

MA'RIFA 2020

Self-Discovery & Imagination



Summary Report

Content

1

Summary

Purpose, Accomplishments, and Summaries

2

Audience

Data and Feedback

3

Conclusion

Concluding Remarks

Introduction

Shi'i students today find themselves dealing with a myriad of challenges. Between the struggles of navigating faith in America, balancing several identities, and being a minority within the Muslim community, Shi'i students need a meaningful forum to engage with these issues. *Ma'rifa 2020: Self-Discovery and Imagination* was a national conference organized by Shi'i students for Shi'i students to provide such a forum to explore Shi'a identity, spirituality, activism, and community.

Ma'rifa 2020 was held at Harvard University on February 28th and 29th, 2020. It was attended by more than 270 university students and invited scholars, academics, and community leaders over a two day period filled with engaging panels, workshops, artistic performances, and more. This report offers a condensed summary of the conference, including its objectives, panels, audience feedback, and future steps. For any questions, comments, and suggestions, please email marifaconference@gmail.com.

Summary

Purpose

Ma'rifa was organized to provide a platform for Shi'i college students to engage with issues relevant to the Shi'i college student experience, within the domains of identity, spirituality, activism, and community. Its goal was to prepare attendees to embark on individual and collective journeys of self-discovery and creative imagination.

Accomplishments

Ma'rifa 2020 made several landmark achievements. It brought together an unprecedented number of Shi'i students together for collective programming, reflection, and connection. Its speakers and workshops pushed students to critically address their understanding and practice of Shi'a Islam. Panels and conversation with community organizers encouraged students to reflect on their agency within their local and national communities. Scholars provided strategies to dismantle structural anti-Shi'ism, preserve Islamic principles of justice in daily work, cultivate spirituality in non-traditional spaces, and deconstruct sectarianism in geopolitics. Finally, *Ma'rifa* demonstrated that supporting youth voices, leadership, and organization is an essential priority for the American Shi'a community.



Summary

Keynote Address

Speaker: Dr. Payam Mohseni, Director of the Project on Shi'ism and Global Affairs at Harvard University

The keynote introduced the central question of the conference: what does it mean to be a Shi'a Muslim—here and now? Many Shi'i students consider themselves a minority due to their denomination within Islam. But after re-examining the multiple layers of identity, such as ethnicity, field of study, language, and more, they can conclude that they are each unique; in this kaleidoscope of uniqueness, they can find God.

Mohseni also discussed the essential role of Shi'ism as a vehicle of humanization in both historical and contemporary periods. Through exoteric practice and esoteric understanding, the Muslim student can connect to his or her humanity and, in doing so, connect with the Divine. Keeping this framework in mind, students then divided into different groups for roundtable discussions. They addressed three prompts centered around the concepts of self-discovery, critical reflection, and escaping marginality. Students engaged in dialogue with each other and shared their conclusions with the audience.



“We shouldn’t be looking to make everyone look like us, because we are made diverse. To appreciate what God has done is to appreciate that diversity.”


- Dr. Payam Mohseni

Summary

Beyond Identity Politics

Speakers: Syed Sulayman Hasan Abidi, Director of the Ahlul Bayt Seminary
Dr. Nicholas Boylston, Lecturer on Middle Eastern Studies at
Harvard University

“Beyond Identity Politics: Cultivating Spirituality and Knowledge” explored spirituality, knowledge, and identity in the Shi’i student experience. Syed Sulayman contrasted a secular notion of identity as “horizontal” with an Islamic understanding of identity as “vertical.” The former is a sum of one’s history, worldly experiences, and emotions, and changes with these situational variables. The latter is centered around divine connection, whereby an individual is both receiving divine instruction from the Quran and the Ahlul Bayt (a) and seeking closeness to Allah (swt). Syed Sulayman illustrated this with the example of a student who feels disconnected from Allah (swt). Within a “horizontal identity,” this feeling appears dissonant from what a “true Muslim” should experience; therefore, the student may stop praying to avoid feeling disingenuous. However, within an Islamic “vertical identity,” obedience—not feeling—is central. Therefore, praying in spite of feeling disconnected from Allah (swt) is not disingenuous, but rather shows an earnestness to return to the spirit of obedience from which the student became distant.



“We are in need, we are lacking, we are in our essence in poverty. We need that connection that comes from Allah (swt).”

- Syed Sulayman Hassan Abidi

Summary

Beyond Identity Politics

Speakers: Syed Sulayman Hasan Abidi, Director of the Ahlul Bayt Seminary
 Dr. Nicholas Boylston, Lecturer on Middle Eastern Studies at
 Harvard University

Boylston expanded on the lofty status of the true Shi'a, in the words of the Aimmah (a). Being Shi'a is an aspiration, an identity that ultimately comes with consistent and constant reflection and spiritual cultivation. The spiritual journey towards Allah (swt) begins with the recognition of human deficiency and the need to achieve closeness with the Divine. Through the guidance of teachers, the Quran, and the Ahlul Bayt (a), the ego can be defeated in the journey towards the Divine.



“It [spiritual fulfillment] starts with you realizing that you need to dedicate your life to this. It starts with you realizing this is the most important thing there is. If you really think this is what is deeply important to you as a human being, it is that thirst that is going to make you seek these sources of knowledge.”

- Dr. Nicholas Boylston

Summary

Understanding Justice

Speakers: Sheikh Mahdi Mohammadpour, Scholar at Mizan Institute
Shereen Yousuf, PhD Candidate at University of Wisconsin-Madison

"Understanding Justice: Faith and Activism" characterized justice within the Shi'i student experience. Sheikh Mahdi introduced the Islamic conception of justice: putting everything in its rightful place. He stressed that Shi'a Muslims in America must understand justice specific to their context, within their unique theoretical and practical frameworks. There must be dialogue between the traditional and the contemporary. Sheikh Mahdi left attendees with three recommendations: (1) know Islamic justice, (2) implement it rightfully per context, and (3) remove any barrier to implementing it.

"You are not just consumers, you are all producers of what justice can be. You are at the cutting edge of what justice can look like in this context. Nobody else can do that."

- Sheikh Mahdi Mohammadpour

Yousuf then deconstructed the American context for implementing justice. The American political system deliberately upholds structures of oppression against communities of color. Shi'i students must be aware of the micro and macro perspectives on this injustice in order to then strategically implement justice.

"Everyone has a role to play. Young people: no one else can play your role - and it is a vital role."

- Shereen Yousuf



Summary

Fireside Chat

Speakers: Dr. Payam Mohseni, Director of the Project on Shi'ism and Global Affairs at Harvard University
 Mohammad Sagha, PhD Candidate in Islamic History and Civilization at The University of Chicago

“Approaching Sectarianism and Geopolitics” defined the need for geopolitical literacy and voice among Shi'i students. Sagha described how Muslim Americans are affected by geopolitical developments in the Middle East and perceived through political events such as 9/11 and the 2003 Iraq War. Further, the notion of a 1400 year old “Shi'a-Sunni conflict” is misleading rhetoric, both historically and contemporarily. Nevertheless, domestic and foreign actions based on this premise hold real consequences for both Sunni and Shi'a communities.

“If a community does not create its own narratives, they will be trapped in someone else’s narrative. Everyone else will tell them how to think about themselves and who they are.”

- Mohammad Sagha

Mohseni emphasized the lack of geopolitical literacy among Muslim communities. Muslim students are susceptible to rhetoric based on false or reductive tropes used to describe otherwise legitimate grievances of Muslim and minority communities in the Middle East. The lack of robust political education in Muslim communities causes many students to turn towards inaccurate sources. Sagha emphasized the need to study history for contemporary context. Finally, Mohseni stressed the need for the American Shi'a community to study and understand political engagement. Creating platforms for this will allow Shi'a Muslims to reclaim their narratives in public discourse and contribute to the wider discussions on Islam as a whole, Shi'a-Sunni dialogue, diversity, and civil society in America.

“Just as important as religious literacy is geopolitical literacy, because if individuals do not know what is happening in the world around them, and do not have their facts and analyses correct, they will fall prey to many of the analyses presented to them, or used against them - leading to misinformed narratives including potentially negative sectarian framings of politics and religion.”

- Dr. Payam Mohseni



Summary

Re-Imagining Sacred Spaces

Speakers: Irtaza Haider, President of Taha Collective
Hidaya Nawee, Co-founder of Imam Mahdi Edification Association

“Re-Imagining Sacred Spaces” redefined “sacred space” within the American Shi’i paradigm. Haider contrasted the prophetic mission to make all spaces sacred with the modern secular notion of privatized religion, where sacred spaces are confined within the walls of a masjid. He summarized the historical trends of the American Shi’a community, juxtaposing the immigrant diaspora with the long-standing, often ignored Black Shi’a experience. Traditional masajid and Islamic centers established by diaspora communities, though effective in safe-guarding faith and establishing institutional support for the Shi’i community, generally have been unable to create a Shi’i experience that is culturally relevant to the American context. Nawee then identified behavioral patterns that burden many American Shi’a sacred spaces with sexist, racist, and ableist attitudes. Such spaces are at odds with a prophetic ideology of service, and leave Shi’i students in a challenging matrix of cultural disconnect, disenfranchisement, and ideological dissonance. Both speakers emphasized that Shi’i students today hold tremendous agency to develop sacred spaces that are inclusive and reflective of the American Shi’a experience on college campuses or beyond, and that this challenge is one that Shi’i students are uniquely poised to solve.

"We can't complain about lack of inclusivity if we don't show up. I can't tell my college MSA we need to have more Shi'a programming if I'm the only Shi'a that ever attends them."

- Hidaya Nawee



Summary

Re-Imagining Sacred Spaces

Speakers: Irtaza Haider, President of Taha Collective
Hidaya Nawee, Co-founder of Imam Mahdi Edification Association

Whether in college campuses, online platforms, or collective communities, such spaces can pave the way for a Shi'ism rooted in the American context. Students were asked to consider how their agency could translate into action. In a Hackathon format, students separated into groups, identified a key challenge in their local or general Shi'a community, and designed a preliminary program, initiative, or event to address it. Groups drafted their pitches onto whiteboards displayed for everyone to see. Solutions included anonymous hotlines for addressing mental health needs, composting strategy and divestment portfolios to make masajids and centers environment-friendly, youth consultants to expand the impact of masjid boards, and speaker circuits to share cultural perspectives with different communities.

"For your sake and for the sake of our community, get involved and create the unique American Shi'i paradigm that we have been discussing. If you don't, nobody else will."

- Irtaza Haider

GREEN

General Way

The way most centers approach the issue of wasting food, water, and parking in general is by leaving "No wasting" posters around. Islam teaches us to care for our environment, but we seem to ignore this issue.

Our Way

- COMPOST UNITS IN EVERY SINGLE MASJID TO PREVENT WASTING ANY ORGANIC MATERIAL.
- USE METAL SILVERWARE
- Divestment Factsheet (List of companies with Fossil Fuel Ties)
↳ Frank, Binos, etc.
- EVERY MASJID SHOULD HAVE AN ELECTRIC CAR CHARGING STATION
- Parking spots nearest to the masjid reserved for those who Carpool
- Volunteers to stay on top of the waste products and make sure recycling is done correctly.

Welcoming Committee

Problem:

Lack of inclusivity

↓

Solutions:

- outreach division
 - show new community members around the new city, inform them of imam/baugh programs (e: dua kurmay), halal food
- ASL interpreters / language translators
- Women resource center / breast feeding, daycare
- mental health counselor
- community resource center - health clinic for non-insured patients

Summary

Open Mic

Speaker: Hoda Katebi, Founder of Blue Tin Production

In addition to the panels, *Ma'rifa 2020* hosted an Open-Mic featuring moving performances and a lively atmosphere. From poignant spoken word poetry to comedy to talented vocal recitations, the Open-Mic set the conference's tone by centering Shi'a youth voices.

The event was headlined by Hoda Katebi, who spoke on structural anti-Shi'ism as a shared experience for Shi'i students across the country. Her presentation used analogous systems of structural oppression, such as anti-Blackness, Orientalism, and Muslim community surveillance programs (eg. Countering Violent Extremism) to describe Shi'a marginalization. This provided students with precise language and intersectional frameworks to communicate their own experiences with anti-Shi'ism, exclusion, and discrimination.



Summary

Closing Remarks

“O Prophet, sufficient for you is Allah (swt) and for whoever follows you of the believers.”
[8:64]

Speaker: Sayyid Mohammad Baqir Kashmiri, Vice Chairman of the I.M.A.M Foundation

The “Closing Remarks” were delivered by Sayyid Kashmiri, who spoke from the perspective of the religious leadership. He began with the above Quranic verse and highlighted three conditions for a successful community: Allah (swt), who is always present; leadership, which started with the Prophet (s) and now rests in the Marja’at; and qualified individuals among the believers who demonstrate their own leadership, vision, and execution. Sayyid Kashmiri emphasized that often, the Shi’a community looks to religious leaders as the sole means of change. But the role of religious leaders is primarily to safeguard the faith and provide guidance from the Quran and Hadith. In fields where religious experts are not specialists, qualified believers must manifest religious wisdom through their own knowledge, vision, and expertise. Thus, every individual in the community is responsible for gaining specialty and using it to project the wisdom of the Shi’i tradition.



“I extend my hand to every one of you. From the bottom of my heart, I thank the organizers for working on Ma’rifa. This is really amazing and unique. The religious authorities are here to support you, but we are limited. We need to work together and collaborate. I will ask you one question: what was the difference between the victory of Badr and the defeat of Uhud? Same Allah (swt), same Prophet (s), what was the difference? People, certain people made the difference. Victory or defeat, the choice is in your hands.”

- Sayyid Mohammad Baqir Kashmiri

*Disclaimer: Sayyid Kashmiri pointed out that his views are not necessarily the views of Sayed Sistani or any Marja’, and his presence at the conference was not a categorical endorsement of the views of any of the speakers who were invited.

Summary

Closing Remarks

Speaker: Sayyid Mohammad Baqir Kashmiri, Vice Chairman of the I.M.A.M Foundation

The role of the American Shi'a youth in this paradigm is critical. Sayyid Kashmiri commended the rare energy, caliber, and diversity of *Ma'rifa 2020* attendees, emphasizing that a strong American Shi'a community equates to a strong global Shi'a community. Shi'i students must learn how to use their resources effectively in the service of Allah (swt) and the community. Religious leadership cannot do everything on its own and depends on strong leaders who can carry the same vision onwards. The ulema are spiritual, intellectual, and material resources that Shi'i students should strive to access and develop a relationship with. Finally, Sayyid Kashmiri urged students to pursue fields where Shi'a representation is lacking, such as the media. Though the Shi'a are a minority, with vision and drive among the youth, others will look to the Shi'a as trailblazers, role models, and leaders for all.

“One of the most surreal things about Ma'rifa was being able to meet and discuss with other students from all around the country. I believe these newfound experiences and relationships provide the Shi'a youth with opportunities to grow as a community and develop our identities as Shi'as.”

- Amina Hasan, Cornell University

Audience

Facts and Figures

100%

Student Run

150+

Colleges Represented

275

Attendees

17

US States Represented

25%

Attendees Received
Financial Aid

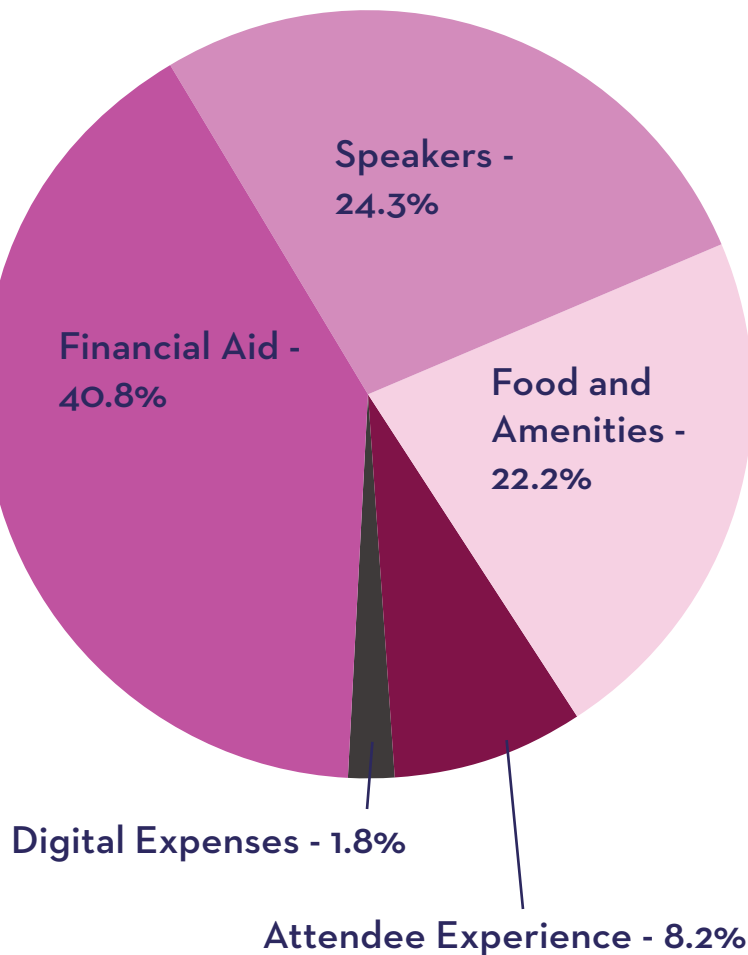
95%

felt more engaged with
their religion and
community

90%

rated their experience as
"Great" or "Amazing"

Cost Breakdown



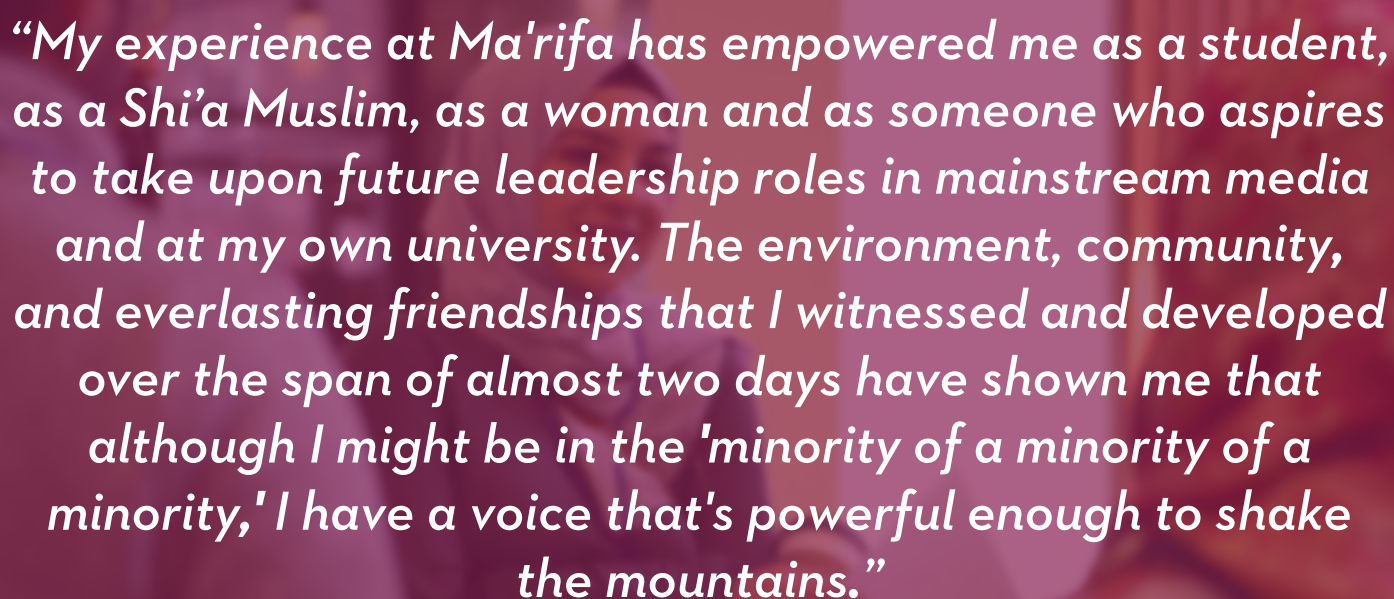
Ma'rifa 2020 Sponsors:

- Harvard Islamic Society
- Project on Shi'ism & Global Affairs
- IMAM Foundation
- UMOJA
- Taha Collective
- Unity Center of NEO
- Islamic Masumeen Center of NE
- Seyed Foundation
- Brown MSA
- Harvard Muslim Chaplain's Office
- Hasan Family
- FRESI
- HUMA
- IABAT
- Mizan Institute
- Bait ul Qayyem/SANA/BQ Youth
- Rutgers ABSA
- Saba Center
- Kisa Kids
- UC Berkeley TMA
- UIUC ABSA
- Muslim Congress
- RISE
- NASIMCO
- IMAMIA Medics
- ABSA Network
- Anjuman-e-Asghari
- Anjuman Nawjawana-ne-Ali Akbar

Conclusion

A Note From the Board

It is with happiness, humility, and gratitude that we conclude this report. *Ma'rifa 2020* was a hope and vision shared by the entire Shi'a community, from our youth to our parents to our religious leaders. It is the culmination of a longstanding legacy of Shi'a identity and tradition in America and signifies the next step: a wave of revived and critical engagement by the Shi'a youth. We organized this conference to address a need that we both observed and experienced ourselves. Too many Shi'i college students face significant challenges to their identity, spirituality, and sense of community. Investing in the understanding and agency of Shi'a youth is critical for the success of our community. As our scholars attest, we must strive to be critical in our thought and practice, prioritize spiritual cultivation, implement justice in our lives, and pursue knowledge about Islam and the world we live in. *Ma'rifa* represents this aspiration. Looking forward, we hope to continue rallying the Shi'a youth community, supporting youth initiatives, and advocating for youth engagement. Finally, we extend our gratitude to the entire Shi'a community, our youth, our elders, our sponsors, and our scholars for coming together and carrying *Ma'rifa* to fruition. May Allah (swt) bless our Prophet (s) and his family (a) and make our community successful.



“My experience at Ma'rifa has empowered me as a student, as a Shi'a Muslim, as a woman and as someone who aspires to take upon future leadership roles in mainstream media and at my own university. The environment, community, and everlasting friendships that I witnessed and developed over the span of almost two days have shown me that although I might be in the 'minority of a minority of a minority,' I have a voice that's powerful enough to shake the mountains.”

- Fatima Zaidi, DePaul University