The Persian Wars*, (1974, Book 3, Chapter 38, NY: Modern Library).

<sup>16</sup> Yusuf al-Qaradawi, an early advocate of this project, an Egyptian Muslim Theologian currently based in Doha, Qatar.

colonial powers only.” In the contemporary period, this view is shared by Shaykh Mohammad Ali Taskhiri.<sup>17</sup> Taskhiri underscores this by stating that the idea of *taqrib* is not to negate the differences of opinions that exist between various schools but to find the overlap between them, and to search for ways to expand this shared space even further through dialogue between the schools, and ultimately, to implement policies that would be beneficial to all.<sup>18</sup>

### *Outlook for Future*

I believe the outlook for the future of such projects in any formulation is bleak. This is not due to the absence of literature in Islam creating a moral impediment to finding common ground between communities or bridgebuilding, nor is it due to a lack of interest from scholars within the various juridical schools in Islam. The issue is more political. We have already seen how the establishment of *The Institute for Bridgebuilding between Muslim Schools of Thought (al-Majma' al-Alami li-l Taqrib)* has had so little impact on pushing forward the parameters of intrafaith dialogue because of the political agendas promulgated by countries that do not see eye to eye with Iran, the host country. Since 1990 every year a grand conference is organized in Tehran under the banner of unity; numerous dignitaries attend, yet nothing of any substance has come out of these conferences beyond publications and speeches. In other words, at this historical moment when the Muslim world is witnessing yet another huge escalation in sectarian violence,<sup>19</sup> not only between a few countries but across the region and around the world, such projects will not find currency at all. In a political world that divides and rules, and sectarian tension and infighting between groups pays huge dividends for those who benefit from the division of Muslims, bridgebuilding and ecumenical projects are highly unlikely to succeed. If there is no will to work together, implementing what is agreed upon in grand conferences becomes extremely problematic. The success or failure of such projects depends not only on members of the different schools participating in *taqrib* meetings, but also on the ability of participants to implement what they have agreed upon once they depart from the conference halls and reach their own countries. Unfortunately, the absence of fertile ground due to pressure from political

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<sup>17</sup>Shaykh Taskhiri (d. 2020) was an Iranian cleric who served as Iranian representative to the Organization of Islamic Conference during the 1980s. He headed (المجمع العالمي للتقريب بين المذاهب الإسلامية) after its establishment in Tehran-Iran in 1990 and its establishment came to succeed the earlier (دار التقريب بين المذاهب الإسلامية) in Cairo that was closed down in the 1970s.

<sup>18</sup>This view is also echoed by many leading scholars of various juridical schools in the Muslim world.

<sup>19</sup>The cases of Syria, Iraq, Yamen and Bahrain are only a few examples of how sectarian differences have been fanned by one government or another for furtherance of their political agendas.

institutions connected with or supporters of the various scholars have neutralized all the decisions reached during the dialogues.<sup>20</sup>

The role of the Saudi government, whose more-than-generous gifts and patronage to various sectarian Sunni organizations around the world has poisoned the ecumenical atmosphere that once prevailed over and was encouraged by organizations such as *taqrib*, should not be ignored. During the last two decades the Wahhabi movement, through the Saudi government, has been able not only to thwart all ecumenical efforts between those intending to work in the field of *taqrib*, but also to sow the seeds of hatred and sectarian rancor and division even further.<sup>21</sup> Short of a tectonic shift in the prevailing political climate, the chances of which under the current political circumstances seem very remote, the success of any ecumenical project similar to *taqrib* becomes doubtful. Again, the words of Herodotus capture the agony of those that would like to see change but have power over little: “of all Men’s miseries the bitterest is this: to know so much and to have control over nothing.”

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<sup>20</sup> As an example, one could advance Shaykh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, mentioned earlier, who used to be one of the most ardent supporters of *taqrib* in the past, but has become one of the major endorsers of sectarian conflict, not to mention seminars organized by Al-Azhar under the banner of “*Combating Shi’ism*.”

<sup>21</sup> This can be seen from how the podium of the Jum’ah prayers in the Holy Mosque has been turned into a platform for airing sectarian hatred and hostility towards Shi’a Muslims.

The al-Azhar Mosque and University in Cairo is one of the most important educational centers in the Sunni world. It was founded by the Shi'a Isma'ili Fatimid dynasty in the 4th/9th century and likely derives its name from Fatimah al-Zahra, the daughter of the Prophet Muhammad. Al-Azhar thrived under various dynasties up until the modern period as a center for Islamic learning.

July 2008. Credit: [Wikicommons, Daniel Mayer \(CC BY-SA-4.0\)](#)



# From Cairo to Samarra:

## The Transnational Scholarly Reception of the *Taqrib* Project

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*Mohammad Sagha, Harvard University & University of Chicago*

Some six months had passed since the American invasion of Iraq in late August 2003 when a massive twin car bomb ripped through the thronging crowds surrounding Ayatollah Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim in Najaf. The blasts instantaneously killed the Ayatollah and some 124 fellow worshippers in a shocking display of mass murder. Importantly, the car bombs targeted the Ayatollah outside the iconic golden-domed shrine of Imam Ali b. Abi Talib who was the cousin, son-in-law, and the legitimate successor to the Prophet Muhammad for Shi'a Muslims. Al-Hakim, a respected Iraqi Shi'a scholar, had spent decades resisting Saddam Hussein who ruthlessly and calculatingly executed dozens of al-Hakim's family members for their political defiance to his rule. The Ayatollah also headed an influential Iraqi political movement and paramilitary organization which outlived him and is still prominent in the country's contemporary politics.

The son of one of the most widely followed Grand Ayatollahs in the Shi'a world during his time, Sayyid Muhsin al-Hakim, Muhammad Baqir was also in a distinguished leadership position of a flagship intrafaith ecumenical organization based in Tehran which claimed the mantle of the taqrib movement, "The World Forum for Proximity of Islamic Schools of Thought" (*Majma' al-'Alami li-l Taqrib bayn al-Madhahib al-Islamiyya*). His unexpected assassination in 2003 by al-Qaeda militants marked the first of a series of major ominous signs of the horrific sectarian violence which was to descend upon Iraq in the coming years, including a tremendously destructive civil war whose consequences we are still witnessing until today, both in Iraq and the wider region. A few years after his killing, in 2006, another major shrine was bombed, again by al-Qaeda and their allies, which prompted a massive reaction and wave of communal violence across Iraq. The holy Samarra shrine housed direct descendants of the Prophet Muhammad,

the Imams Ali al-Hadi and Hasan al-Askari, who are followed in particular by the Twelver Shi'a but are also universally revered among the global Muslim community.

Almost a decade after the assassination of al-Hakim, on March 21, 2013—coincidentally one day after the ten-year anniversary of the start of the 2003 Iraq War—an enormous explosion ripped through the white-domed al-Iman Mosque in central Damascus' famed al-Mazra'a district.<sup>1</sup> The target was one of the Muslim world's most well-known and respected Sunni clergyman and scholars: Shaykh Muhammad Sa'id Ramadan al-Bouti. The Shaykh was a towering senior scholar intellectually steeped in both classical Islamic and modern western social sciences, and the well-respected head preacher of the historic Umayyad Mosque who had a reputation as a conciliatory figure and advocate for Sunni-Shi'a rapprochement and *taqrib*.

Al-Bouti was known for his staunch support of the Syrian government and his public premonitions based on spiritual dreams before his killing in 2013 which predicted that the government would prevail in the civil war despite the massive suffering that the conflict would bring to society. In the process, he earned the deep ire of the Syrian opposition. The suicide bombing attack inside the famous mosque not only killed al-Bouti, who was delivering academic lessons to students and the public at the time, but also killed some 40 others and left more than 80 wounded—including dozens of his students and fellow clergymen.

The murderers of al-Hakim and al-Bouti did not distinguish between the Sunni and Shi'a garb of these scholars—they were targeted because to their killers mainstream Sunni and Shi'a Muslim clergy alike were a threat. The assassinations of these two figures, by most credible accounts, were carried out by “reformist” Wahhabi militants and certain strands of militant Salafi armed groups active in Syria and Iraq usually associated with al-Qaeda.<sup>2</sup> The Wahhabi worldview and theology opposed the very existence of scholars like Ayatollah al-Hakim and Imam al-Bouti,<sup>3</sup> and the wars in Iraq and Syria provided Wahhabi militancy the open grounds to challenge state structures and the established Islamic clerical scholarly institutions—*both*

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<sup>1</sup> As Damascus mosque blast kills 42 including senior Syrian imam,” *Reuters*, 21 March 2013 <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-blast/damascus-mosque-blast-kills-42-including-senior-syrian-imam-idUSBRE92K0X520130321>

<sup>2</sup> Wahhabism refers to the violent anathematization (*takfir*) and interpretation of certain strands of Salafi reformist discourse. For an erudite study of Wahhabism and its roots in Saudi Arabia, see: David Commins, *The Wahhabi Mission and Saudi Arabia* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2006).

<sup>3</sup> Most reliable evidence identifies the culprit behind the assassination of al-Hakim to be Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq. In fact, one of Zarqawi's immediate family members is credibly reported to have carried out the suicide

Sunni and Shi'a—which generally integrated more inclusive notions of orthodoxy and acceptance within the larger Muslim community as well as among other faith traditions.

What these events highlighted was that the sectarianism often assumed to be between Shi'as and Sunnis was in fact mainly between Wahhabis and non-Wahhabis (regardless if they are Shi'as or Sunnis). The militant Wahhabi movement legitimates killing or enslaving of those considered infidels, including Shi'a Muslims and religious minorities such as Druze and Yezidis. Importantly they also excommunicate and also legitimate the killing of those Sunnis who differ from Wahhabi doctrinal beliefs such as Sufi Sunni Muslims and many other strands of Sunni Islam which have historically otherwise been considered orthodox in the larger Islamic community. Not all Wahhabism is violent all the time and there are pro-monarchical and revolutionary strands of Wahhabism which can and do clash with one another; however, excommunication and *takfir* remain core doctrinal beliefs that were easily activated into violence and genocide depending on larger structural political opening such as in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen.

Therefore, although many narratives of the region frame sectarian tensions as primarily between Sunnis and Shi'as, in fact—as will be demonstrated below—the leading Sunni and Shi'a scholarly institutions of the Muslim Middle East are generally accepting of not only each other but also of larger pluralism and confessional diversity within Islam and among global religions. This does not mean that all of the Sunni and Shi'a scholars who are more ecumenical or pluralistic in outlook necessarily accept or engage in the specific project of *taqrib*. The *taqrib* movement is only one particular interpretation and strategy of sectarian dialogue. Many scholars, whether Shi'a or Sunni, may also see *taqrib* as part of a particular pan-Islamist project or socio-political movement and eschew involvement under the specific auspices of *taqrib*. Nonetheless, the general tenor and theological norms promoted within mainstream Sunni and Shi'a higher institutes of scholarly learning provide grounds for greater ecumenical dialogue whether within the framework of *taqrib* or outside of it.

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attack. In the case of Ramadan al-Bouti, strong evidence demonstrates that al-Qaeda's branch in Syria, *Jabhat al-Nusra*, was behind the assassination. See: Mohamad Bazzi, "Zarqawi Kin Reportedly Bombed Shrine in Iraq," *Newsday*, February 7, 2005; Matthew Duss and Peter Juul, *The Fractured Shia of Iraq: Understanding the Tensions within Iraq's Majority*, (Washington, D.C.: Center for American Progress, Jan. 2009), 10; and, "Dimashq: 'al-Nusra' Qatalat al-Buti bi-Amr min al-Julani [Damascus: al-Nusra Murdered al-Bouti with orders from al-Julani (the head of al-Nusra)], *Al-Arabi Press*, 22 Dec. 2013.

There are structural reasons behind the shared outlook of Sunni and Shi'a clerical institutions. Indeed, upon closer examination, what may initially seem an unbridgeable sectarian divide between Shi'a and Sunni clergy and scholars (*ulema*) in fact reveals relatively deeply shared institutional and intellectual interests between the two groups—and why anti-clerical militants would target them across sectarian and national boundaries. These shared positions between mainstream Shi'a and Sunni scholarly institutions in the Middle East include, but are not limited to:

- a. The desire of Shi'a and Sunni scholarly centers to institutionalize and form hierarchical orthodoxy in the Muslim world, including questions of who is considered within the fold of Islam. This can be seen through the issuing of authoritative decrees (*fatwas*), forming specific Islamic doctrines, defining legitimate Islamic sciences and Islamic law, running educational institutions, influencing certain government policies and socio-cultural norms, and a range of other related activities. Oftentimes, mainstream Sunni and Shi'a clergy alike find it in their mutual interests to forge formal and informal alliances between themselves in order to sideline internal threats to their scholarly authority and in turn agree upon larger cross-denominational orthodoxy for the Islamic world. This includes the move among Sunni clergy to reject the normalization of violent mass *takfir* (anathematization) which is advocated by Wahhabi and like-minded groups. Shi'a scholars, by contrast, have been active in curbing radical (but largely non-violent) provocations by some Shi'a extremists who intentionally provoke hate-speech and conflict among Muslims especially on satellite and social media channels;
- b. A shared threat perception of secular beliefs and ideologies which challenge the primacy of Islamic identities and beliefs as understood by Muslim clergy in all social, political, or cultural spheres. At the forefront of these perceived threats is liberalism today, but in the recent past included Marxism, Communism, and strands of pan-Arabist nationalism which challenge the epistemic foundation of Islamic socio-political thought and adopt secular ideologies which paint religion and Islam as backwards;

- c. A commitment to Islamic civilization and educational heritage. This includes a wariness of the serious epistemic challenges secular universities and belief systems impose on the historically rooted clerical institutions of learning. An example of these tensions can be seen in the recent open exchange between the head of al-Azhar, Shaykh Ahmed al-Tayyib and the President of Cairo University, Muhammad Uthman al-Khusht at a live-broadcasted international conference in Cairo. The open clash erupted over whether Islamic historical heritage can provide the foundation for new civilizational thought (the position supported by al-Tayyib) or whether “new foundations” which did not privilege Islamic heritage needed to be built in order to reform society (the position supported by al-Khusht)<sup>4</sup>;
- d. And, the belief in pan-Islamic unity despite the geopolitical differences between their respective home states. Religious identity for many clergy transcends the state system of the modern Middle East. Therefore these scholars tend not to be fixated on Shi’a-Sunni divides (which are not new in Islam) but rather focus on modern geopolitical differences in the Muslim world which they interpret in large part as a consequence of constructed post-colonial ethno-national projects meant to divide and rule the Muslim world. The project of *taqrib* ecumenicism intersects with many of these points and thus serves as an important case study for larger socio-political dynamics in the region.

It is here in the heartlands of the Middle East, the ancestral homelands to dozens of religious and ethnic confessions, in which the battle over the project of interfaith reconciliation, *taqrib* and religious pluralism in the Muslim world has proved to be of immense consequence. In order to understand some of the main internal fault lines over authority and orthodoxy in the Muslim world, which are currently unfolding, it is important to hear Islamic scholarly perspectives from their own voices. What do leading contemporary Shi’a and Sunni clergy themselves say when it comes to the project of interfaith ecumenicism and *taqrib*? By keeping in mind the aforementioned shared areas of overlap among many (but

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<sup>4</sup> “*Munawisha Kalamiya bayn Shaykh al-Azhar wa Ra’is Jami’at al-Qahira Tuthir al-Jadal fi Misr*” [verbal sparring between the Shaykh of al-Azhar and the President of Cairo University provokes a Debate in Egypt], BBC, 29 Jan. 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/arabic/trending-51296005>.

certainly not all) formally trained Muslim *ulema*, the next section aims to focus on the substantive theoretical and intellectual contours that leading Muslim clergy of the Middle East have advocated in their scholarly works.

### *Contemporary Muslim Scholars*

Let us begin in Cairo, the historical birthplace of the *Jama'at al-Taqrīb*, the flagship institution of Islamic ecumenicism.<sup>5</sup> One of the major issues theoretically related to *taqrīb* is how this joint project between leading Shi'a and Sunni scholars contributed to the clergy regulating norms and orthodoxy within their own confessional groups. Writing on the issue of Shi'a-Sunni reconciliation and *taqrīb*, the highly regarded former Sunni Grand Mufti of Egypt, Shaykh Ali Gomaa (tenure 2003-2013), laid out an intriguing blueprint of what he considered to be the most encouraging areas of ecumenical reconciliation. His focus was not only on the theoretical, legal, and theological differences between Sunnis and Shi'as, but he also approached the historical development of confessional identity in a nuanced manner to give a multidimensional view of Shi'a-Sunni relations.

Firstly, Gomaa began by explicitly rejecting the practices of the “extremists who are called Salafis,” and invoked the important Quranic phrase (3:103) urging unity: “hold on firmly to the rope of Allah and do not become divided.” Gomaa reaffirmed that the Shi'as believe in all of the same roots of faith in the religion of Islam: the belief in God, his Prophets, his divine revelation and holy books, the Day of Judgement and all other core beliefs. After confirming the foundational overlap between Sunnis and Shi'as, Gomaa noted an important point regarding the differences which existed between them over the important issue of succession to the Prophet Muhammad. While staying faithful to the traditional tenets of Sunnism and accepting the succession order of the first four caliphs (*al-khulafa al-rashidun*), Gomaa duly contextualized that for the Shi'a, the theological issue of the infallible Imamate was at stake—including the belief in trusteeship/guardianship (*wasaya*) and divine appointment (*nass*)—following the demise of the Prophet Muhammad, while for the Sunnis the succession to the Prophet was not so much explicitly about theological issues but rather one of communal consensus and free election.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> For a thorough historical survey of this early *taqrīb* institution and general movement, see: Rainer Brunner, *Islamic Ecumenism in the 20th Century* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 129-143.

<sup>6</sup> Ali Gomaa, “Are Shi'as Muslims?” [Hal al-Shi'a min al-Muslimeen?], 25 April 2016 draligomaa.com/index.php/الفتاوى/عقائد/item/1983-هل-الشيعة-من-المسلمين-؟-وإذا-كانوا-من-المسلمين-فما-واجب-أهل-السنة-نحوهم-؟-وما-هي-مسائل-الاختلاف-بينهم-وبين-أهل-السنة-؟-وهل-يجوز-التقريب-بينهم-وبين-أهل-الشيعة-من-المسلمين-؟-أو-أن-هذا-مُشكلاً-خاطناً؟

By de-theologizing the succession issue within Sunnism and contextualizing succession through the divinely ordained institution of “Imamate” within Shi’ism, Gomaa opened up a proactive space for mutual co-existence of one another’s foundational beliefs without forcing a binary doctrinal pledge of allegiance upon Muslims. This approach mirrored in many ways the historical norm for many Muslims in the historic middle periods of “confessional ambiguity.”<sup>7</sup> During this time, many Muslims across different world regions simultaneously believed in the legitimacy of the first four caliphs not necessarily as “divine” appointments (and instead a product of fallible human electoral mechanisms) while simultaneously believing in the sovereignty (*wilaya*) of the twelve Shi’a Imams as a divinely ordained matter. Such sentiments today are quite rare as these two positions have generally come to represent exclusive modern doctrinal beliefs.

Regarding the Islamic historical past, the former Grand Mufti of Egypt Ali Gomaa strived to establish a moral distance from the Umayyad caliph, Mu’awiya b. Abi Sufyan—a position which in fact many Sunni scholars throughout time have taken. Gomaa explicitly affirmed that Sunnis actually believe that Ali b. Abi Talib (the first Shi’a Imam and fourth “rightly guided caliph” of Sunnism) was closer to the truth than Mu’awiya (while still respecting Mu’awiya’s status as a companion of the Prophet), and that Husayn b. Ali was murdered unjustly by Yazid b. Mu’awiya, thereby implicitly criticizing (without having to explicitly condemn) Mu’awiya’s appointment of his son Yazid as caliph of the Muslim world, which led to the gruesome massacre of Husayn, his companions, and other members of the Prophet Muhammad’s household.

Turning to Syria, Imam Ramadan al-Bouti’s approach towards ecumenicism within Islam, as highlighted in a journal article entitled *al-Taqrīb bayn al-Madhahib wa-l Firaq*, focused on the potential of the science of *usul al-fiqh* (principles of Islamic legal jurisprudence) to be a means of bridging Sunni and Shi’a schools of thought and enable mutual learning between the two denominations. For al-Bouti, Shi’a and Sunni schools of thought agreed on the fundamentals or roots (*usul*) of religion and most of the doctrine (*aqida*) as well; their differences are legitimate ones based on reasonable disagreements and exercise of judgement.<sup>8</sup> As he argued, a greater

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<sup>7</sup> John Woods, *The Aqquyunlu: Clan, Confederation, Empire* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1999), 3-10.

<sup>8</sup> Muhammad Sa’id Ramadan al-Bouti, *Risalat al-Taqrīb*: vol. 14, 1417 AH.

understanding for *usul al-fiqh* and the principles of textual interpretation (hermeneutics) would either minimize sectarian differences or lead to proper appreciation of the diversity and plurality of opinions which can emerge from shared foundational beliefs and doctrinal commonality. As an example, he highlighted how the Hanafi *madhab* (one of the major law schools of Sunnism) differs from the majority (*jumhur*) of other Sunnis in many of their final legal rulings but explained that these differences were understandable since they were based on reasonable divergences in logical argumentations within Islamic jurisprudential theory.

In Turkey, the influential Directorate of Religious Affairs (or the “*Diyanet*”) which runs the vast religious bureaucracy in the country has undertaken similar contours of intra-faith religious outreach under the stewardship of its head and senior religious scholar, Dr. Ali Erbas. On different occasions, Dr. Erbas has spearheaded ecumenical reconciliation and even formal bureaucratic religious exchange with neighboring Shi’a-majority countries, namely Iran and Iraq.<sup>9</sup> One of the important, although certainly not sole, reasons behind recent rapprochement is the shared disdain that Turkish, Iranian, and Iraqi scholars have for the Wahhabi proselytization emanating from Saudi Arabia, which challenges both mainstream Sunnism and Shi’ism alike. An agreement signed in 2019 between Iran and Turkey included “translation and publication of religious books to holding various events” and the teaching of comparative Shi’a and Sunni jurisprudence.<sup>10</sup> In late 2018, Erbas stated that “today, we do not make a Shi’a-Sunni distinction, but we consider our various sects, lifestyles, ethnic differences as the wealth of Muslims... We will continue to invite everyone to unity and solidarity under the Islamic umbrella, under the name of Islam, regardless of the denomination of the countries we will visit.”<sup>11</sup>

Among the prominent contemporary Shi’a scholars, a leading proponent of *taqrib*, Ayatollah Ja’far Sobhani, prefaced his discussion on ecumenicism by discussing how his predecessor Ayatollah Hossein Boroujerdi, the most widely followed *Marja* (Grand Ayatollah) of his time, was a key backer of the ecumenical movement.<sup>12</sup> One of the reasons motivating Boroujerdi

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<sup>9</sup> For details on Dr. Ali Erbas’ meeting with the head of Iraq’s Shi’a *Waqf* (religious endowments) bureau, Seyed ‘Ala ‘al-Mu-sawi, see: “Ra’is Diwan al-Waqf al-Shi’i Yaltaqi Ra’is al-Shu’un al-Diniya al-Turkiya al-Duktur Ali Erbas” [The Head of the Shi’a *Waqf Diwan* [religious endowments bureau] meets with the head of the Head of the Directorate of Religious Affairs of Turkey, Dr. Ali Erbas,] *Wikalat Nun al-Khabariya*, 01 Feb., 2018, <http://www.non14.net/97364>.

<sup>10</sup> “Iran, Turkey sign religious cooperation agreement,” *Middle East Monitor*, 27 Dec. 2019 <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20191227-iran-turkey-sign-religious-cooperation-agreement/>

<sup>11</sup> “Meeting with members of the press in Qatar, President of Religious Affairs Erbas: ‘We must fight together for the oppressed in the world,’” *Presidency of Religious Affairs*, 7 Dec. 2018, <https://diyanet.gov.tr/en-US/Content/PrintDetail/12183>.

<sup>12</sup> As Sobhani argues, Boroujerdi was in turn influenced to take up the project of *taqrib* by his colleague Ayatollah Mohammad Baqir Darchei; “Vujud-i Rivayat-i Mushtarak bayn-i Shi’ih va Sunni Nishanih-ye Taqrib Ast” [The Presence of Shared

towards intra-Islamic reconciliation, Sobhani argued, was Boroujerdi's sensitivity to the internal threat of "*ghuluww*" or exaggeration of the Imam's divine characteristics and his desire to highlight the orthodox mainstream positions shared between the Sunni legal schools of thought and the Shi'a clergy.

This points to the counterintuitive conclusion that Islamic ecumenical relations as well as the specific project of *taqrib* not only helped to create orthodox standards between Muslim denominations but also *within* them. These Shi'a-Sunni clerical overtures were therefore in part motivated by sidelining fringe movements within Sunnism such as Wahhabism as well as those within Shi'ism such as "*ghulati*" or "heretical" movements,<sup>13</sup> or more recently *takfiri* figures who publicly insulted historical figures held dear to the Sunni community and excommunicated other Shi'as who refused to engage in such corrosive sectarianism including many contemporary leading Shi'a Grand Ayatollahs. It is important to note, however, that this latter Shi'a *takfiri* group, as opposed to their Wahhabi counterparts, have largely not turned violent nor do they advocate genocide. Additionally, Shi'a and Sunni scholars also faced certain strands of anti-religious secular movements within their own Muslim-majority countries which promoted anti-clerical ideology and equated religion (and by extension the clergy) with violence or backwardness. This challenge of anti-religious secularism, which was the ruling state ideology in many countries in the Middle East, such as in Turkey and Iran for much of the 20th century, did not necessarily distinguish between Sunni and Shi'a forms of Islam and, by extension, created a shared threat perception that Islam in general was under pressure.

Coming back to our clerical interlocutors, both Sobhani and Goma'a also interestingly highlighted the importance of the shared *hadith* tradition between the Shi'a and Sunni schools. Sobhani argued that while outsiders believed that Shi'a *hadiths* about the Prophet Muhammad are very limited, they are in fact numerous and many of those prophetic narrations in fact overlap with those in the Sunni *hadith* canon. In this vein, Sobhani called for greater strengthening of ties and mutual cooperation (*ishtirakat*) between Sunnis and Shi'as and for identifying and publicizing scholarly

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Narrations between Shi'as and Sunnis are a Reflection of *Taqrib* (ecumenicism)], *Shafaqna*, 26 Jan., 2020 <https://qom.shafaqna.com/FA/192796>.

<sup>13</sup> For discussions on earlier internal struggles within Shi'ism during the Qajar period and in particular relations between Usuli Twelver elites and Shaykhi and Babi movements, see Vanessa Martin, *Islam and Modernism: The Iranian Revolution of 1906* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1989), 21ff.

works which highlighted the shared intellectual, scriptural, and narrative (*hadith*) heritage between Sunni and Shi'a Islamic schools. Interestingly, in a separate article, Ali Gomaa had already highlighted a few important works by Muslim scholars who had gathered and analyzed the shared *hadith* narrations between different Islamic schools of thought including by the Shi'a scholar Sayyid Muhammad Husayni al-Jalali as well as by the Ibadi scholar Yusuf al-Taffayish in his work entitled *Jami' al-Shaml*.<sup>14</sup>

One of the most widely followed contemporary Shi'a Grand Ayatollahs, Naser Makarem Shirazi, has also advocated for a series of measures to be undertaken in order to make ecumenicism between Muslims a reality. He (alongside the majority of other Grand Ayatollahs in the Shi'a world) issued a *fatwa* condemning the insulting (*ihanat*) of the revered or sanctified beliefs of other Muslims, which has been a cause of historical tension between Shi'as and Sunnis given the practice of some Shi'as to publicly denounce the first three caliphs revered by Sunnis.<sup>15</sup> Makarem Shirazi also strongly advocated for direct scholarly exchanges between Sunni and Shi'a academics in order to learn comparatively from one another in Islamic sciences.

In this vein, he recommended a revival in Quran studies given the revered and foundational position the scripture has for both Shi'a and Sunni Muslims as a divine revelation. Given the shared doctrinal beliefs in the Quran, he advocated for scholars to focus on Quranic studies as a scholarly bridge which could universally benefit the larger Muslim community. Indeed, among the earlier generation of Muslim scholars, the Grand Mufti of Egypt Muhammad Abduh edited key Twelver Shi'i Quranic commentaries (*tafsirs*), and Quranic study was and remains a key strain of ecumenical scholarship given the importance of this holy scripture among all denominations of Muslims. Ayatollah Makarem Shirazi, nonetheless, also provided criticism to his Sunni counterparts when he deemed necessary. In late 2015, he penned a professional yet critical letter to Ahmad al-Tayyib, the Grand Imam of al-Azhar in Egypt, urging him to prevent anti-Shi'a violence and rhetoric in his country and to revive the historical role of the institution as a center for Muslim unity and peace—areas he believed Tayyib to be seriously underperforming in especially

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<sup>14</sup> Ali Gomaa, *Are Shi'as Muslims?*

<sup>15</sup> Mujtaba Shirazi and Ali Allahverdi, "Didgah-i Ayatollah Makarim Shirazi Darbarih-ye Vahdat-i Islami" [The Outlook of Ayatollah Makarem Shirazi Regarding Islamic Unity], *Furugh-i Vahdat* 10, no. 38 (1393), 18-31.

vis-à-vis his predecessors at al-Azhar.<sup>16</sup>

### *Conclusion*

Through an analysis of the *taqrib* movement we can utilize an important yet understudied lens through which to study modern intellectual developments in the Islamic world as well as sectarian de-escalation and conflict resolution initiatives. Unfortunately, ecumenical dialogue and the *taqrib* movement have been largely ignored in the field of contemporary Islamic and Middle East studies, which is relatively more focused on Islamist political parties, armed movements, and certain disciplinary understandings of politics, violence and sectarianism. Importantly, studying the *taqrib* movement allows us to try and understand Muslim scholars and clergy through their own voices.

As this article argues, many (but not all) leading Sunni and Shi'a scholars of the Middle East largely share similar epistemic beliefs, wish for greater rapprochement between their denominations, and share certain perceptions of threats and challenges to their contemporary Islamic clerical authority. These serious challenges are represented in part through variant forms of Salafi-Wahhabi Sunnism or radical Shi'a media outlets who promote *takfir* in addition to indigenous secular reformist Shi'i and Sunni trends which back anti-clerical ideology and disdain for traditionally rooted Islamic institutions of learning.

Studying many of the region's top Sunni and Shi'a scholars also reveals that they do not generally define the goals of Islamic ecumenicism in the same terms that many outsiders do. As the study of these Muslim scholars illustrates, for them *taqrib* is not about ignoring history, "converting" the other side, or eliminating confessional lines between Sunnis and Shi'as. This is clear from the fact that the scholars leading the call for *taqrib* are the senior elite Muslim clergy who have confessional commitments to their own school of thought. According to many of these thinkers, *taqrib* is about more seriously learning from and knowing one another, especially when the core doctrinal beliefs and ritual practices of Muslims are so similar, as well as engaging in comparative scholarly study of the rich legal and intellectual

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<sup>16</sup> "Namih-ye Sargushadih-ye Ayatollah Makarim bih Shaykh-i Azhar" [Ayatollah Makarem's Open Letter to the Shaykh of al-Azhar], *Khabar Online*, 29 December 2015.

traditions of diverse Shi'a and Sunni Muslim schools of thought.

Finally, it is important to note that due to this ecumenical movement, serious work has been carried out mutually by Sunni and Shi'a scholars engaging in comparative intellectual projects, including in the fields of *usul al-fiqh* (legal theory), *tafsir* (Qur'anic exegesis), and *hadith* studies, alongside other rich fields of study.<sup>17</sup> In fact, in many ways we are witnessing what was the norm throughout much of Islamic history as scholars took from one another regularly without getting bogged down by the doctrinal or internal political issues which could drive them apart.

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<sup>17</sup> See, for example, Ayatollah Muhammad Ibrahim al-Jannati, *Durus fi Fiqh al-Muqarin* (Qumm: Majma' al-'Alami li-l-Shahid al-Sadr, 2020), 10 vols.; Jalal Miraghaee, *Ta'dud-i Madhahib* (Qumm: Majma'-ye Jahani-ye Taqrib-i Madhahib-i Islami, 2021).







**The Project on Shi'ism and Global Affairs**

Weatherhead Center for International Affairs  
1737 Cambridge Street  
Cambridge, MA 02138

Phone: (617) 495-4420

Fax: (617) 495-8292

Website: <https://shiism.wcfia.harvard.edu>

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