

Contemporary Shi'ite Polemic on the Web: A Media Analysis

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ABSTRACT

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There are over one and a half billion Muslims in the world today, but a schism occurring in early Islamic history divided the house of Islam into two factions: the Sunnis, comprising roughly ninety percent of adherents today, and Shi'ites, comprising approximately the remaining tenth. Sunnis and Shi'ites have long engaged in debates with and polemic against each other, producing a substantial body of literature.

This presentation will explore the continuation and evolution of sectarian debate in cyberspace. The reader is introduced to both the themes characterizing this discourse and polemical techniques, including those favored or facilitated by the medium of the web. The thesis concentrates on Shi'ite material, leaving Sunni internet activity for future investigation. Treatment of the very large number of constantly shifting and proliferating sectarian websites is enabled by the fact that they exhibit common themes and patterns, facilitated by the constant interchange, copying and linking that are characteristic of the web. The research is limited to sites posted in English, which has become a lingua franca of the web, including Muslim religious sites.

The thesis also assesses the effects of the internet on sectarian debate and relations. The chief effect has been to provide an outlet for popular, "lay" voices; within the last few decades, the internet has given people of all walks of life a forum in which to share their views and

convictions, and Sunni-Shi'ite dialogue is no different. The impact overall, however, has been negative, since the internet has served largely to intensify or escalate the negative features of polemic by creating a new, trans-national space in which anonymous authors can, without much learning or restraint, attack a depersonalized "other" while surfers instantly access that material and pass it on. Because of the Shi'ite minority position, some Shi'ite sites appear to be somewhat more temperate and begin by attempting to present a picture of their tradition acceptable to Sunnis (Chapter One); but this strategy soon leads to more overt critique of Sunnism and is finally undermined by material and tactics that are, like those found in Sunni sites, openly hostile (Chapter Two). Surprisingly given the accessibility of the web, there are no significant sites or internet voices (at least in English) that encourage real dialogue and respect, a disappointing reality especially in view of the current rise of sectarian conflict and violence in the Muslim world.

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Introduction

The Arabic word *taqrīb* comes from the verb *qarraba*, meaning "to cause to draw nigh, to be brought close, to be permitted to approach".¹ In the context of inter-faith dialogue, it connotes the effort of bringing two religious bodies closer so as to nurture discourse and understanding between them.

In recent history, a group of Islamic scholars calling themselves Jama'at al-Taqrīb (Taqrīb Society) attempted to achieve at least a measure of unity between the Sunni and Shi'ite communities. The Sunni scholar who spearheaded the movement was the Shaykh al-Azhar Mahmud Shaltūt,² who is most famous in this regard for issuing a fatwa which declared that the Ja'fari school, also known as Twelver Shī'ī or Imamis, is a legitimate school of thought that is religiously correct on a level equal to other Sunni schools of thought.³ Among the Shi'ite scholars who participated in this initiative was Muhammad Taqi al-Qummi.⁴ The group was founded in 1948,⁵ and it had three main objectives: firstly, to bring the sects closer together; secondly, to clarify the various madhahib (schools or schools of law) in order to ensure adherence from the rank and file of the Muslim laity; and thirdly, to act as an arbiter in sectarian disputes.⁶ However, despite the evident need for Muslim unity and impressive credentials of the scholars behind the movement, no real progress was made in undoing more than a millennium of Sunni-Shi'ite schism.

From its inception, the movement was plagued by suspicion. Traditional leaders from both camps construed attempts at taqrīb to be covert assaults on established canon. Among

¹*Lane's Lexicon*, Vol. 7, p.33.

²Kate Zebiri, *Mahmūd Shaltūt and Islamic Modernism* (Oxford Clarendon Press, 1993), p. 5.

³Zebiri, *Shaltūt*, pp. 25-26.

⁴Zebiri, *Shaltūt*, p. 24.

⁵Zebiri, *Shaltūt*, p. 13.

⁶Zebiri, *Shaltūt*, p. 24.

laymen, fears were no different. Most believed that taqrib was meant to lay the foundation for a unification of all the madhahib (schools). The group responded to these allegations by reaffirming their intention to encourage the exchange of ideas and shed light on differences existing in the Muslim world; they denied that they aimed to consolidate centuries of varied tradition into a single code of law. They insisted that they had never condemned diversity, but rather emphasized the importance of plurality as indicative of the range of Islamic thinking.⁷

Nonetheless, many believed the attempt at resolution of sectarian conflict was not successful precisely because it essentially limited itself to law and failed to address the more fundamental differences in faith between Sunnis and Shi'ites. Taqrib was possible on a jurisprudential level because fiqh (law) by its very nature must be pliable enough to adapt and evolve with changing circumstances. This characteristic of law naturally resulted in a diverse tradition. However, questions of internal faith are not as flexible. Aqida (creed), the domain of elementary beliefs, the catechisms to which Muslims cling with fervent devotion, are deemed authoritative and exempt from 'development'; and it is in this area that the crucial differences between Sunnism and Shi'ism lie.

One of Egypt's most prominent scholars, Yusuf al-Qaradawi, expressed this succinctly. Shaykh Qaradawi achieved international acclaim and even notoriety⁸ for his efforts to unite the Muslim world on the political front because of his over-arching concern that Muslims should speak with a unified voice on current events such as the Palestinian struggle and wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. However, in 2008 following a trip to Iran, he finally declared that there was an unbridgeable gulf between Sunnis and Shi'ites due to (supposed) Shi'ite belief in the distortion

⁷Zebiri, *Shaltūt*, p. 25.

⁸www.qaradawi.com mentions that al-Qaradāwī often appears on al-Jazeera, a television network broadcasting throughout the Middle East.

of the Quran and cursing of the Sahaba, that is the Companions of the Prophet revered by Sunnis. Furthermore, certain Shi'ite groups, according to Qaradawi, had conducted proselytizing campaigns in Sunni countries. It is relevant to this thesis that Qaradawi's adamant rejection of taqrib was publicized through television and can be viewed on several websites.⁹ My aim is to examine Sunni-Shi'ite polemic on the internet, along with the less common efforts at taqrib.

The timing for such an investigation could not be more opportune. We live, as the Chinese curse goes, in 'interesting times'. The 2003 war in Iraq brought much instability to Iraq and the Middle East in general. As Iraq was released from the iron fist of Saddam Hussein, sectarian divisions were openly exposed. Despite the very significant participation of Iraqi Shi'ites in the Baath party, many perceived that Saddam's punitive actions had been directed at them out of sectarian feeling (Saddam was, of course, a Sunni), rather than as suspected traitors aligned with Khomeini's Iran. The fact that the deposed president of Iraq had been primarily a secular megalomaniac became almost irrelevant.

A virtual sectarian civil war, stoked by the American occupation, quickly ensued and transformed Iraq into a fratricidal battleground. Coreligionists from surrounding regions were drawn into the power struggle as Shi'ite Iran and Sunni Saudi Arabia began to jostle for power and influence. As Iraq became an arena for a proxy war and settling of historical scores with clear sectarian dimensions, Western media portrayed the unfolding events as the instantiation of age-old "Oriental" animosities that the enlightened West could not conceivably hope to penetrate. Sunni-Shi'ite animosity was transformed overnight into a transnational sensation.

The web activity examined in this thesis throws light on perceptions and feelings behind this sectarian conflict and those rising in other parts of the world, for instance in Pakistan, Saudi

⁹For example: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=334u_ahITSQ

Arabia and the Gulf. Although it is often not clear exactly who is behind sectarian websites and postings, it is at least evident that we are dealing with non-elite “authors” putting together material that is fairly simple for the benefit of a wide audience. The polemical sites, in other words, give insight into popular sentiment, a very valuable perspective to have access to when dealing with conflict between peoples or groups.

It seems, in fact, that the open, unhindered, easy, and most notably, anonymous communication afforded by the internet heightens and sharpens polemics. What the majority of partisan websites devoted to Sunni-Shi’ite sectarian argument lack in scholarship, they compensate for in enthusiasm and sheer volume. We will restrict this analysis to English language sites, as most activity seems to be in that language. Even where sites are in Arabic, Urdu, and so on, they usually also appear in an English version; English, after all, has become an international Muslim lingua franca. Focusing on English also allows us to assess material that might have an impact on or attract the participation of Western Muslims and which readers of this English-language thesis can access, as the net allows, in order to see material first-hand.

In this presentation we hope to explore Shi’ite websites, one half of Sunni-Shi’ite internet polemical discourse. Covering all Shi’ite polemical websites is an impossible task, as well as unnecessary, since the majority of sites recycle the same or similar arguments, albeit with some refinement. I found after sampling hundreds of sites that detectable patterns began to emerge, eventually exposing the primary points of contention along with the most frequently deployed lines of argument. Thus the sites referred to in this work can be taken as representative of Shi’ite material overall. Nevertheless, despite a repetitiousness that may be characteristic of the web overall, there was enough of a range of material that I had to abandon my original plan of considering both Shi’ite and Sunni sites. Fortunately, I also saw that I could quite effectively

study only one group, as the two sides do not really engage each other. The Sunni and Shi'ite sites often resemble two separate conversations, for the reason, I think, that they are largely meant to confirm and reinforce the outlook of the group concerned rather than engage outsiders.

We must keep in mind that the polemic animating Shi'ite-Sunni relations is dense and widely dispersed through the history and geography of the Muslim world. The material is complex, culturally particularistic and temporally contextual. We cannot hope to completely illuminate the background of the arguments advanced; nor, of course, is it our task to evaluate their accuracy or efficacy. We are rather concerned with how the internet in particular presents and uses sectarian arguments; the reader should understand that the thesis does not offer an account of Shi'ite polemic overall, but only this one manifestation or aperçu. The sites do sometimes cite classical sources extensively in translated excerpts to lend an air of authenticity; I have preserved some of these verbatim, including in footnotes,¹⁰ in order to communicate some of the flavor of the material and illustrate its style.

This work is intended not only to familiarize the reader with the online Shi'ite arsenal, but also to demonstrate the polemical techniques Shi'ite activists employ, whether in attracting Sunnis to their faith or attacking Sunnism. The discussion is divided according to different approaches or techniques so that the strategies of polemics are laid bare. Chapter One, "Familiarization and Rapprochement", shows how and why Shi'ite sites strive to present their tradition as part of the mainstream of Islam, while Chapter Two, "Offensive Strategies: Dissecting Discrepancies", examines approaches used in open attack.

¹⁰ When such passages or citations from classical sources are reproduced in footnotes, I have placed them in italics to distinguish them from my own citations. *Note:* Arabic names and terms are spelled according to the transliteration system of the Library of Congress, with the exception of omission of -ah- representing ta-marbuta. However, since this is a non-technical work, dots and macrons representing special characters and long vowels are not included.

Although there are, as explained above, too many websites to take stock of, we have sampled and cited a good variety in order to provide the reader with a feel for the content and style of material currently available. I focused on sites that were the most extensive and seemed to have the most effort put into them, as well as those that appear, judging from frequency of cross-citation and linking, to be most popular. In fact, these two categories of sites usually were the most elaborately and comprehensively linked. I have also included the internet sub-genres of chat forums and videos (specifically, Youtube). Videos in particular are popular since they are a means of communication or even entertainment which surfers can access and “read” with little effort, thus attracting a wide audience. In all these genres, the medium is very much a part of the message.

The thesis, in fact, is relevant not only to current Shi’ite polemics and the Sunni-Shi’ite conflict, but also use of the internet by Muslims and its impact on the tradition. The advent of the new medium of the World Wide Web does not mean merely that Islam has been extended to cyberspace; it has affected the accessibility of information, the way Muslims view authority, and the dynamics of clandestine traditions, as well as altering experiences of social exchange. My work is intended as a contribution to the study of Islam on the internet, a rapidly growing field of research.

Although the internet has had an impact on nearly every aspect of Islam, most scholarship on the subject has concentrated on three areas: jihad,¹¹ gender,¹² and fatwa sites.¹³

¹¹See for example Gary Bunt, *Islam In The Digital Age: E-Jihad, Online Fatwas And Cyber Islamic Environments* (London: Pluto, 2003); Nico Prucha, "Online Territories of Terror - Utilizing the Internet for Jihadist Endeavors", *German Journal For Politics And Economics Of The Middle East* 52.iv, 2011, pp. 43-47; Evan F. Kohlmann, "The Real Online Terrorist Threat." *Foreign Affairs* 85.v (2006): pp. 115-124.

¹²For example, Barbara Stowasser, "Old Shaykhs, Young Women, And The Internet: The Rewriting Of Women's Political Rights In Islam." *Muslim World* 91.i-ii (2001): pp. 99-119.; A. Linjakumpu, "Islam On-line: Muslim Women Defined by the Multicultural Internet Community." In *Ethnic Encounter and Culture Change: Papers from*

Discussion of fatwa sites often explores the question of authority, while women's issues and jihad appear to be tantalizing topics, as they are sensational, trendy and will ensure a response. This notion is echoed by Chroust, who states that the widespread subjects online are concentrated on "web sites of sex and violence"¹⁴ There are, however, many other subjects related to Islam and the internet in which research is needed. Online communities are constantly being created around numerous topics; for instance current political affairs, democracy in Islam, conversion testimonials, Qur'anic & Arabic learning, and spiritual development, to mention just a few. Sectarian conflict and polemic is certainly a very significant concern, as the plethora of sites shows; I hope that my work will help to attract attention to this neglected field.

Despite focus on a limited range of subjects, existing scholarship on Islam and the internet does provide valuable suggestions about how the medium affects the tradition. Mandaville remarks how the unrestricted availability of scholarly works afforded by the Web gives virtually everyone the opportunity to read, interpret, and re-post available information while omitting, including, or adding emphasis as suits their agenda.¹⁵ The effect of easy circulation, posting and re-posting of sectarian polemic as I have seen in my study is to give it a false air of "truth" through constant repetition in many strident variations, all of which are available in simple bites and rapid sequence to net surfers. Greifenhagen speaks in his study of Christian-Muslim polemic on the web of the hazards of the medium for an audience untrained in

the Third Nordic Conference on Middle Eastern Studies, Joensuu, June 1995, edited by M'hammed Sabour and Knut S. VikørBergen, pp. 158–163. Bergen: University of Bergen, 1997.

¹³See L Bettina Gräf. "Islamonline.Net: Independent, Interactive, Popular." *Arab Media & Society* January (2008), <http://www.arabmediasociety.com/?article=576> (accessed August 15, 2012).; Bettina Gräf and Yūsuf al- Qaradāwī, "Media Fatwas, Yusuf Al-Qaradawi And Mediated Authority In Islam." *Orient: Deutsche Zeitschrift Für Politik Und Wirtschaft Des Orients. German Journal For Politics And Economics Of The Middle East* 51.i (2010): pp. 6-15.; and Jens Kutscher, "Online-Fatwas: Islamische Rechtsgutachten Und Ihre Bedeutung Für Politische Partizipation." *Von Chatraumbis Cyberjihad: muslimische Internetnutzung in lokaler und globaler Perspektive.* Hrsg. Matthias Brückner; Johanna Pink. pp. 135-154. Würzburg: Ergon-Verlag, 2009.

¹⁴Peter Chroust, Neo-Nazis And Taliban On-Line, *Democratization* 7.i, 2000, 102

¹⁵Peter Mandaville. "Digital Islam: Changing the Boundaries of Religious Knowledge?", *ISIM Newsletter* 1.2, 1999, p. 1.

filtering sources. According to Greifenhagen, the internet is fast becoming not only the default option for a popular audience for locating information quickly and efficiently, but also an easy source for cut-and-paste plagiarism and ready fodder for unsuspecting youth and others of “unreliable information from acutely biased sources.”¹⁶

Whether one focuses on the benefits or harm of the World Wide Web, it cannot be denied that it has significant consequences in the real, non-virtual world. One of those consequences is creation of spaces uncontrolled by traditional authorities. Anderson observes that access to the net tends to wear away respect for authorities and elders who were once regarded as the possessors of knowledge, while Scholz maintains that the net shifts the locus of authority from the status of the speaker to the power of the word.¹⁷ Opinions disseminated online are predominantly from faceless, nameless sources. As such, the strength of an argument increasingly depends not on the respectability of an authority or sheikh, but the persuasiveness of the idea being advanced. In regard to online Sunni-Shi’ite polemic, this means that anyone can retail arguments and even insults, which appeal to and are readily consumed by persons already immured in a sectarian worldview.

The internet has, on the other hand, also given minority groups a forum to openly inquire about, discuss and express their faith. Sökefeld observes that the Web has helped the Alevis, an esoteric sect centered in Turkey with features of Sufism and extreme Shi’ism, to shift from being a secretive, elitist religion to a proud, open community. The online world has served as a stepping stone, allowing young members in particular of the Alevi community to express their religious values in a space that is between being entirely public and entirely private. The internet

¹⁶F.V. Greifenhagen. "Scripture Wars: Contemporary Polemical Discourses Of Bible Versus Quran On The Internet." *Comparative Islamic Studies* 6.i-ii (2010): pp. 23-65.

¹⁷Jan Scholz and others. "Listening Communities? Some Remarks on the Construction of Religious Authority in Islamic Podcasts." *Welt Des Islams* 48.iii-iv (2008): p. 469.

has, according to Sökefeld, so successfully served as ‘training’ for public religious zeal that many Alevi youth now proudly display their religious symbols for all to see.¹⁸ Mainstream Shi’ites, who comprise a small minority of the population of Muslims overall, have also historically been, to some extent, a hidden or at least discrete community, and the open expression seen on Shi’ite polemical sites on the web seems to represent a similar phenomenon.

Finally, the virtual world of the internet is affecting some real-world interchanges so completely that one could imagine them being entirely replaced by it. It does seem that intersect Islamic polemical debate is becoming a largely online phenomenon; or at least, the Web acts as an ideal facilitator. Individuals and groups who would not otherwise have had much opportunity to express and circulate their sectarian views now have an outlet that allows them to take action on their feelings, without possessing much traditional knowledge or expending much effort; and persons open to such views can also easily and instantly have them reinforced. Zaman maintains that cyber space cannot replace sacred space,¹⁹ yet it appears that this is not true in all circumstances. Zaman is certainly correct in regard to the functions of mosques and Muslim communities, but real space for face-to-face polemics, places where people meet and express or discuss differences, are rare, whereas online debate has the potential to expand in what is essentially an instant and unlimited space.

¹⁸ M. Sökefeld. “Alevism online: re-imagining a community in virtual space.” *Diaspora: A Journal Of Transnational Studies* [serial online]. 2002;11(i): p. 103.

¹⁹ Saminaz Zaman. "From Imam To Cyber-Mufti: Consuming Identity In Muslim America." *Muslim World: A Journal Devoted To The Study Of Islam And Christian-Muslim Relations* 98.iv (2008): p. 467.

Chapter One

Familiarization and Rapprochement Tactics

As a small minority, Shi'ites are looked upon as outsiders. It is difficult for a fringe group to gain the trust of those who perceive them to be a strange and mysterious sect at best and dangerous at worst. The initial objective of sites that employ tactics of familiarization and rapprochement - or, as we shall see, erstwhile rapprochement - is to reintroduce the members of the Prophet's household to Sunnis using their own most familiar sources, the Quran and hadith. After certain propositions are established on the basis of these texts, the doctrine of Imamate is introduced as a necessary corollary and completion of the Prophetic mission. Finally, a key Shi'ite technique in familiarizing a potential Sunni audience with Shi'ism is to alienate Wahhabism from mainstream Sunnis. By doing this, Shi'ite polemicists aim both to discredit their greatest foes and identify a common enemy that might create a sense of comradeship between themselves and non-Wahhabi Sunnis.

i) The Quranic View of Ahl al-Bayt

The Quran is, evidently, a very important text in the Islamic tradition. Debates between Sunnis and Shi'ites cover a variety of topics, but the immutability, finality, and inexorability of Quranic evidence is too important to disregard. Naturally, then, Shi'ite polemicists attempt to substantiate their beliefs by demonstrating that they accurately reflect or at least are commensurate with Quranic dicta. Shi'ite contributors to the web accomplish this in various ways, and many websites are entirely based on the Quran and Quranic exegesis.²⁰ Shi'ite sites often concentrate on the Quran because, unlike Shi'ite hadiths and sectarian history, it is

²⁰ See, for example <http://quran.al-shia.org/en/index.htm>

considered authentic by Sunnis and thus provides an accepted starting point. Sunnis do not need to take this approach since they are confident of their ground in hadiths and other literature; and their aim, in any case, is to attack rather than attract and convince.

Shi'ite use of the Quranic treatment of prophets provides an example. The Quran relates a wide variety of stories describing past Prophets. Several of these stories mention the death of a Prophet, succeeded, normally, by another. The Shi'ite interpretation of prophetic succession pays special attention to the role of family, accentuating inheritance by family members through birthright or primogeniture. The case of David and his son Solomon is cited,²¹ as well as Zachariah and his son John,²² and Moses and his brother Aaron.²³ In the case of Moses, Shi'ites note that Aaron's appointment was made neither by Moses nor through popular election. Rather, Moses needed to beseech God for Aaron's appointment, an indication that leadership is divinely ordained and not to be left to politics. Shi'ite internet authors then build on this material by asserting that Ali is mentioned in the Quran as the political and spiritual successor of Muhammad. They point, for instance, to what they call the verse of Wilaya (allegiance): "Your ally is none but Allah and [therefore] His Messenger and those who have believed - those who establish prayer and give *zakāh*, and they bow [in worship]."²⁴ Ostensibly, Ali was the only man to ever give money in charity while simultaneously bowing in worship. Shi'ite websites explain that this event has been so well documented that the narrations have attained a *tawatur* level, that is the level of being transmitted through multiple sound paths of narration within Shi'ite tradition. Furthermore, they add that well respected Sunni scholars document it as well.²⁵

²¹ Quran 27:16 http://www.shiachat.com/forum/index.php?/topic/234983137-can-we-forget-about-the-past/page__st_25

²² Quran 19:5-6

²³ Quran 20:29-30

²⁴ Quran 5:55

²⁵ <http://www.shiaanswers.net/?p=543>

Nevertheless, what is referred to, evidently, is a particular Shi'ite exegesis referring to a hidden dimension of the Quran, so one finally doubts that this would be very convincing to Sunnis who tend in our time to think of the meaning of the Quran as being literal and evident. This, however, does not seem to deter Shi'ites posting such material on the web.

Shi'ite apologists such as Hassanain Rajabali, an English-speaking non-clerical Shi'ite lecturer who is very active on the web and one of the few figures engaged in polemic who is not anonymous, places a great deal of emphasis on the topic of family and discusses it at length. For Rajabali and others, succession is wedded to family; sometimes the two subjects are discussed interchangeably, apparently in order to suggest Sunni carelessness in not assigning enough importance to the institution of the family. Rajabali also refers to the *fada'il* (virtues or excellences) of *ahl al-bayt*, a genre of literature that underlines Shi'ite reverence for the House of the Prophet. Activists like Rajabali use this literature to suggest that *ahl al-bayt* are qualitatively more than mere *Sahaba* (the Companions of the Prophet revered by Sunnis); the aim seems to be to plant the question in the minds of Sunni readers: "How could we have not seen these points in our own books? Why don't our scholars promote the truths that the Shi'ites show us? Do they have something to hide? If *ahl al-bayt* enjoy pride of place according to statements by the Prophet found in our own books, is it possible that that Shi'ite reverence for them is proper and correct?"²⁶

Shi'ite sites also seem to suggest that Sunnis do not appropriately emphasize the tragic death of Husayn as a martyr for Islam, while the *Sahaba*, who were not related to the Prophet and did not suffer such a death, are venerated.²⁷ The technique in general is to begin from a common

²⁶ For instance, *Najh al-Balagha* is a collection of sermons, letters, and sayings of Ali ibn Abi Talib that are relatively unknown to Sunnis. The entire text is available online: <http://www.al-islam.org/nahjul/index.htm>

²⁷ http://truemuslim.9.forumer.com/a/so-who-killed-imam-hussain-as_post475.html

source, that is the Quran, and gradually introduce logical arguments for Shi'ite doctrine, fortified by reference to Sunni texts that seem to confirm those arguments.

We will treat the topic of Husayn's martyrdom toward the end of this chapter. For now, using the site maintained in the name of Rajabali, we will continue with the importance of family and blood relation, an emphasis typical of Shi'ite sites in general and often based on the Quran. Verse 33:33 constitutes an important piece of evidence for Shi'ites, and also presents a challenge:

And abide in your houses and do not display yourselves as [was] the display of the former times of ignorance. And establish prayer and give *zakāh* and obey Allah and His Messenger. Allah intends only to remove from you the impurity [of sin], O people of the [Prophet's] household, and to purify you with [extensive] purification.

At first glance, this verse appears to exclusively address women. One then naturally asks: how do Shi'ites understand this verse to refer to Ali, Fatima, Hasan and Husayn rather than the wives of the Prophet? Are the wives part of his family as well? Shi'ite apologists aiming to convince a popular Sunni audience through the internet continue to insist, as in the traditional exegesis, that those purified are the Family of the Prophet and none other, even though this essentially esoteric interpretation is unlikely to seem evident and reasonable to non-Shi'ites. Here we see an example of a common phenomenon in the Shi'ite sites: they begin by making veiled references to Shi'ite doctrines and relying on reasoned arguments (e.g. the proposition that Prophets passed on authority to their descendants or relatives in the past and that family is naturally important), but quickly jump to pure dogmatics.

On forums such as the apparently very popular www.shiachat.com, the issue of the Prophet's family is addressed prismatically from several angles.²⁸ Verse 33:33 of the Quran, just discussed, is often featured, but sometimes also with additional arguments aimed at

²⁸ <http://www.shiachat.com/forum/index.php/?/topic/234984713-wives-of-the-prophet/>

convincing readers that the persons referred to as being purified are the Prophet's family, and not the wives of the Prophet who appear to be the subject of the first part of the passage. It may be argued, for instance, that the Quran clarifies the status of the wives of the Prophet elsewhere. Two of the Prophet's wives (Aisha and Hafsa) are said to have been admonished in Quran 66:10²⁹ for an incident in which their jealousy caused them to orchestrate a deceptive ruse. Shi'ites adduce this event as evidence that the Quran did not intend to include the Prophet's wives in the Verse of Purification, since they are seen in the incident supposedly referred to in 66:10 as not entirely pure.³⁰ Two Sunni narrations from the wives of Muhammad, Aisha³¹ and Umm Salama,³² are also often cited (typically, as illustrated in the notes below, with the entire text and references to Sunni sources in order to lay the "full proof" before readers). Both narrations refer to the incident of the cloak (Hadith al-Kisa), also known as the episode of Mubahala (mutual imprecation), as a consequence of which Ali, Fatima, Hasan and Husayn acquired the honorific "people of the cloak" (Ahl al-Kisa). The Quran³³ mentions this episode (although, of course, without actually naming the members of the Family), thereby heightening

²⁹ "Allah presents an example of those who disbelieved: the wife of Noah and the wife of Lot. They were under two of our righteous servants but betrayed them, so those prophets did not avail them from Allah at all, and it was said, "Enter the Fire with those who enter."

³⁰ <http://www26.brinkster.com/sdolshah1/arii.html>

³¹ Narrated Aisha: "One afternoon the Prophet came out wearing a black cloak (upper garment or gown; long coat), then al-Hasan Ibn Ali came and the Prophet accommodated him under the cloak, then al-Husain came and entered the cloak, then Fatimah came and the Prophet entered her under the cloak, then Ali came and the Prophet entered him to the cloak as well. Then the Prophet recited: "Verily Allah intends to keep off from you every kind of uncleanness O' People of the House (Ahlul-Bayt), and purify you a perfect purification (the last sentence of Verse 33:33)." *Sahih Muslim, Section of the virtues of the Ahlul-Bayt of the Prophet, 1980 Edition, Arabic version, v4, p1883, #61.* Shi'ite website reference: <http://www.shiacrescent.com/2009/07/23/rebuttal-to-osama-abdullah%E2%80%99s-article-on-surah-3333-revised-edition/>

³² Narrated Umar Ibn Abi Salama, the son of Umm Salama (another wife of the Prophet): The verse "Verily Allah intends to ... (33:33)" was revealed to the Prophet (PBUH&HF) in the house of Umm Salama. Upon that, the Prophet gathered Fatimah, al-Hasan, and al-Husain, and covered them with a cloak, and he also covered Ali who was behind him. Then the Prophet said: "O' Allah! These are the Members of my House (Ahlul-Bayt). Keep them away from every impurity and purify them with a perfect purification." Umm Salama (the wife of the Prophet) asked: "Am I also included among them O Apostle of Allah?" the Prophet replied: "You remain in your position and you are toward a good ending." *Sahih al-Tirmidhi, v5, pp 351,663.* Shi'ite website reference: <http://remorsecode.tumblr.com/post/16497897513/the-ahlul-bayt-include-the-wives-of-the-prophet>

³³ Quran 3:61

its significance. Thus a purely Shi'ite interpretation, supported by additional material from the Quran, is joined with Sunni material which - so the authors apparently hope - serves to reinforce or legitimize it.

Some Sunnis may find these interpretations objectionable and, since they refer, as is common in Shi'ite exegesis, to "hidden" meaning, consider them purely conjectural. Anticipating this objection, Shi'ite internet activists guide readers to a verse of the Quran that points to the possibility of open-ended or multivalent exegesis, that is 3:7, which affirms that the Book comprises both verses that are precise (muhkamat) and ambiguous or unspecific (mutashabihat).³⁴ Shi'ites also proclaim that they anchor their comprehension of the Quran in the exegesis of the infallible family of the Prophet; their interpretation is thus (supposedly) fool-proof, despite its esoteric nature. Sunni tradition, in contrast, relies on a radical democracy of independent ulama and is thus conducted by men who admittedly falter; this is what the Shi'ite statement ultimately implies. Shi'ites champion the Imamate as a sort of spiritual surety, vouchsafing correct interpretation through all time. Sunnis, in contrast, have no Imam to consistently pilot them through the challenges of shifting circumstance. Shi'ite internet activists thus effectively conclude: Considering that the Quran was revealed in 7th-century Arabia, how can its interpretation and axial legal verses be steadily applied in the different contexts of different lands and centuries without an infallible Imam? The implication – stated explicitly on some sites and left unsaid on others – is that reliance on the divergent views of the Companions, whose only qualification is that they were contemporaneous with the Prophet, results in tampering with the perfection of God's guidance.³⁵

³⁴ Note that the Quran itself does not indicate which verses are precise or ambiguous; these categories are imposed by the exegetes and there is wide disagreement on which passages belong to each.

³⁵ See for example: <http://ahlubait.wordpress.com/2010/02/06/whom-to-follow/> ;

The aim of this and other arguments related above seems to be to raise doubts by working slowly on the mind of the reader. The rhetoric is typically not, in contrast to most Sunni sites, strident or otherwise very highly colored, even though the World Wide Web invites that kind of language and approach. Shi'ite postings on the web seem to exhibit more awareness of a non-insider audience and thus are, in general, more measured and cautious.

Once Sunni readers are provided enough reason (in the Shi'ite view) to doubt their beliefs, a solution is tendered; the technique is to set up a problem and then offer an answer. This approach may seem naïve, but the Shi'ite perspective on ahl al-bayt is somewhat plausible for Sunnis owing to the praise Sunnis themselves bestow on the same personalities. Further on in the chapter, we will examine some Shi'ite methods of reintroducing Sunnis to the Prophetic Household. Here we will consider a very common tactic of Shi'ite activists: utilizing Sunni hadiths that seem to confirm their views. The Sunni hadiths commandeered by Shi'ite sites are usually, it should be noted, quite explicit in their attention to revered Shi'ite figures; there is no need here to assert a hidden or non-evident meaning. The use of Sunni hadiths seeming to point to Shi'ite beliefs is also relatively effective because of the great value Sunnis place on the sayings of the Prophet. It is to the very common strategy of co-opting Sunni hadith into Shi'ite taqrib discourse that we now turn.

ii) Hadith View of Ahl al-Bayt

Having exploited Quranic evidence, hadiths are advanced as the second most authoritative texts in the Islamic canon. Citation of hadiths has great appeal for a certain Sunni mentality, especially that of the more conservative kind, which is immersed in hadiths and the

<http://www.al-islam.org/encyclopedia/chapter1b/5.html> and
<http://www.answering-ansar.org/answers/imamate/en/chap11.php>

science of hadith transmission, collection and authentication. The hadiths and their authenticity are the object of great and often minute attention by such Sunnis, including the discipline of ‘ilm al-rijal, that is intimate knowledge of the biography and credentials of the hadith transmitters. Although websites, due to the nature of the medium, tend to present abbreviated material, lengthy detailed hadith texts, including the names of various transmitters, are preserved, as can be seen in the material reproduced in many of the footnotes in this thesis. Few Shi’ite web activists fail to draw on Sunni hadith.

The Shi’ite activist here is chiefly interested in substantiating Shi’ite beliefs through the canonical Sunni hadith compilations, principally the six books of al-Bukhari (d.870), Muslim (d. 874/5), Abu Dawud (d. 888), Al-Nasa’i (d. 915), Al-Tirmidhi (d. 892), and Ibn Majah (d. 896). The first two are the most authoritative for Sunnis. A foray into the hadith collections is no trifling task, and Shi’ite activists are faced with providing enough material to convince without becoming tangled in details that might seem obscure. It is, at the same time, useful to demonstrate that Shi’ite scholars know the Sunni books, perhaps even better than Sunnis themselves; this serves not only to draw Sunnis in, but also, perhaps, to reassure members of the Shi’ite audience in need of self-validation that they are not so different from the “orthodox” Sunni majority. Here again we see the complex relation of polemics, especially on the web where material is universally accessible to all audiences. The intended or actual audience often consists of both outsiders and insiders, two groups with very different perspectives. In this case, citation of hadith has the merit of (potentially) reaching both. Adducing of Sunni hadith material is most often aimed at highlighting the revered figures of Shi’ism, a subject for which abundant material is available due to Sunni regard for many of the same figures.

iii) Virtues of Ali

Sunni tradition depicts the Companions of the Prophet as being like one large, multi-faceted, multi-racial family, divergent in disposition and temperament yet united by shared faith, piety, asceticism, and sense of duty and mission. They may even fight to the point that an outsider would mistake them for enemies; but their common faith ultimately prevails. While the Sunni tradition concentrates on the Companions, the Shi'ite tradition narrows the scope and invests the spiritual capital and authority of the first generation almost entirely in Ali. Certainly the entire family of the Prophet enjoy, in the Shi'ite view, 'infallibility', but since the women of the hallowed house could not play major public social roles and the Prophet's grandsons were very young, it is Ali's character that most shines forth.

Although Sunnis can draw on a larger group of heroes from the formative period of the Prophetic generation than Shi'ites, what the latter lacks in numbers, they compensate for in Ali. His dazzling and charismatic personality encompasses each quality and attribute a devoted follower might emulate. Paragon, exemplar, and epitome, Ali is the incarnation of religious perfection, a figure of cosmic significance reminiscent of mythologist Joseph Campbell's "hero of a thousand faces". For this reason, exuberant depiction of Ali and his virtues is a staple of Shi'ite websites.³⁶

An important element of the Shi'ite rapprochement method much used in websites oriented towards taqrib is to list the virtues of Ali from Sunni sources.³⁷ This approach seems to be based on the perception that no Sunni can deny the veracity of Shi'ite claims concerning Ali while he holds a very special place in Sunni religious history and the evidence is harvested from authoritative and legitimate Sunni sources. Several websites sport striking headings such as,

³⁶ For a website entirely devoted to Ali, see <http://www.abuturab.org/>

³⁷ See for example <http://www.loveforahlulbayt.com/>

“Ten proofs of his superiority from authentic Sunni sources”³⁸ or “The Virtues of Ameerul Momineen Ali ibn Abi Taalib (a.s.) as Mentioned in Shia and Sunni Exegesis.”³⁹ These treatments tend to highlight certain episodes already accepted by Sunnis such as Ali’s early acceptance of Islam, his bravery in sleeping in the Prophet’s bed so as to thwart an assassination plot, his appointment as the Prophet’s scribe, and his marriage to the Prophet’s favorite daughter, Fatima.

The early days of Islam when the Messenger first received revelation are also commonly referred to. The first command to proselytize is known as The Verse of Warning. It reads: “And warn your nearest relatives.”⁴⁰ Exegesis recording the context in which this verse was revealed has often highlighted Ali; this includes the account in the 10th history Tarikh al-Tabari which is regarded by Sunnis as authoritative. Tabari’s account reads as follows:

The Messenger of Allah was ordered by the Almighty to invite his relatives towards Islam. He summoned his relations and said, "Whoever among you agrees to cooperate with me in this matter will be my brother, my successor and my vicegerent." Everyone remained silent but Ali stood up and said, "I will help you O Messenger of Allah." The Messenger of Allah said pointing towards Ali, "This is my brother, and my Successor and my Caliph among you. So listen to him and obey him." The people stood up and in jest said to Abu Tālib, "You have been ordered to listen to and obey your son".⁴¹

A similar episode highlighting Ali that is also widely accepted by Sunnis concerns Ali being made the “brother” (i.e. in faith) of Muhammad despite their already close family ties. In this narration, Ali comes to the Prophet in tears, crying: “O Apostle of God! You have made

³⁸ <http://www.scribd.com/doc/12593680/Ten-Proofs-for-the-Superiority-of-IMAM-ALIas>

³⁹ <http://www.seratonline.com/2010/11/11/5/the-virtues-of-ameerul-momineen-ali-ibn-abi-taalib-as-as-mentioned-in-shia-and-sunni-exegesis/>

⁴⁰ Quran 26:214

⁴¹ http://www.oneummah.net/understand/imamat_or_khilafat.htm

brethren among your companions but you have not made anyone my brother.’ And the Apostle of God said to him: ‘You are my brother in this world and the next.’⁴²

Ali’s courage in battle is also featured in the catalogue of his virtues, especially since it serves to display his leadership abilities, crucial to the Shi’ite assertion that he was the rightful successor of the Prophet. The first such instance was the battle of Badr, a day of enduring historical import. It was on that day that Ali distinguished himself along with the Prophet’s uncle Hamza by defeating the Quraysh, despite overwhelming odds. In the accounts of many Shi’ite historians, Ali’s duels in this and other battles have a hagiographic quality, reminiscent of the encounter of David and Goliath, and websites often feature this compelling narrative material.

The battle of Khaybar is one such episode. The following account of Khaybar quoted on a Shi’ite site is actually taken from the hadith collection of Bukhari revered by Sunnis:

Narrated Sahl bin Sad: On the day of Khaibar, Allah's Apostle said, "Tomorrow I will give this flag to a man through whose hands Allah will give us victory. He loves Allah and His Apostle, and he is loved by Allah and His Apostle." The people remained that night, wondering as to who would be given it. In the morning the people went to Allah's Apostle and everyone of them was hopeful to receive it (i.e. the flag). The Prophet said, "Where is Ali bin Abi Tālib?" It was said, "He is suffering from eye trouble O Allah's Apostle." He said, "Send for him." 'Ali was brought and Allah's Apostle spat in his eye and invoked good upon him. So 'Ali was cured as if he never had any trouble. Then the Prophet gave him the flag. 'Ali said "O Allah's Apostle! I will fight with them till they become like us." Allah's Apostle said, "Proceed and do not hurry. When you enter their territory, call them to embrace Islam and inform them of Allah's Rights which they should observe, for by Allah, even if a single man is led on the right path (of Islam) by Allah through you, then that will be better for you than the nice red camels."⁴³

The Khaybar episode has the additional advantage of placing Ali in a privileged position above the first two Caliphs, Abu Bakr and Umar. Some narrations specifically mention that Umar was never more envious of a position of leadership than on that day. This plays nicely into

⁴² http://www.answering-ansar.org/answers/imamate/Tarikh_Khulfa_p177.jpg is careful to precisely cite a Sunni source as follows: *Tareekh ul Khulafa by Suyuti, page 177.*

⁴³ *Sahih Bukhari, Volume 5, Book 59, Hadith Number 521* <http://www.al-masumeen.com/films/the-battle-of-khaybar>

the Shi'ite narrative because it seems to suggest a motive for Umar and Abu Bakr's usurpation (in the Shi'ite view) of Ali's leadership. Shi'ite apologists on the web emphasize the Companions' inability or failure to rise to the challenge, while emphasizing Ali's miraculous healing as an instance of divine intervention. The event of Khaybar looms large in the Shi'ite imagination – for instance, a movie has recently been produced in Persian, entitled *The Battle of Khaybar – The Victory of Ali* and this “visual aid” or clips from it also appear on a website,⁴⁴ a striking instance of the capacity of the web to appeal to a popular audience and heighten sectarian feelings by drawing on various media. This particular movie does not show the face of either Muhammad or Ali, but it does capture fight scenes where Ali's back can be seen as he either reasons with his enemies or brandishes his famous sword, Zulfiqar, to heroically attack after negotiations prove futile. One can imagine surfers on the web being drawn in by clips from the film before or perhaps even without referring to the accompanying text.

The expedition to Tabuk is also featured on the web as a tradition shared by Sunni and Shi'ite sources that demonstrate Ali's leadership skills. Tabuk represents an instance in which Muhammad needed to assign Medina a representative during his absence. In the authoritative Sunni hadith compilation by Imam Bukhari, the hadith, duly reproduced in a Shi'ite website, reads as follows: Allah's Apostle set out for (the Battle of) Tabuk, appointing Ali as his deputy (in Medina). Ali said, 'Do you want to leave me with the children and women?' The Prophet said, 'Will you not be pleased that you will be to me like Harun to Musa? But there will be no prophet after me.'⁴⁵

⁴⁴ <http://www.al-masumeen.com/films/the-battle-of-khaybar>

⁴⁵ *Sahih al-Bukhari, Volume 5, Book 59, Number 700* (from the web page cited in the previous note).
http://www.answering-ansar.org/answers/hadith_manzila/en/chap3.php

The final statement, "...like Aaron to Moses", is an important focus of Shi'ite doctrine. That Aaron was divinely inspired is understood by Shi'ites to presage the status of Ali. At the same time, the final statement, "but there will be no prophet after me" indicates that Ali is no Prophet. Sunnis and Shi'ites do not dispute that, and the phrase may in fact reassure Sunnis. It is, however, also the case that it effectively elevates Ali above the station of the Companions or Sahaba and places him in a unique category as an Imam; Ali's position as a 'divinely' appointed leader is as close to that of a Prophet as one can get. Thus apparently acceptable material finally has, if one looks at it from the Shi'ite point of view, a great deal of sectarian meaning. One wonders whether non-Shi'ites coming across such material immediately realize this or not.

The oft-cited narration also found in the canonical Sunni hadith compilation of al-Tirmidhi, "I am the City of Knowledge and Ali is its Gate", is fielded by www.al-islam.org. This very elaborate site, not entirely devoted to Shi'ite-Sunni controversy but still containing a great deal of "rapprochement" material, dedicates a lengthy treatise to the City of Knowledge narration, locating it again in numerous Sunni books.⁴⁶ The purpose seems to be not only to establish the authenticity of the narration, but to demonstrate, based on the quantity of chains of transmission, that it has attained the level of tawatur. Within the discipline of hadith, only a precious few narrations can claim this status. By raising its status to an almost indubitable level of authenticity, the audience (so the web author may hope) is forced to consider its importance and implication for their approach to Islamic knowledge.

iv) Virtues of Fatima

⁴⁶ <http://www.al-islam.org/tahrif/cityofknowledge/index.htm>

Shi'ite websites spare no efforts to remind their Sunni audience of the favored status of Fatima in Islam. Abdolali Al-Khaweladi⁴⁷ authored a compilation entitled *Forty sayings of Prophet (s) about Hazrat Fatima (a)*. This article has been copied, pasted, and disseminated on a wide spectrum of Shi'ite websites.⁴⁸ Several of the sites maintain that each of the narrations is found in Sunni sources – as we have seen, an important point for Shi'ites. That both Sunnis and Shi'ites agree on the elevated status of Fatima, calling her "Mistress of all the ladies of Paradise",⁴⁹ may be enough to initially persuade a Sunni audience. This fact, coupled with quotation of the hadith, also found in the Sunni canon, "Fatima is a part of me, and whoever makes her angry, makes me angry",⁵⁰ is aimed at convincing a Sunni audience that more attention should be paid to this daughter of the Prophet. However, just as in the case of Ali, Shi'ite piety concerning Fatima is far more elaborate than that suggested in the narrations found in Sunni sources, and a surfer of the web willing to search a bit more will soon come across examples - for instance, in the case of Fatima, a listing of her various epithets and meanings of

⁴⁷ The identity of this figure could not be determined. Even web authors who are named often remain effectively anonymous.

⁴⁸ 1. [http://www.jafariyaneews.com/articles/2k3/25jan_fatima\(sa\).htm](http://www.jafariyaneews.com/articles/2k3/25jan_fatima(sa).htm)
2. <http://answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20110116134945AA4vJdu>
3. http://www.sibtayn.com/en/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1704&Itemid=268
4. <http://www.imamreza.net/eng/imamreza.php?id=335>

Other examples could be given, perhaps into the hundreds.

⁴⁹ Narrated 'Aisha: *Once Fatima came walking and her gait resembled the gait of the Prophet. The Prophet said, "Welcome, O my daughter!" Then he made her sit on his right or on his left side, and then he told her a secret and she started weeping. I asked her, "Why are you weeping?" He again told her a secret and she started laughing. I said, "I never saw happiness so near to sadness as I saw today." I asked her what the Prophet had told her. She said, "I would never disclose the secret of Allah's Apostle." When the Prophet died, I asked her about it. She replied: "The Prophet said, 'Every year Gabriel used to revise the Qur'an with me once only, but this year he has done so twice. I think this portends my death, and you will be the first of my family to follow me.' So I started weeping. Then he said. 'Don't you like to be the mistress of all the ladies of Paradise or the mistress of all the lady believers? So I laughed for that.' Sahih Bukhari: Volume 4, Book 56, Number 819.* Shi'ite website reference: <http://umar-ibn-khattab.blogspot.ca/2012/03/status-of-fatema-zehrasa-and-umar.html>

⁵⁰ Sahih Bukhari: Volume 5, Book 57, Number 111: <http://www.shiacrescent.com/2010/03/09/the-status-of-fatima-in-islam/>

those epithets that make her a cosmic, Imam-like or Mary-like figure.⁵¹ Respect for Fatima is also used to argue for the precedence of Ali over Abu Bakr and Umar. It is said that both Abu Bakr and Umar proposed marriage to Fatima, but the Prophet rejected them both; whereas Ali was given her hand even without active courtship or even a proposal. Shi'ites use this point to suggest the inferiority of Abu Bakr and Umar and decisively establish Ali's superiority.⁵²

Several websites, such as <http://www.yafatima.org/>, are devoted entirely to Fatima. These sites seem to be designed primarily to strengthen the religious resolve of the Shi'ite community and provide them with material to defend their beliefs; although, as I have noted, the easy accessibility of the web makes it possible or likely that Sunni surfers will come across material that certainly exceeds their basic respect for the revered figures of Shi'ism. For instance, Fatima's bond with the Prophet in the Shi'ite telling extends far beyond a father-daughter blood relation, since she is believed to represent an emanation from the same divine light that comprises the essence of the Prophet.⁵³

Finally, Fatima in particular is a delicate subject because Shi'ites contend that she was persecuted by figures revered by Sunnis. A particularly emotional presentation of this theme is seen in a YouTube lecture entitled *Fatima Az-Zahra (AS) Martyrdom*.⁵⁴ This lecture, presented by an apparently American-born preacher, relates the supposed death of Fatima at the hands of Umar in highly colored language and directly attacks Sunnis who might deny these events and

⁵¹ http://www.shiatc.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1203%3Athe-glorious-names-of-hazrat-fatima-az-zahra-pbuh&catid=103%3Ahazrat-zahra-as&Itemid=392&lang=en; for more on the names of Fatimah, see Barnaby Rogerson, *The Heirs of the Prophet Muhammad and the Roots of the Sunni-Shia Schism*; (London: Little, Brown, 2006), 42-43. For more material on the names of Fatimah, see:

http://www.shiatc.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1203%3Athe-glorious-names-of-hazrat-fatima-az-zahra-pbuh&catid=103%3Ahazrat-zahra-as&Itemid=392&lang=en

⁵² E.g. <http://www.shiachat.com/forum/index.php?/topic/45016-abu-bakrs-umars-proposal-to-marry-fatima-ra/>

⁵³ http://www.shiatc.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1134%3Ahazrat-fatima-saw&catid=85%3Aiceslider-carouselslide-&Itemid=392&lang=en

⁵⁴ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CwJtPo7VHVk>

“pretend” to venerate Fatima just the same. The lecture may have been meant for the Shi’ite audience of the “Masjid Ahl al-Bait” the banner of which can be seen behind the speaker, but the site can, of course, be accessed by anyone. The Fatima controversy and this particular video are striking exceptions to the careful, rapprochement-oriented approach of most Shi’ite sites.

v) Establishing the Doctrine of the Imamate

Shi’ite sites also take a hadith-based approach to establishing the imamate, a most central doctrine of Shi’ism. The narrations most frequently deployed are those concerning the event of Ghadir Khumm. This event, in which the Prophet is said to have openly designated Ali his successor in the presence of all the community, is so central to Shi’ite sectarian history that entire books,⁵⁵ special sermons, a holiday, and, of course, websites honor its memory. On <http://www.al-islam.org/ghadir/>, one finds an introductory caption with the following information regarding the website:

It currently consists of narrations involving 76 Companions, 69 Successors, and 626 Scholars in the chains of transmission, recorded in 182 Sunni books. In addition, there is Arabic text for 387 narrations, English translations for 78 narrations and scanned pages from 54 books. 280 quotations on the reliability of narrators are available in Arabic and 324 in English.

Note here, apart from the typical emphasis on Sunni sources, the amassing of documents and information. This is not usually associated with the web as a popular medium; this particular site seems to aim at a “scholarly” presentation.

There are several variations of the hadith of Ghadir found in both Sunni and Shi’ite sources. Essentially, they recount an important event that took place after the final farewell pilgrimage of the Prophet Muhammad. After the pilgrims' departure from Makkah, the caravans heading north gathered at the location of Ghadir Khumm, and the Prophet addressed the

⁵⁵ Available in cyberspace through <http://www.momin.com/Books/Ghadir-34.html>

congregation. The Shi'ite narrative includes the exegesis of the verse 5:67, which according to their beliefs was specifically revealed for this occasion. The verse reads as follows: "O Messenger, announce that which has been revealed to you from your Lord, and if you do not, then you have not conveyed His message. And Allah will protect you from the people. Indeed, Allah does not guide the disbelieving people." This makes for a compelling argument given the verse's emphatic language. It is said that after the Prophet received these words, he proceeded to deliver a sermon which began (again, according to Sunni sources) with the question:

"Do I not have more authority on the believers than they have over themselves? They replied, "Yes, O, Messenger of Allah (s.a.w.s.)." The Holy Prophet (s.a.w.s.) raised the hands of Ali (a.s.) and said, "Of whomsoever I am the *mawla*, this Ali is his *mawla* too. And of whomsoever I am the guardian; this Ali is his guardian too. O, Allah! Love those who love him and be inimical to one who is inimical to him."⁵⁶

The event of Ghadir happened on the return journey from the Hajjat al-Wada (Farewell Pilgrimage of the Messenger); in this final Hajj, the Prophet delivered an important speech known as Khutbat al-Wada (the Final Sermon). Though Shi'ites and Sunnis agree that an event involving Ali took place at Ghadir Khumm, its meaning is a hotly debated issue, especially since there are several variations in the wording in different accounts. Shi'ite websites widely circulate and promote the following version, called by them the narration of the Two Weighty Matters (Hadith al-Thaqalayn):

It seems the time approaches when I'll be called away (by Allah) and I shall answer that call. I am leaving for you two precious things and if you adhere to them both, you will never go astray after me. They are the Book of Allah and my progeny, that is my *Ahl al-Bayt*. The two shall never separate until they come to me by the Pool (of Paradise).⁵⁷

In some narrations, including those, as can be seen from the note below, in Sunni sources, the oft-maligned Umar, eventually to be second Caliph, congratulates Ali: "Congratulations, O son

⁵⁶ *Sahih Tirmidhi Vol. 2 Pg. 298*. Shi'ite website reference: <http://www.alqaem.org/maula.html>

⁵⁷ <http://www.al-islam.org/ghadir/incident.htm>

of Abu Tālib! Now morning and evening you are the master of every believing man and woman.”⁵⁸

This event is said to have taken place near the end of the life of the Prophet, which contributes to the argument that the Prophet was aware that he would soon depart from this world and was preparing his followers for that moment. The Shi’ite claim is that certain of the Companions whom they vilify understood all this and knew full well that the Prophet desired Ali to succeed him. Nevertheless, they consciously ignored the Prophet’s orders and usurped that authority for themselves. The final days of the Prophet’s life are a constant source of dispute for both Sunnis and Shi’ites, and most traditional Shi’ite historians will identify the death of the Prophet as the beginning point of the Sunni-Shi’ite schism.

The schism began, according to both Shi’ite and Sunni history, with the incident known as Saqifa, that is the “Portico” of a certain tribe where the debate over succession took place. The Prophet Muhammad passed away and his family members, including Ali and Abbas, attended to his body and the funeral rites and procession.⁵⁹ At the same time, several of the prominent Sahaba, including Abu Bakr, Umar and Abu Ubayda, were busy engaging in discussion over matters of leadership. The Shi’ites utilize hadiths found in Bukhari to support their contention that Ali knew his rights were being systematically stripped from him. The narration of Ibn Abbas is most effective, first because it is from Bukhari and therefore cannot be

⁵⁸ *Al-Tirmidhi: Hadith 6094 Narrated by: Al-Bara' ibn Azib and Zayd ibn Arqam*
<http://www.ummah.net/khoei/imamate.htm>

⁵⁹ "(The body of the) Apostle of Allah, may Allah bless him, remained on the bier from Monday when the sun was declining, till Tuesday when the sun was declining. The people said funeral prayers over him when the body was on the bier close to (the site of) his grave. When they wanted to bury him, they moved it towards the site of his feet and then the body was placed inside and Al-Abbas Ibn Aal Muttalib, al Al Fadl Ibn Al Abbas, Qutham Al Abbas, 'Ali ibn Abi Talib and Shuqran having entered the grave". From the Shi’ite website <http://www.answering-ansar.org/answers/saqifa/en/chap7.php>

denied, and secondly because it quotes Umar who, through his own words, confirms Ali's disapproval of their ascension to power. According to Bukhari, Umar admits:

One should not deceive oneself by saying that the Pledge of allegiance given to 'Abu Bakr was given suddenly and it was successful. No doubt, it was like that, but Allah saved (the people) from its evil⁶⁰

This narration, which also (as can be seen from the note above) appears in Sunni sources, is widely circulated on Shi'ite websites.⁶¹

Ali's purported disapproval of the election of Abu Bakr is emphasized through another narration in Bukhari delivered by none other than Aisha, who mentions that Ali had not given the oath of allegiance during those months (i.e. the period between the Prophet's death and Fatima's death).⁶² In instances such as these, we come to appreciate the great resources available to Shi'ites in Sunni literature. This particular narration, however, also raises the question: Why did Ali fail to object to Abu Bakr's leadership for such a long period of time? According to accounts preserved in the Sunni narratives, Ali remained silent for several months until he finally gave in and pledged his allegiance to Abu Bakr. Shi'ites explain this by characterizing Ali's silence and final acceptance as a self-sacrificial act necessary for the avoidance of civil war. It was Ali's burden to choose between unlawful leadership or bloody conflict, and he chose the lesser of two evils in order to protect Islam. In other words, Ali finally submitted not because he recognized Abu Bakr's rule as legitimate or out of cowardice, but due to coercion.⁶³ This view is in accord with an image in Shi'ism of Ali as facing many difficult trials and injustices both before and after his Caliphate; this picture even more than that of a warrior is the image that finally comes

⁶⁰ *Sahih al Bukhari, Arabic-English Volume 8 hadith number 817, page 540.* <http://www.answering-ansar.org/answers/imamate/en/chap14.php>

⁶¹ Two examples are: <http://www.imamreza.net/eng/imamreza.php?id=5401> and

http://www.alhassanain.com/english/book/book/beliefs_library/various_books/a_shiite_encyclopedia_chpater_4/005.html

⁶² *Sahih Bukhari Hadith Vol 5 Hadith no. 546.* Several Shi'ite websites present this ḥadīth as part of a series of twenty unanswerable questions for Sunnis: <http://www.answering-ansar.org/challenges/20questions/en/index.php>

⁶³ This is made explicit at: <http://imamshirazi.com/history.html>

through in web material. It is an image in tune with the way Shi'ites position themselves in general in inter-sectarian debate on the web. There is, in stark contrast to Sunni material, an appeal to sympathetic emotion and even pathos. The tone comes out most strongly in depiction of the martyrdom of Husayn, to which we will now turn.

vi) Martyrdom of Husayn

Shi'ite web material utilizes the tragedy of Karbala or 'Passion of Husayn' to soften the hearts of Sunnis. While Sunnis are likely to be familiar with the fact and perhaps also basic events of the martyrdom, the Shi'ite accounts contain many more details, embellishments, and emotion, which may – or so authors of Shi'ite web content apparently hope – serve to awaken the conscience of non-Shi'ites. Before proceeding, it is necessary to give the basic outlines of the martyrdom.

Husayn was the son of Ali and grandson of the Prophet. There are many quotations from the Prophet concerning the virtues of Husayn, and several Shi'ite websites provide compilations of these derived from Sunni books. Popular hadiths include, “Husain is from me and I am from Husain”, “He who loves al-Hassan and al-Husain, has loved me, and he who makes them angry has made me angry”, and “The Prophet (PBUH) looked toward Ali, Hassan, Husain, and Fatimah (AS), and then said: "I am at war with those who will fight you, and in peace with those who are peaceful to you."⁶⁴ Shi'ites depict the grandson of Muhammad as the reflection of the Prophet's personality, an existential continuation and affirmation of his message. The parallels between them extend, according to Shi'ites, even to physical resemblance, and they hold identical spiritual and political principles.

⁶⁴ See <http://www.almujtaba.com/en/index.php/left-menu-articles/41-imam-hussain/966-sunni-traditions-on-imam-hussain-as>. PBUH = “Peace be upon him”; AS = the Arabic phrase for “on him (or her) be peace”.

After the death of his brother Hasan, Husayn sought aid from the people of Iraq in hopes that they would support him in the overthrow of Yazid, the oppressive Umayyad caliph resident in Damascus. The people of Iraq confirmed that they would assist him in his cause, but news of his plans reached the government and his caravan was intercepted. Battle was joined on the tenth of Muharram, 61 A.H. (October 10, 680) in the desert near the town of Karbala. On one side was a military detachment from the Umayyad forces, while on the other stood Husayn and a small band of supporters and relatives who willingly gave their lives in resistance. Each year, this Battle is commemorated during a ten-day religious festival observed by Shi'ites (as well as some Sunnis), culminating on the fatal tenth day, known as Ashura.

While Sunnis revere the Prophet Muhammad who triumphed over the "Ignorance" of pre-Islamic Arabia, dedicating his life to God and to Truth, Shi'ites assert that they fail to grasp the role Husayn played in transmitting and vouchsafing that legacy and sacrifices made by the Prophet's family. It is evident from web material that Shi'ites consider this to be a conscious and deliberate blindness rather than innocent ignorance, and they emphasize their own virtue in recognizing the historical and cosmic significance of the martyrdom, as if they were somehow the conscience of the community. On this point, Shi'ite web material tends to be uncharacteristically unapologetic.⁶⁵

A few words about the tone of such material is in order. It tends to position the Shi'ite community as being persecuted for their righteousness, harassed and oppressed by the very people they intend to educate and 'save', that is their Sunni brethren. The Shi'ite thus appears to be a concerned, even affectionate confidant, undertaking what could be described as a 'sectarian

⁶⁵ The site titled *The Shia Are The Real Followers Of The Sunnah* is one prime example of Shi'ite propagandists declaring their superior position, as well as mastery over the Islamic source texts, Sunni and Shi'ite alike. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FzEh31M8Wd4>

intervention' to counsel Sunnis that the only way to treat the problem is to admit that there is a problem. This tone, although no doubt condescending, is completely different from the aggressive quality of most Sunni sites.

vii) Biblical Analogies

Shi'ites perceive in the death of Husayn a cosmic resonance, a conspicuous instance of evil prevailing over good. The butchering of Husayn and members of his family at the hands of Yazid's army is seen as the beginning of a cosmic rupture, to be mended only at the end of time.

For this reason, Shi'ite rapprochement is not limited to Sunnis alone. Shi'ite apologists attempt to both legitimize their tradition and, apparently, address adherents of the Judeo-Christian tradition through reference to Biblical narrations. For instance, both the Quran and the Bible recount the sacrifice God required of Abraham. Although the two books differ regarding which son of Abraham was to be slaughtered, they agree that Abraham's son was replaced with a ram. Shi'ite exegetes explain that God intended in this way both to demonstrate the devotion of His great Prophet and to compel humanity to sympathize with that Prophet. Since Abraham was finally spared the trial of sacrificing his son, the burden was passed on to Muhammad and Husayn.⁶⁶

The full text of a book dealing entirely with Biblical themes, *Husain: The Saviour of Islam*, by S.V. Mir Ahmed Ali, is available on the site www.rafed.net. It examines both Biblical and Qur'anic passages with the aim of establishing Husayn's unique role in history in a manner calculated to draw in both Muslim and non-Muslim audiences. Like much Shi'ite polemical

⁶⁶ "We ransomed him with a great sacrifice, the life of Ismael was spared and from his progeny came a man who was the ultimate sacrifice that the Quran refers to. That sacrifice was the one given by Imam Husain which was at the pinnacle of truth, righteousness, patience, courage and perseverance. Not only did he sacrifice his own life on the day of Ashura (which is the 10th day of the month of Muharram,) but that of his family and companions as well who accompanied him to Karbala." Quoted at: <http://www.madressa.net/plays/190-the-tale-of-two-sacrifices-pr-abraham-and-imam-husayn>

material, *Saviour* paints a poignant picture rather than directly engaging in polemics, apparently with the aim of arousing sympathy.⁶⁷

Many websites also find parallels between the twelve Imams and the number twelve in the Bible, Qur'an and Sunni hadith. Participants in Shi'ite chat sites, for instance,⁶⁸ are fond of quoting Genesis 17:20 as a foreshadowing of the Imamate: "And as for Ishmael, I have heard you: I will surely bless him; I will make him fruitful and will greatly increase his numbers. He will be the father of twelve rulers, and I will make him into a great nation." Reference is also made to the number twelve in the Quran, such as the mentions in chapters two and five⁶⁹ and a passage in the seventh chapter referring to twelve springs gushing from a rock struck by Moses symbolizing the twelve Israelite tribes.⁷⁰ Verse 161 following the account of Moses and the rock reads: "And [mention, O Muhammad], when it was said to them, 'Dwell in this city and eat from it wherever you will' and say, 'Relieve us of our burdens,' and enter the gate bowing humbly; We will [then] forgive you your sins. We will increase the doers of good [in goodness and reward]." This verse is thought to allude to the hadith, "I am the City of Knowledge, and Ali is its Gate. So whoever intends to enter the City and the Wisdom, he should enter from its Gate".⁷¹

⁶⁷ http://en.rafed.net/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&id=199&Itemid=965&layout=default (exact address).

⁶⁸ E.g. <http://www.shiachat.com/forum/index.php?/topic/234974550-12-princes-of-ishmael/>

⁶⁹ "And [recall] when Moses prayed for water for his people, so We said, 'Strike with your staff the stone.' And there gushed forth from it twelve springs, and every people knew its watering place. Eat and drink from the provision of Allah, and do not commit abuse on the earth, spreading corruption"; "And Allah had already taken a covenant from the Children of Israel, and We delegated from among them twelve leaders...."

⁷⁰ "And We divided them into twelve descendant tribes [as distinct] nations. And We inspired Moses when his people implored him for water, 'Strike with your staff the stone,' and there gushed forth from it twelve springs. Every people knew its watering place. And We shaded them with clouds and sent down upon them manna and quails, [saying], 'Eat from the good things with which We have provided you.' And they wronged Us not, but they were [only] wronging themselves" (7:160).

⁷¹ *al-Tirmidhi*, v5, pp 201,637. Shi'ite website reference: <http://www.al-islam.org/encyclopedia/chapter2/6.html>

Fortuitously (or perhaps because twelve is a sacred number in several religious traditions), a number of twelve leaders is also prominently mentioned in Sunni hadith collections, including four of the six canonical hadith books.⁷² This type of material is more likely to appeal to surfers of the web interested in “concrete evidence” rather than exotic speculation which, as we shall now see, is characteristic of the Shi’ite approach.

viii) Numerology and Secret Sciences

One advantage of being a minority is that one can present oneself as the holder of privileged, insider information. Human nature cannot resist being privy to secret information and enjoying membership in an exclusive group. As already suggested in the previous section, Shi’ite websites - and especially, it seems, chat sites where members may speculate freely and exchange “privileged” information – often use language suggestive of access to exclusive material, speaking, as it were, in somber and hushed tones as if alluding to meaning restricted to believers. While this approach may draw in some of the “uninitiated”, it appears to be primarily meant for insiders; this is likely why we find it principally on chat rather than websites.

Numerology as an approach to discovering religious truth has been popular throughout human history. Shi’ites suggest that references are made to the ahl al-bayt through the number Twelve. Thus, for instance, Shi’ite websites cite Quran 33:33: "Allah intends only to remove from you the impurity, O people of the [Prophet's] household, and to purify you with [extensive]

⁷² Narrated Jabir bin Samura: I heard Muhammad saying, "There will be twelve Muslim rulers." He then said a sentence which I did not hear. My father said, "All of them (those rulers) will be from Quraish." (Sahih Bukhari: 89.329).

Narrated Jabir bin Samura: I heard Muhammad saying, "The (Islamic) religion will continue until the Hour (day of resurrection), having twelve Caliphs for you, all of them will be from Quraysh." (Sahih Muslim : Book 020: Number 4477, 4478, 4480, 4481, 4482, 4483).

The Prophet said: "This religion remains standing until there are twelve vicegerents over you, all of them agreeable to the nation, all of them from Quraysh." (Sunan Abu Dawood : Book 36: Number 4266).

The Prophet said: "There will be after me twelve Amirs (Prince/Ruler), all of them from Quraysh." (Sunan al-Tirmidhi (Arabic) Chapter of Fitna, 2:45 (India) and 4:501 Tradition # 2225 (Egypt) Hadith #2149 (numbering of al-'Alamiyyah)) Shi’ite website reference: <http://www.chennaishiyouth.com/who-is-a-shia.html>

purification." An intriguing riddle follows. We are invited to add the number three four times to equal twelve, which Shi'ite activists do not consider to be mere coincidence but an unmistakable reference to the imams. This "insider" speculation is, again, most often found on chat rather than full websites.⁷³ Similarly, the ahl al-bayt are said to be referred to in a passage in the eleventh chapter of the Quran, called Hud, even though it does not refer to the Prophet Muhammad's family per se: "They said, 'Are you amazed at the decree of Allah? *May the mercy of Allah and His blessings be upon you, people of the house.* Indeed, He is Praiseworthy and Honorable.'" In this instance, the verse number, 11:73, is considered to be a code for the twelve Imams, since $1+1+7+3 = 12!$ That the verse makes clear reference to the family of Abraham by no means destroys the argument in the view of Shi'ites, since, after all, it never intended the apparent meaning. It is rather thought to connote the esoteric meaning with which only the privileged few are acquainted.

The presence of esoteric material of this kind on Shi'ite sites shows the limitations of the Shi'ite approach. With few exceptions, Shi'ite sites attempt to appeal to Sunnis (and also, no doubt, reassure Shi'ites of their own "orthodoxy") by adopting a subdued tone, featuring personalities and other material that might be somewhat acceptable to Sunnis, and copiously citing Sunni sources. It is, however, in the very nature of the web that it exposes less acceptable material, including the exotic, supposedly "hidden" speculation that is certainly a part of Shi'ism. The web is not a discreet medium. Thus efforts at a careful presentation and conciliation are easily undermined by other, less cautious voices with equal access, and those voices in turn are just as readily accessed by hostile audiences.

ix) Wahhabism

⁷³ For example, <http://www.shiachat.com/forum/index.php?/topic/234935980-surah-33-ayat-33/>

Finally, Shi'ite sites employ a technique that is captured in the proverb 'My enemy's enemy is my friend'. In this case, Wahhabis are targeted by Shi'ite activists not only because of Wahhabi anti-Shi'ism, but apparently in the hope of propitiating non-Wahhabi Sunnis, for instance Sufis, modernist/moderate Muslims, and so on.⁷⁴

On Shi'ite websites, there are evident efforts to isolate Sunni groups in order to build bridges with one while distancing the other. The topic of tawassul, that is intercession or appeal to a revered personality, is an example. Intercession – by the imams and sometimes others – is central to Shi'ite doctrine and practice. Several Shi'ite sites make use of the disagreement Sunnis have concerning this practice. On Shi'ite websites, we find claims that Sunnis are divided into 'traditional Sunnis' who recognize the legitimacy of tawassul, and 'Wahhabis'⁷⁵ who are deemed extremists for denying its validity. For example, on the website www.al-islam.org/mot/tawassul.htm, many prominent Sunni scholars are cited for their approval of tawassul: "All jurists including Imami, Shafi'i, Maliki, and later-day Hanafi scholars as well as others such as the Hanbalis, are unanimous on the permissibility of this way of supplication, whether it was in the lifetime of the Prophet (s), or whether it is after his passing away."⁷⁶ The practice is further justified through verses of the Qur'an which contain the word wasilah,⁷⁷ the root of the word tawassul.

⁷⁴ Seyyed Vali Reza Nasr, *The Shia Revival, How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006), p. 60.

⁷⁵ Wahhabism properly refers to the movement begun by [Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb](#) (1703–1792) that began in late 18th century Najd (in modern day Saudi Arabia). The Wahhabi movement advocated the purging of Islam from what Abd al-Wahhab believed to be heretical innovations and impurities. Wahhabism is, however, used in a loose sense as a pejorative term by liberals and modernists, as well as being applied to followers of the more puritanical 'Salafi' movement.

⁷⁶ *Sharh al-Mawahib*, vol. 8, p. 304; *al-Majmu'*, vol. 8, p. 274; *Ibn 'Abidin*, vol. 5, p.254; *al-Fatawa al-Hindiyyah*, vol. 1, p. 266 and vol. 5, 318; *Fath al-Qadir*, vol. 8, p. 297, 298 and *al-Futuhāt al-Rabbaniyyah 'ala al-Azkar al-Nabawiyyah*, vol. 5, p. 36. Shi'ite website reference: <http://www.al-islam.org/mot/tawassul.htm>

⁷⁷ "O you who have believed, fear Allah and seek the means [of nearness] (wasīlah) to Him and strive in His cause that you may succeed." (5:35). "Those whom they invoke seek means of access (wasīlah) to their Lord, [striving as

Shi'ite sites also make use of parallels between their beliefs and the beliefs of the revered eponymous Imams of Sunni Islam. The apparently very popular website Answering-Ansar.org explains that the great Imams of "Ahl al-Sunnah wal-Jamā'ah" (the Sunnis) received their renowned knowledge from their Shi'ite teacher Ja'far al-Sādiq (the sixth Shi'ite imam): "Abu Hanifa and Malik were the students of Imam Sadiq and Abu Hanifa used to say: 'Without the two years [in the company of the Imam] al-Numan [i.e. Abu Hanifa] would have perished.'"⁷⁸ This statement seems to portray the Shi'ite imams as the counterparts of Sunni imams. The aim, however, it must be noted, is ultimately to convince Sunnis that Shi'ism is the sole correct position, not that it is one legitimate position among others. For instance, an entire web-channel which purports to favor taqrib is actually devoted to stories of Sunnis becoming Shi'ites.⁷⁹ It aims to show how the similarities between Sunnis and Shi'ites have resulted in a sizable number of Sunnis 'seeing the light'. The aim, then, is not rapprochement but conversion; though this is not usually confessed.⁸⁰ Sunni sites, in any case, are still different in that they seem to aim at refutation of Shi'ism and exclusion of Shi'ites from the community rather than conversion; they are not, in contrast to Shi'ite material, designed to attract.

In general, Shi'ite apologists who favor rapprochement take a two-tiered approach. First, they isolate and try to delegitimize groups with whom they conclude there can be neither settlement nor compromise. Secondly, they distinguish those groups from the majority with whom they wish to engage. They attempt to placate Sunni readers by reminding them of the elements in their religion that agree with Shi'ite doctrine. This approach is facilitated in the case

to] which of them would be nearest, and they hope for His mercy and fear His punishment. Indeed, the punishment of your Lord is ever feared" (17:57)

⁷⁸ http://www.answering-ansar.org/answers/imam_jafar/en/index.php

⁷⁹ <http://www.youtube.com/user/AsSaifulMaslul#p/u>

⁸⁰ Sites and channels devoted to genuine rapprochement do not yet exist. The closest instance I have found is the Unity-oriented YouTube channel <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fh2OZZcn1ro>.

of Wahhabism by a popular perception among Sunnis that Wahhabism is obscurantist, even if still within the fold of Sunni Islam. Shi'ite websites imply that the more extreme anti-Wahhabis, that is those who would characterize them as wholesale neo-Kharijites, represent the whole. Then, emphasis is placed on the supposedly regressive nature of Wahhabism.⁸¹ Shi'ites portray Wahhabis as Muslims who have cut themselves off from the roots of traditional Islam and have, like the Kharijites before them, popularized the practice of takfir (declaring others non-Muslims). They then depict the majority non-“Wahhabi” Sunni remnant as being more conciliatory, tolerant, and modern. The Sunni reader is thus – so the Shi'ite sites would like to suggest - faced with the choice of accepting detente with Shi'ites or taking his or her place with the fringe element.

This chapter has reviewed the most common ways Shi'ite websites attempt to bridge the seemingly unbridgeable gap between them and their Sunni counterparts. The approach, as I have noted several times, is quite different from that of Sunni sites. The chief aim, even if not pursued quite consistently, is to harmonize and reconcile Sunni with Shi'ite beliefs, largely by drawing on Sunni sources. Unfortunately, Shi'ite efforts do not end on such a pleasant note. Reconciliation is seldom what either side wants or deems sufficient. Shi'ite sites do also sometimes go on the offensive, and in the following chapter we will examine Shi'ite web material and tactics of this kind.

⁸¹ Wahhabi Hunter Youtube channel: <http://www.youtube.com/user/Wahhabihunter>

Chapter Two

Offensive Tactics: Dissecting Discrepancies

Going on the offensive seems to be the second choice for polemic on the Shi'ite web. There are many more rapprochement-type sites than those that deliberately launch attacks. The main line of attack is exposing supposed discrepancies, a common tool for polemicists of all stripes. Inconsistency is taken to be evidence of intellectual flaws, and perhaps even fraudulent misrepresentation. Muslims are attuned to this idea as a result of a Quranic verse (4:82) that emphasizes cohesion: "Do they not consider the Qur'an (with care)? Had it been from other Than Allah, they would surely have found therein much discrepancy."

Anything from fundamental beliefs concerning the attributes of God, the status of the Messenger and reliability of the narrations attributed to him to the integrity of the Prophet's Companions is considered fair game. In this chapter, we will look at the tone of these arguments, the message they intend to convey, and what audience they appear to be intended for. We can begin to remark that, although sites of this kind are in the minority, they are quite strident, often portraying Sunni Islam as an unfortunate consequence of Umayyad propaganda. This serves to link Sunnis with the ultimate evil, that is the murder of Husayn. There is a tendency, in contrast to the material described in the previous chapter, to picture Sunnis as deliberate wrongdoers rather than a faction led astray which can be usefully preached to.

i) Definition of Sahaba

Shi'ite internet crusaders are particularly focused on the Companions of the Prophet or Sahaba. The Companions were the first community of Muslims to practice and spread the new religion, and after the Prophet's death they bore, in the Sunni Muslim construction of history, the

responsibility to preserve and sustain the community of believers or Umma. This task involved not only external challenges, but conflict from within. Authors chronicling the early Islamic era never fail to make mention of internal strife.

Shi'ite attacks on Sunni dogma therefore draw from Islam's fractious and discordant beginnings, blaming major and minor conflicts on the Prophet's Companions. Shi'ite sites maintain that hypocrites among the Sahaba⁸² usurped the position of the Imams, who alone have the right to transmit the pristine message of Islam and guide the Umma as spiritual and political vicegerents. The general Sunni perspective embraces all genuine Companions as virtuous and noble. While Shi'ites recognize a select few Sahaba as righteous,⁸³ they consider the vast majority of them to have abandoned religion after the death of the Prophet Muhammad.

Shi'ite activists often fasten on the Sunni definition of Sahabi (singular of Sahaba). Sunni theology defines a Companion of the Prophet as someone who met the Prophet while remaining a believer in Islam until his or her death. Shi'ites consider this very wide category virtually meaningless. The Qur'an classes humanity in three broad categories: believers, non-believers, and hypocrites. The question Shi'ites pose is: If everyone who simply met the Prophet is considered honorable, trustworthy or constant, are we then to believe that no hypocrites lived in the fledgling Muslim community during his lifetime?⁸⁴ On the other hand, if hypocrites did live around the Prophet, what particular merit does a Sahabi possess to demonstrate that he did not

⁸² In a part of one site titled "Companions of the Prophet", the author attempts to prove from Sunni textual sources that hypocrites existed among the Companions: http://www.alhassanain.com/english/book/book/beliefs_library/religions_and_sects/inquiries_about_shia_islam/016.html. The word "hypocrite" occurs many times in the Quran and has a great deal of resonance for Muslims (see below).

⁸³ See <http://www.123muslim.com/islamic-articles/8257-shias-view-sahaba.html>

⁸⁴ The idea is phrased in popular language in the following quote: "who was sura-e-munafiqeen revealed for?? (hint: ppl around the prophet)" <http://www.shiachat.com/forum/index.php?/topic/9926-why-do-the-shia-hate-the-sahaba/>

harbor (somehow always presumed) hypocrisy in his heart?⁸⁵ Apologists typically first raise this concern and then go on to particular historical personalities and events.

Despite the many conflicts in the Umma's first generation, Sunnis revere the Prophet's Companions and accord them authority, so long as they died upon the Islamic faith. The object of many Shi'ite websites is to expose the flaw of that assumption by drawing on Sunni sources and tradition, a tactic already seen in abundance in the previous chapter. An article entitled *A Shi'ite View of the Companions* serves as an example of this type of rhetoric.⁸⁶ Its host website, along with many others of its ilk, seem to delight in citing hadiths that might dim Sunni enthusiasm for the Companions. One such narration in both Bukhari and Muslim recounts the Prophet's description of the Day of Judgment:

...Then will be brought some men of my followers who will be taken towards the left (i.e., to the Fire), and I will say: 'O Lord! My companions whereupon Allah will say: You do not know what they did after you left them...'⁸⁷

With an evident sense of self-satisfaction, Shi'ite sites rhetorically ask who these narrations refer to if not the Companions. Sunnis are depicted as being in denial of their own tradition.

ii) The Beginnings of Disunity

Once suspicion is planted, evidence is culled from Sunni history. Several narrations examine the character of the Prophet's Companions during his lifetime. The climax and ultimate focus is the passion of Husayn, but the narrative leading up to Husayn begins with the death of the Prophet. During the Prophet's final illness, a fateful incident occurred, recorded in both Sunni and Shi'ite sources. This story has become notorious, as seen in names given to it by Shi'ites such as the "Incident of the Pen and Paper" and "Calamity of Thursday". The early

⁸⁵ See <http://www.al-islam.org/encyclopedia/chapter5a/11.html>

⁸⁶ <http://www.al-islam.org/encyclopedia/chapter4/2.html>

⁸⁷ *Sahih Bukhari: Book #76, Hadith #533, (3865)*. Website: <http://www.al-islam.org/encyclopedia/chapter4/2.html>

twentieth-century Shi'ite scholar Sayyid 'Abd al-Husayn Sharaf al-Dīn al-Musawi dissects this event in detail in his widely circulated opus *Al-Muraja'at*. The material has been posted on the web,⁸⁸ and we will follow it in the account here.

As the Prophet's health deteriorated, a circle or 'cabal' of close Companions present around his death bed were prescient enough to envisage an impending power vacuum. The hadith compilation of Muslim recounts that the Prophet while lying on his deathbed requested those around him to bring forth a pen and paper so that he could have something written, through and after which, he had hoped, no one would "go astray."⁸⁹ Umar began to object, asserting that the Quran was sufficient as a guide. Many Companions, some of whom had hitherto openly protested (to the Prophet) about Umar's severity and harsh temperament, found his sentiments less than congenial. They began to quarrel in the presence of the Messenger. The Prophet was displeased, requesting the party to leave. The narrator, Ibn Abbas, depicts the mood in the gathering: "There was a heavy loss, indeed a heavy loss, due to their dispute and noise. Allah's Messenger (may peace be upon him) could not write (or dictate) the document for them."

The narrator's words can be taken as an acknowledgement of the gravity and solemnity of the setting. The implied question is, what else but some kind of "farewell advice" would impel the Prophet to summon an assembly of the elect? As the hadith is silent on whether the Prophet's intention was to dictate his last will and testament, one can understand why Shi'ite apologists raise the issue, in accord with their own view of history.

True to form, the Shi'ite "Answering Ansar" team has produced a lengthy piece exploring the event, in depth and in partisan fashion. The Ansar site holds that the incident marks

⁸⁸ <http://www.najaf.org/english/book/12/86.htm> The notes below in italics are also from this site.

⁸⁹ *Sahih Muslim, Book 013, Number 4016*

a watershed in the Sunni-Shi'ite divide, a lamentable fracture destined to haunt the Muslim community forever:

At this point two sects emerged at the deathbed of Muhammad (s) – one with his wives (mentioned in many sources and not denied – see main article) favoring the family of Muhammad (s) AND Muhammad (s), the other favoring Umar and going AGAINST Muhammad (s) and his family.⁹⁰

Shi'ite propagandists depict those of the Messenger's Companions present at his deathbed as guileful and wily opportunists. The account reads like anti-hagiography, with no evil too great to be attributed to the Sahaba. Describing the event, they pronounce the episode (as described by Sunni sources) as “shocking” and “DEEPLY disturbing”.⁹¹

The first of the caliphs succeeding the Prophet was Abu Bakr, whose ascension to power resulted, as described above, from a process of tribal nomination and election in the courtyard of the Saqifa. Shi'ite historians portray this episode as the key moment in execution of a grand plot by the Companions who agreed as to the distribution of power now in their grasp. An entry titled “Saqifah Plot” in a Shi'ite blog enlarges on the account of the tenth-century Sunni historian, Tabari:

What Hadhrath Umar seems to have forgotten when recollecting the event is the fact that not all those present in the Saqifa gave Bayya to Hadhrath Abu Bakr, and they were adamant that their loyalties lay with another man: "Umar stood up saying, "Who among you would be agreeable to leave Abu Bakr whom the Prophet gave precedence?" and he gave him the oath of allegiance. The people followed [Umar]. The Ansar said, or some of them said "We will not give the oath of allegiance [to anyone] except Ali"⁹².

In the Shi'ite view, the fact that both the Muhajirun and the Ansar (the two groups of Muslims in Medina) saw fit to bicker and wrangle over legitimacy of rule betrayed their worldly

⁹⁰ http://www.answering-ansar.org/answers/pen_and_paper/en/index.php S = “The prayers of God be upon him, and peace.”

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² *History of Tabari, English translation, Volume 9 p 186*, http://shiabook.blogspot.com/2010/10/blog-post_7946.html Hadhrath = “his excellency”; the titles are most likely from an original, non-Shiite translation of the text.

ambitions. There is a consensus between Sunni and Shi'ite historians⁹³ that the Companions Abu Bakr, Umar and Abu Ubayda represented the leadership of the Muhajirun. Shi'ites emphasize that the Prophet never appointed or endorsed these three, nor, by extension, did the generality of the Medinan Muslims. Rather, they took it upon themselves to confront the leaders of the Ansar in order to claim that right and a leadership position.

At this juncture, Shi'ite activists field a rather peculiar argument. They point out that Sunnis resort to the Prophet's custom of consulting his closest Companions when the Quran and Sunnah are silent on an issue. Ergo, the generation of the Prophet would naturally have observed the time-honored habit of seeking the input and counsel of the most prominent Companion(s) of the Prophet. Yet, just when the bereaved house of the Prophet was pre-occupied with funeral arrangements, a hasty election occurred under ambiguous circumstances, excluding the Prophetic family, who would come to know of the appointment and even the meeting only after the fact.⁹⁴

Hassanain Rajabali, cited earlier as a staunch advocate of taqrib, is here seen speaking in a different tone. Rajabali contends that it is implausible, in view of the crucial importance of the future leadership of the entire Muslim community, that the Prophet would leave his community perplexed and without any instruction. Moreover, the Sunni claim that no instruction was given is, according to Rajabali, tantamount to accusing God and the Messenger of being derelict in their duty to provide guidance under all circumstances.⁹⁵ Rajabali does not, however, explain why the Prophet honored and even bestowed honorifics upon persons who were unreliable and essentially of bad character. Polemic is, as always, highly selective.

⁹³ Such instances are not at all rare. Shi'ite doctors of religion and legists are fond of pointing out that the early historians of Islam were in fact of Shi'ite disposition, at least politically. They explain that they did not embrace the Twelver Shi'ite articles of faith because those had not yet crystallized. The irony in conceding the point that Twelver Shi'ite doctrine only found complete and coherent expression in a much later period seems lost on them.

⁹⁴ E.g. <https://theaccursedthree.wordpress.com/2010/02/23/abu-bakr-umar-in-saqifa/> (The "accursed three" referred to in this "attack site" are the first three caliphs, supposed usurpers of Ali's rule.

⁹⁵ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2j8S6r7B4ow>

iii) Shi'ite views of Abu Bakr

The first of the 'Rightly Guided' Caliphs, in the Sunni view, was Abu Bakr. Abu Bakr is considered by Sunnis to be the most noble of the Companions and the Prophet's closest friend. Shi'ites see things differently. Websites that speak of Abu Bakr do not, however, attack him directly; rather, they approach the issue of his personality gradually and somewhat cautiously, apparently hoping to raise subtle doubts. This caution in relation to Abu Bakr may be an instance of taqiyya.⁹⁶ One suspects that the sometimes slightly favorable treatment of Abu Bakr is designed not to directly offend a potentially receptive Sunni audience.

The site www.al-islam.org takes the approach of gradually whittling away the reputation of the caliph. In a series entitled "Restatement of History", Abu Bakr is initially acknowledged to be the fourth Muslim to accept Islam, a man whose sermons inspired several prominent Sahaba to embrace Islam.⁹⁷ The "Restatement" then goes on to recount how Abu Bakr spent his wealth buying and liberating Muslim slaves tortured for their beliefs.⁹⁸ In this way, the Shi'ite site acknowledges the nobility and distinction of the first Sunni caliph, through narrations familiar to a Sunni audience. Again, the aim may be to draw in a Sunni audience. However, as his biography progresses, Abu Bakr's praiseworthiness unravels. His early contributions being accounted for, Abu Bakr is ultimately painted as a staunch enemy of the Prophetic household.

The first issue to be raised on this website and many others is the infamous rivalry between the first caliph and the Prophet's daughter Fatima. Sunni and Shi'ite sources speak of Fatima's desire to inherit from her father's estate after his passing. Abu Bakr, according to the

⁹⁶ Taqiyya is the practice of concealing beliefs, primarily used when said beliefs could endanger one's life. In Shi'ite context, it can refer to concealing beliefs from the Sunni majority in order to avoid being labeled heretics.

⁹⁷ <http://www.al-islam.org/restatement/9.htm>

⁹⁸ <http://www.al-islam.org/restatement/10.htm>

same sources, was of the opinion that Prophets do not leave inheritance. Fatima disagreed.⁹⁹ Shi'ite discourse on the web, following popular Shi'ite sentiment, makes much of Fatimah's unhappiness at Abu Bakr's ruling, taking it to be even a sign of Allah's displeasure. Fatimah's loss of her inheritance consisting of the garden of Fadak is the subject also of impassioned sermons broadcast through the net; in these pieces, dislike of Abu Bakr (as well as Umar) is very clear.¹⁰⁰ Some sites also portray the enmity between Fatima on the one hand, and Abu Bakr and Umar on the other, in more graphic detail, painting the persecution allegedly suffered by the House of the Prophet in very high colors. Umar's attack on Fatima, subsequent to and on account of Ali's refusal to pledge allegiance to Abu Bakr, is a particularly popular subject.¹⁰¹

Other sites simply refer to a hadith narrated by none other than Aisha herself, from Bukhari himself. The aim, evidently, is to confound Sunnis with their own sources. The text, though long, is worth quoting in full, since it demonstrates the ambiguity of texts used by Shi'ites in this way:

Fatima the daughter of the Prophet sent someone to Abu Bakr (when he was a caliph), asking for her inheritance of what Allah's Apostle had left of the property bestowed on him by Allah from the Fai (i.e. booty gained without fighting) in Medina, and Fadak, and what remained of the Khumus of the Khaibar booty. On that, Abu Bakr said, "Allah's Apostle said, "Our property is not inherited. Whatever we leave, is Sadaqa, but the family of (the Prophet) Muhammad can eat of this property.' By Allah, I will not make any change in the state of the Sadaqa of Allah's Apostle and will leave it as it was during the lifetime of Allah's Apostle, and will dispose of it as Allah's Apostle used to do." So Abu Bakr refused to give anything of that to Fatima. So she became angry with Abu Bakr and kept away from him, and did not talk to him till she died. She remained alive for six months after the death of the Prophet. When she died, her husband 'Ali, buried her at night without informing Abu Bakr and he said the funeral prayer by himself. When Fatima was alive, the people used to respect 'Ali much, but after her death, 'Ali noticed a change in the people's attitude towards him. So Ali sought reconciliation with Abu Bakr and gave him an oath of allegiance. 'Ali had not given the oath of allegiance during those

⁹⁹ For details, see Rogerson, *Roots of the Sunni-Shia Schism*, p. 131.

¹⁰⁰ For example, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hUG33wyYekg>

¹⁰¹ See for example <http://www.shiachat.com/forum/index.php?/topic/234982731-attack-to-house-of-fatimah-by-umar-and-abubakr/>

months (i.e. the period between the Prophet's death and Fatima's death). 'Ali sent someone to Abu Bakr saying, "Come to us, but let nobody come with you," as he disliked that 'Umar should come, 'Umar said (to Abu Bakr), "No, by Allah, you shall not enter upon them alone " Abu Bakr said, "What do you think they will do to me? By Allah, I will go to them' So Abu Bakr entered upon them, and then 'Ali uttered Tashah-hud and said (to Abu Bakr), "We know well your superiority and what Allah has given you, and we are not jealous of the good what Allah has bestowed upon you, but you did not consult us in the question of the rule and we thought that we have got a right in it because of our near relationship to Allah's Apostle." Thereupon Abu Bakr's eyes flowed with tears. And when Abu Bakr spoke, he said, "By Him in Whose Hand my soul is, to keep good relations with the relatives of Allah's Apostle is dearer to me than to keep good relations with my own relatives. But as for the trouble which arose between me and you about his property, I will do my best to spend it according to what is good, and will not leave any rule or regulation which I saw Allah's Apostle following, in disposing of it, but I will follow." On that 'Ali said to Abu Bakr, "I promise to give you the oath of allegiance in this after noon." So when Abu Bakr had offered the Zuhr prayer, he ascended the pulpit and uttered the Tashah-hud and then mentioned the story of 'Ali and his failure to give the oath of allegiance, and excused him, accepting what excuses he had offered; Then 'Ali (got up) and praying (to Allah) for forgiveness, he uttered Tashah-hud, praised Abu Bakr's right, and said, that he had not done what he had done because of jealousy of Abu Bakr or as a protest of that Allah had favored him with. 'Ali added, "But we used to consider that we too had some right in this affair (of rulership) and that he (i.e. Abu Bakr) did not consult us in this matter, and therefore caused us to feel sorry." On that all the Muslims became happy and said, "You have done the right thing." The Muslims then became friendly with 'Ali as he returned to what the people had done (i.e. giving the oath of allegiance to Abu Bakr).¹⁰²

Shi'ites concentrate on Abu Bakr's last days to emphasize his decline. Before passing away, Abu Bakr ensured Umar would succeed to his office. Two Shi'ite perspectives then emerge. The first represents the elderly Abu Bakr as Umar's pawn, propped up during the Saqifa incident by him as a short-lived facade put in place to ensure Umar's succession. Umar here takes his typical role in Shi'ite tales of duplicity, a characteristic to which we shall later return. The second perspective rather faults Abu Bakr himself for hijacking leadership and then giving real power to Umar during his lifetime. This practice, Shi'ites maintain, contravenes an

¹⁰² *Bukhari: Volume 5, Book 59, Number 546* (Bold and underlining my own; *tashahhud* = the 'witness' that there is no god but God and Muhammad is His Prophet.) Shiite source site: <http://www.usc.edu/schools/college/crcc/engagement/resources/texts/muslim/hadith/bukhari/059.sbt.html>

authoritative Sunni tradition which attributes to the Prophet the democratic method of allowing the ruled to decide through mutual consultation (shura) who should rule, in accord with the tribal institutions of the time. Sunnis are thus accused of betraying their own standards.¹⁰³

Sunnis actually believe that Abu Bakr was mentioned in the Quran, in connection with his hiding along with the Prophet and protecting him in a cave during the flight to Medina. The Quranic passage (9:40) reads as follows:

If ye help not (your leader), (it is no matter): for Allah did indeed help him, when the Unbelievers drove him out: he had no more than one companion; they two were in the cave, and he said to his companion, "Have no fear, for Allah is with us": then Allah sent down His peace upon him, and strengthened him with forces which ye saw not, and humbled to the depths the word of the Unbelievers. But the word of Allah is exalted to the heights: for Allah is Exalted in might, Wise.

What then is the Shi'ite response to this very favorable mention of Abu Bakr in the Quran? Rajabali, whom we have already met several times in this thesis, downplays the passage by emphasizing that Abu Bakr is referred to only as Sahib (companion), which he takes to be a neutral term not conferring any special merit. Rajabali also reduces Abu Bakr's prestige by pointing out that Ali willingly endured even greater danger when he substituted himself for the Prophet in the latter's bed the night his enemies plotted to assassinate him.¹⁰⁴ That Abu Bakr is praised while Ali's heroism remains (supposedly) in relative obscurity seems to frustrate many Shi'ites, who accuse Sunnis of accentuating the virtues of the wrong man.¹⁰⁵ This feeling should be understood in light of the extraordinary reverence accorded by Shi'ites to Ali, described in the previous chapter.

¹⁰³ <http://www.followislam.net/books/roots/27.htm>

¹⁰⁴ http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z_XWzgL2iwU

¹⁰⁵ <http://www.shiachat.com/forum/index.php/?topic/234935224-abu-bakr-in-the-cave/>

Shi'ite internet activists are also able to cite Sunni literature that seems to severely criticize Abu Bakr, as well as Umar. The standard commentary on Bukhari's *Sahih*, Asqalani's *Fath al-Bari*, contains the following rather devastating anecdote:

Abu Bakr (r.a) and `Umar (r.a), almost ruined themselves. They both raised their voices in the presence of the Prophet (s.a.a.w) when a delegation of the Banu Tameem came to him. One of the two men recommended al Aqra` ibn Haabees [to be appointed the chief of the delegation] while the other pointed to al-Qa`qaa` ibn Ma`bad ibn Zaraarah. Abu Bakr thereupon said to `Umar: `You only wanted to oppose me.' `Umar replied: `I did not want to oppose you.' Their voices grew louder and louder over the issue. And the divine words were revealed: "O you who have believed, do not raise your voices above the voice of the Prophet or be loud to him in speech like the loudness of some of you to others, lest your deeds become worthless while you perceive not".¹⁰⁶

Shi'ites believe this incident to be a kind of 'Freudian slip' on the part of the two power-hungry Companions. Shi'ites also point out that the verse occurs alongside other Quranic statements¹⁰⁷ speaking of how certain believers from among the Prophet's entourage will turn back on their faith. One Shi'ite site asks acerbically, "Could you tell me Who Allah refers to by "you" in the above verse?"¹⁰⁸

Other websites are even more overtly hostile. The site www.abubakr.org is entirely dedicated to maligning Abu Bakr, accusing him of rank opportunism and using Islam for personal gain. Some sites recount Ali's oppression caused by his protest against the usurpation of his lawful bequest. The image commonly given out by Shi'ites is of the gallant warrior Ali being

¹⁰⁶ *Fath al Baaree*, 8/66, 454 and 13/235. Shi'ite website reference:

<http://www26.brinkster.com/sdolshah1/myth.html> RA = "May God be pleased with him/her". SAAW = "May God's prayers be upon him/her, and peace".

¹⁰⁷ Most prominently, Quran 47:38.

¹⁰⁸ http://muxlim.com/blogs/salvation2010/shiite-view-of-the-companions/?comments_page=2

forced to hold in his anger throughout the persecution for the greater good of the community, a patience that seems to eventually bear fruit in his final ascension to the caliphate.¹⁰⁹

iv) Shi'ite views of Aisha & Hafsa

If Abu Bakr's own actions were not enough to indict him, his associations would suffice. Apart from his close friendship with Umar, Aisha, the wife of the Messenger, was his daughter. Revered among Sunnis, Aisha occupies an unenviable position among Shi'ites; she is the conniving Jezebel of Shi'ism. Her status as the Prophet's wife, however, poses considerable difficulties for Shi'ite polemicists. Nevertheless, websites that go on the offensive give her no quarter, citing the Quran's haranguing of the wives of two Prophets, Noah and Lot, whose final abode was hellfire. The relevant verse reads: "They were under two of Our righteous servants but betrayed them, so those prophets did not avail them from Allah at all..."¹¹⁰

In contrast to their sometimes nuanced approach to her father, Abu Bakr, Shi'ites abandon all pretense to taqrib or taqiyya in relation to Aisha. Nonetheless, Shi'ite internet activists, perhaps yielding to the instinct for taqiyya, indulge their potential Sunni audience with preparations to soften the blow. One finds a particularly striking example on al-islam.org, which begins with the disclaimer:

Note: I apologize in advance, if my Sunni brothers/sisters feel offended by the content of these parts of the article due to their previous background on Aisha. The purpose of this article is not to make you feel bad, but to provide you with some pieces of information that the Sunni collections carry, but they have been ignored due to some scholars who prevented discussing them. The final judgment is with you.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁹ http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-8pd_b3h7jg Although this video has been produced as anti-Shi'ite propaganda, it includes a clip of the prolific Shi'ite speaker Ammar Nakshawani explaining Ali's wisdom in bearing the caliphate of the first three caliphs in order to reclaim it later.

¹¹⁰ Qur'an 66:10.

¹¹¹ <http://www.al-islam.org/encyclopedia/chapter1a/9.html>

One could be forgiven for doubting the conciliatory tone here, but appeals of this kind are, nevertheless, not found in Sunni sites.

Aisha's controversial position can be traced, at least in the accounts given in the Muslim sources, to the life of the Prophet when she began to form alliances with certain wives of the Prophet in opposition to others. Aisha and Hafsa were on one side, while Fatima and Umm Salama were on the other. Some historians consider this to be a minor representation of the beginnings of the Sunni Shi'ite split.¹¹² Even more important, Ali and Aisha were embroiled in an incident in which the Prophet was upset with his wives. Some of the Prophet's Companions, it is related, then offered him advice, and it was the opinion of Ali that he should divorce them and replace them with better women. Ali is also reported to have been critical of Aisha in connection with the famous incident in the which Aisha was suspected of adultery.¹¹³ Finally, there was the Battle of Al-Jamal (Camel), which found Ali and Aisha on opposing sides. This incident causes much consternation for Sunnis, and they call it a 'fitna' - tribulation or distress - as it involves conflict between Companions who were particularly close to the Prophet, one his wife and the other his cousin and adopted son. Shi'ite web activists relish the implications of this event and constantly feature it. Sunnis maintain that Aisha and Ali came into conflict merely because of miscommunication; but Shi'ite websites identify Aisha's true goal as, quite unequivocally, the deposing of Ali.

One outspoken Shi'ite cleric, Yasir Habib, hosts a video entitled, sensationally: "Scandal: Aisha killed the Prophet Muhammad!!"¹¹⁴ This video comes fully equipped with Quranic, hadith, and biographic texts, all deployed in an attempt to prove that the Prophet's death was the result

¹¹² Rogerson, *Roots of the Sunni-Shia Schism*, p. 92.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 101-102.

¹¹⁴ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HiMgW9yd7w>

of an assassination executed through the nefarious collaboration of two of the Prophet's wives, Aisha and Hafsa, Abu Bakr's and Umar's daughters respectively. Though not quite made explicit, the implication is that the murder received the tacit acquiescence of Abu Bakr and Umar, if it was not actively commissioned by them.

This would not be the first time the two women were involved in intrigue against the Prophet, even according to Sunni narratives, as Shi'ite activists never tire of mentioning. The Quran is quite direct about a ruse carried out by the wives:

And when the Prophet confided to one of his wives a statement; and when she informed [another] of it and Allah showed it to him, he made known part of it and ignored a part. When he informed her about it, she said, 'Who told you this?' He said, 'I was informed by the Knowing, the Acquainted.' If you two repent to Allah, [it is best], for your hearts have deviated. But if you cooperate against him-then indeed Allah is his protector.¹¹⁵

These verses provide Shi'ites with a platform from which to launch attacks against some of the wives of the Prophet. Most Sunnis believe it is the duty of all Muslims to defend and honor the memory of the wives of the Prophet, since the Quran refers to them as the mothers of the believers.¹¹⁶ Shi'ites, however, reject this as an interpolation and argue that love for the wives of the Prophet depends on conditions laid out in the following Quranic verse:

O Prophet, say to your wives, 'If you should desire the worldly life and its adornment, then come, I will provide for you and give you a gracious release. But if you should desire Allah and His Messenger and the home of the Hereafter - then indeed, Allah has prepared for the doers of good among you a great reward.'¹¹⁷

Shi'ite partisans active through www.wilayat.net read the passage literally, citing it as proof that the Prophet's wives fell into two classes: righteous, and those desirous of worldly gratification

¹¹⁵ Qur'an 66:3-4, cited, for instance, at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gQzjdNd1BFO&NR=1>

¹¹⁶ Qur'an 33:6.

¹¹⁷ Qur'an 33:28-29.

and contentment: “The Quran has confirmed the existence of evil-doers among the Prophet’s wives, peace be upon him and his family”.

Shi’ites also interpret the verse immediately after as referring specifically to Aisha: “O wives of the Prophet, whoever of you should commit a clear immorality - for her the punishment would be doubled two fold, and ever is that, for Allah, easy.”¹¹⁸ The Arabic word *fahisha* designates ‘clear immorality’, meaning an open or public sin. Shi’ite sites hold that the only wife of the Prophet to scandalously and publicly defy or oppose a Righteously Guided Caliph, and Ali no less, was Aisha, through her participation in the Battle of the Camel.¹¹⁹

v) Shi’ite views of Umar ibn al-Khattab

Shi’ites consider Umar ibn al-Khattab to be the worst of the Muslims surrounding the Prophet. Umar is accused of having corrupted the religion of Islam almost beyond redemption. He played a decisive role in securing Abu Bakr’s place as the first Caliph, as both Sunni and Shi’ite historians attest. Shi’ite polemicists like to describe Umar as singularly perfidious even in Islam’s early days. Did he not, during the Makkan period before his conversion, make it his personal mission to assassinate the Prophet even should it cost him his life? Sunnis attribute his conversion to an episode involving his sister whose acceptance of Islam occurred unknown to him. Shi’ites are skeptical of this conversion.

In fact, Shi’ite websites frequently repeat the charge that Umar feigned belief so as to rise with the emergent power of Islam. (They do not, however, explain why Umar would do this at a time when the fledgling community was singularly weak and vulnerable.)

¹¹⁸ Qur’an 33:30.

¹¹⁹ For further details of Shi’ite views of the battle, see Rogerson, *Roots of the Sunni-Shia Schism*, p. 289.

Several Sunni hadiths attest to Umar's harsh character, a dimension of his personality Shi'ites never tire of exposing. To begin, there is the incident already mentioned of Umar preventing the Prophet from communicating during the episode of the Pen and Paper. Then Umar supported the claims of Abu Bakr, urging everyone to grant him allegiance and threatening anyone who opposed him.¹²⁰ Shi'ites insist that members of the House of the Prophet were conspicuously absent from the council. They maintain that Ali was busy with the funeral and therefore unable to attend; others consider Ali's absence to have been the result of a deliberate decision made to avoid the calamity of fitna and division. As one site puts it:

It was said beforehand that many great men of Mecca, especially those who had grudge against Muhammad (s) obstinately, were killed in the battle of Badr by the sword of Imam Ali and that there were a few houses that did not lose a relative by Ali's sword; therefore they were not so pleased with him. On the other hand, many notable companions of the Prophet (s) were jealous of him because of his great valor for Islam, especially since he was highly esteemed by the Prophet. Therefore these reasons made him stay at home.¹²¹

Whatever the case may be, after being dispossessed of his rightful claim to the Caliphate, Ali and his wife Fatima would not offer their allegiance to Abu Bakr, which resulted, according to Shi'ite tradition, in Umar's assault on the daughter of the Prophet:

Umar kicked the door through which he hit her and she fell. She was carrying a baby which she lost. Ali (A.S.) came out and was arrested. He was dragged in the streets of Madinah with a rope tied around his neck.¹²²

After two years of leadership, Abu Bakr passed away and Umar stood at the helm of the Muslim community. Shi'ites accuse Umar of altering the pristine religious practices of the Prophet Muhammad with his own personal innovations during his decade of supremacy.

¹²⁰ <http://home.swipnet.se/islam/books/imamate/lesson9.htm>

¹²¹ <http://www.erfan.ir/21309/book/>

¹²² <http://www.imamreza.net/eng/imamreza.php?id=6320>

Answering-ansar.org, for instance, features a chapter that highlights specific innovations; from divorce, charity, prayer, to narrations and recounting of Prophetic sayings, and so on.¹²³ One section is entitled: “Inclusion of the statement ‘prayer is better than sleep’ was an innovation of Umar bin Khattab”¹²⁴; the idea that Umar would have wrongly altered this basic ritual is a very severe charge. A Youtube video by outspoken Shi’ite propagandist Yasir Habib titled “Why do shiites hate Omar Ibn al-Khattab?!”¹²⁵ very openly exposes the Shi’ite attitude to this Caliph and Companion revered by Sunnis.

vi) The passion of Husayn

In the last chapter, we described how the tragic martyrdom of Husayn at Karbala is used by Shi’ite web authors to persuade Sunni audiences to at least acknowledge Shi’ite grievances. In this section, we will see how this event is linked in a kind of concatenation to other critique of the Sunni position, with the ultimate aim (so it seems) not of taqrib, but proselytization. Both parties, as already explained, agree that the brutal murder of Husayn and his family was unjust and evil. This leads Shi’ite activists to raise the difficult issue of where blame is to be laid. The objective is to impress on the minds of Sunnis the enormity of a grandson of the Prophet - the grandson who resembled him the most – being persecuted and slaughtered, in order to raise doubts about the integrity and legitimacy of the community’s leadership afterward. Karbala is initially highlighted because it generates a unanimous, emotional response from Muslims, whether Shi’ite or Sunni. Taking Karbala as the centerpiece, Shi’ite postings to the web then trace each step leading to the incident in order to indict Sunni rule and thus prepare the way for argument in favor of the Shi’ite imamate.

¹²³ <http://www.answering-ansar.org/answers/bidah/en/chap4.php>

¹²⁴ http://www.answering-ansar.org/fiqh/kalima_adhan/en/chap3.php

¹²⁵ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mratgRFtbB0>

The Umayyad Caliph Yazid ibn Muawiya reigned from 680 to 683 CE. It was under Yazid's leadership and upon his orders that Husayn was martyred. A minority of Sunni historians argue that Yazid was not responsible for the death of Husayn and that the attack was ordered without his approval. The evidence for such a claim remains controversial.

One prominent and popular Sunni public speaker, Dr. Zakir Naik, founder of the Islamic Research Foundation (IRF) and the Islamic English television channel Peace TV, has actually praised Yazid in one of his lectures. This led to a strong reaction from Shi'ites; a video lecture posted on the web entitled *Yazid - The Criminal of Karbala & the Hero of Zakir Naik* leaves a strong visual impression as it superimposes a fiery background accompanied with dramatic music on a video clip of Dr. Naik as he mentions Yazid in a positive light.¹²⁶ The incident is isolated; Dr. Zakir Naik's opinion does not represent that of the majority of Sunni Muslims. There is a minority opinion among Sunni scholars that Yazid was a righteous ruler; however, most scholars simply refrain from judgment and avoid the extremes of either praising or cursing him.¹²⁷ Nevertheless, Shi'ite polemicists invest a great deal of energy in condemning Yazid and take it upon themselves to compose exposés that uncover little-known facts about this enigmatic figure. The purpose may be, again, to begin from a point of relative consensus in order to establish a basis for further argument.

Thus the Shi'ite website www.hasnain.wordpress.com presents a compilation of Sunni texts enumerating the vices of Yazid (for instance, drunkenness, incest, and pedastery!) in order to demonstrate consensus on his malevolence and justify the Shi'ite ritual practice of cursing him.¹²⁸ Once again, Shi'ite activists draw on Sunni sources to demonstrate the inconsistency of

¹²⁶ http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1mMQbR_48IU; see also <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rqE33JbZB8k>

¹²⁷ See <http://www.islam-qa.com/en/ref/14007>

¹²⁸ <http://hasnain.wordpress.com/2007/12/16/cursing-yazid-bin-muwaiyaopinions-of-ahlus-sunni-scholars/>

their positions. In regard to history, another website, www.hadithlistcollection.blogspot.com, gathers quotations from Sunni historical sources in order to compel, as it were, the audience to witness undeniable facts attested by their own scholars. The site also employs Web style to make the complex historical texts accessible by presenting a few extracts fitted with “optional” links to further evidence and dramatic videos,¹²⁹ while pages of the books from which quotations are taken have been scanned and uploaded to the site as pictures in order to dispel any doubt that the citations are authentic. A similar approach is adopted in the detailed attack launched by Answering-Ansar.org on the person of Yazid. The Yazid section is made accessible by being divided into short texts that one can optionally access through a linked table of contents; each of these texts aims to forestall a particular inclination a Sunni reader might have to consider Yazid a legitimate ruler.¹³⁰

Once Yazid is portrayed as a tyrannical deviant, Shi’ite activists are able to raise the question as to how he attained the caliphate. Both Sunnis and Shi’ites agree that Yazid was appointed by his father; thus although Muawiya is certainly less notorious among Sunni Muslims than Yazid, he becomes another relatively easy target for Shi’ite activists.

The site en.shiopen.com (apparently a kind of wiki, as it describes itself as “a volunteer project”) analyzes the evidence offered by ansar.org’s article defending Muawiya’s appointment of his son, and systematically dismantles it by discrediting the sources on which it relies as inauthentic according to the standards of Sunni historiography itself.¹³¹ Here is an example of polemic being aimed at the opponents’ site, something that is much more common in Shi’ite than Sunni cyberspace, possibly because Sunnis feel themselves to be self-sufficient and thus do not

¹²⁹ E.g. <http://hadithlistcollection.blogspot.com/2010/03/shia-history-in-sunni-history-books.html>

¹³⁰ <http://www.answering-ansar.org/answers/yazeed/en/chap1.php>

¹³¹ <http://www.shiopen.com/comprehensive/muawiya/appointment-of-yazeed>

often refer to Shi'ite material. The website alhassanain.com, again referring to historical sources, describes Muawiya as the actual pioneer of opposition to ahl al-bayt and main opponent of Ali and his elder son Hasan, who briefly held the caliphate under the leadership of the Family of the Prophet:

This is the same Muawiya who, not only rebelled and waged a war against “The Fourth Caliph” (Imam Ali bin Abi Talib a. s.), who had been elected by the Muslims to be their Caliph, but also opposed and fought Imam Hasan (the brother of Imam Husayn a. s.), who, according to Sheikh Abdallah S. Farsy, “was murdered by being poisoned” by Yazid, the so called Amirul Mu'minin!¹³²

Generally respected as a Companion of the Prophet, most Sunnis know little about Muawiya's life except that his reign followed Ali's Caliphate and ended the sovereignty of the "rightly guided Caliphs". More learned Sunnis may be aware that Muawiya opposed Ali's leadership during his reign, a stance that Sunni scholars generally consider a mistake. However, only a minority among the Hanafi school of jurisprudence consider it wrong to utter the honorific 'radiya Allahu anhu' ('may Allah be pleased with him', usually pronounced at the mention of Companions) after Muawiya's name.¹³³

Shi'ite activists thus have a more difficult job on their hands with Muawiya than Yazid in convincing Sunnis of their views. Nevertheless, they endeavor to expose Muawiya's evil ways, both before and during his reign. Almajalis.com has posted what might be described as an emotional rant, which includes a section asserting that the conversion to Islam of both Muawiya and his father was forced; the two are then branded with the dishonorable title at-tulaqa. Muslims in general use this term, meaning “freed”, to refer to those who converted only after they were

¹³² http://www.alhassanain.com/english/book/book/history_library/islamic_personalities/yazid_was_never_amirul_muminin/004.html

¹³³ The very well-known Sunni fatwa website islamqa.com states: “We appreciate the love that you and your wife have for the noble Sahaabi Mu'aawiyah ibn Abi Sufyaan (may Allaah be pleased with him) and we appreciate your efforts to convey this love to others who have been influenced by the Raafidi propaganda about him.” <http://islamqa.info/en/ref/84304>

amnestied after the conquest of Makkah, implying that the conversions might have been disingenuous; although it is the Shi'ites who make a great issue of "freed" personalities gaining positions of power, since the group includes a number of Companions they dislike.¹³⁴

Again, Answering-Ansar (perhaps because it aims to effectively 'answer', as the name of the site says, to Sunni polemic) is particularly thorough. The Answering-Ansar site displays organized links to chapters that systematically review the Sunni historical sources in order to make a convincing case against a man considered by Sunnis to stand in the ranks of the revered Companions. The piece is appropriately entitled "Answering-Ansar's detailed attack on Mu'awiyah".¹³⁵ Chapter headings include, "Mu'awiyah instituted the bid'ah of cursing Imam Ali (as)"¹³⁶; this section depends on the Shi'ite conviction, perhaps not entirely convincing to Sunnis, that the division of good and evil depends on one's love or hatred of ahl al-bayt. Another chapter highlights the etymological root of the name Muawiyah, pointing out that it technically, and also suitably for an enemy of Ali, means a female dog or "barking bitch".¹³⁷ This insult seems more likely to inflame Sunni anger than convince through a sustained critique. As often happens with the more aggressive kind of Shi'ite site, a bridge being (supposedly) built is soon undermined by the builders themselves. It is as if Shi'ites, with the advent of the web, continued to use material that earlier circulated among themselves for a Sunni public that was previously not very accessible to them, but failed in the process to adequately modify or expurgate the content.

vii) Shi'ite views of Uthman

¹³⁴ See <http://al-majalis.com/forums/viewtopic.php?t=6773>

¹³⁵ <http://www.answering-ansar.org/answers/muawiyah/en/chap1.php>

¹³⁶ <http://www.answering-ansar.org/answers/muawiyah/en/chap7.php>

¹³⁷ <http://www.answering-ansar.org/answers/muawiyah/en/chap11.php>

It was the caliph Umar who appointed Muawiya governor of Syria (before Muawiya himself ascended to the caliphate), and then the third caliph, Uthman, confirmed that appointment after him. Therefore in the view of Shi'ites, both caliphs are implicated in the actions of Muawiya, and Shi'ite web activists spare no effort in exposing their iniquity both prior to and during their caliphates.¹³⁸ Once Muawiya's character and legacy are proven to be corrupt, those of Uthman are also called into question. Uthman is, however, a respected and revered Companion, as well as, of course, one of the four "rightly-guided" caliphs, along with Abu Bakr and Umar before him and Ali after. It is quite a challenge for Shi'ite polemicists to discredit him.

Sunnis, for their part, have love for all four of the rightly-guided Caliphs, including Ali. Some opinion of the Hanafi juristic school even prefers Ali to the others, without detracting from his predecessors' piety and legitimacy. This is not, however, enough in the view of Shi'ite activists, for whom any praise of the other three rightly-guided caliphs is misguided. One line of attack taken on Shi'ite sites against the legitimacy of the other three early caliphs is, as mentioned in the previous chapter, elucidation of the case for Ali's Imamate. The necessity of Imamate rather than the caliphate and Ali's right to that office provide sufficient grounds to establish that the first three Caliphs usurped Ali's birthright. Their supposed incompetence in appointing governors such as Muawiya then serves to underline their illegitimacy, and these doubts are finally confirmed, as in the case of the other figures discussed above, by evidence of their evil deeds recorded in Sunni history books.

Shi'ite activists love to attack Uthman for his alleged ostentation. They trace the beginning of a focus in the Muslim community on luxury and opulence to his reign and policies.

¹³⁸ See for example <http://umar-ibn-khattab.blogspot.com/2011/02/how-muawiyah-ibn-abu-sufyan-came-to.html>

The site <http://www.al-islam.org/masoom/companions/abudharr.html> comments, in a tone of open disgust:

Even though 'Umar and Abu Bakr were themselves the cause for this deviation, yet the political organization of Islam was established upon the very bases which the Prophet had structured: simplicity, equality, fair distribution of wealth, and prevention of its centralization, just as could be seen. 'Umar also left and Uthmān, this incapable, pseudo-religious old man took over the reins of rulership and instability which had come into being in the foundation of Islamic rule had become so strong that the structure of Muhammad (pbuh&hf) all at once was destroyed. During his rule, the caliphate was changed into a monarchy and the mud homes of the Islamic rulers were changed into monarchical palaces, simplicity into splendid ceremony of the court of Mu'āwiya and the extravagant organization of Uthmān.

A dispute, apparently famous among Shi'ites, with Ali's close companion Abu Dharr is a focal point. Uthman is reputed to have exiled Abu Dharr for criticizing his court's luxurious ways.¹³⁹ Barnaby Rogerson describes how Abu Dharr (according to the Shi'ite sources) was exiled from Medina and sent to live in the desert, where he practiced austerity. According to Rogerson, "It was a mild enough persecution, but the death of Abu Dharr just two years later created a powerful new martyr for all those who opposed the self-satisfied wealth proudly displayed by the new ruling class."¹⁴⁰ Ali is said to have criticized Uthman for banning Abu Dharr for speaking 'the truth' against Uthman's court's luxurious lifestyle.¹⁴¹

The caliph Uthman was finally murdered in Medina by a mob, under somewhat mysterious circumstances. The Answering-Ansar team has compiled a three hundred-page PDF file on Uthman's murder and its circumstances,¹⁴² including an expose dismantling the praise of Uthman found in Sunni books, an in-depth look at the killers of Uthman designed to establish the correctness of their stance, and an analysis of the honorary title Dhu al-Nurayn ("He of the Two

¹³⁹ <http://hasnain.wordpress.com/2011/05/29/abu-dharr-the-truthful-companion-of-our-prophet-saww/>

¹⁴⁰ Rogerson, *Roots of the Sunni-Shia Schism*, pp. 273-4.

¹⁴¹ See for example <http://www.al-islam.org/nahjul/129.htm>

¹⁴² http://www.answering-ansar.org/answers/who_really_killed_uthman/who_really_killed_uthman.pdf

Lights”) traditionally given to Uthman as a result of his marriage to two of the Prophet’s daughters. The scope of this effort is an indication of the difficulty of impugning this particular figure. The fact that Uthman was murdered without resistance from anyone also indicates, in the Shi’ite view, the tacit approval of those who were present when the act took place, which is taken as evidence of the caliph’s guilt or corruption. On the site Shiachat.com, one blogger writes, in a fractured English not atypical of Islamic cyberspace:

Amazing thing about usman is that he was killed in the city of companions after he was put in house arrest for 3 days. If companions would not have complaints against his policies (as he had opened the gate of Baitul maal for his family Banu ummaya) they would have saved him. But instead they helped and allowed his murder.”¹⁴³

As the argument unfolds between the Sunni and Shi’ite bloggers, we find the derogatory term “nasibi” repeated frequently. The term implies hatred for the House of the Prophet, and it is used by Shi’ites against Sunnis in general, but more often against Salafis specifically. The YouTube channel shiaistrueislam features a video entitled, “The True Face Of Uthman ibn Affan”, a five-part series dedicated to analyzing source texts (mostly Sunni) in order to expose the caliph’s alleged hypocrisy. In a bid to establish legitimacy, the videos quote original Arabic sources, and they are equipped with intense music that heightens the emotional impact of the experience.¹⁴⁴ The YouTube propaganda is both skillful and, of course, easily accessed by anyone with access to a computer or even web-phone.

Perhaps the most incriminating evidence Shi’ites use against Uthman is his close relationship with Muawiya. The familial as well as political ties that exist between the two are recognized by Sunni and Shi’ite historians alike. Shi’ites consider Uthman’s granting of important political posts to his relatives to be another step downwards towards the historical

¹⁴³ <http://www.shiachat.com/forum/index.php?/topic/78110-who-were-the-killers-of-uthman-ibn-affan/>

Bayt al-Mal means ‘treasury’; Uthman is accused in Shi’ite and Sunni sources of nepotism.

¹⁴⁴ http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gw1evjgPT_8

decline of the Muslim Umma, eventually culminating in the unthinkable – the tragic murder of Husayn. The event of Karbala, the focal point of Shi'ite history and piety, is the ultimate end of criticism and denigration of Uthman.

viii) Creed

Shi'ite polemic, as seen in this chapter, focuses chiefly on Sunni personalities connected (in the Shi'ite view) with the usurping of Ali's rights and the eventual murder of Husayn. Personalities – actual persons who can be described and imagined and toward whom believers can feel a real enmity – are an ideal target for polemic. Theology or Creed is more abstract and complicated and might be thought to be a less ideal target, especially on the web, which generally aims at popularization through brief, colorful texts, use of links to break up text or lead to more substantial 'back-up' material, and images and sound. There are, however, significant differences between Shi'ite and Sunni theology, and Shi'ite web activists do occasionally seize upon them.

Shi'ites adopted the Mu'tazilite doctrine shortly after the school peaked in popularity in the 9th century C.E.¹⁴⁵ The Mu'tazilites emphasized reason and logic; they employed reason or *aql* in constructing theological doctrines pertaining to ontology, cosmology, and teleology. Mu'tazilite rationalism serves as the basis of Twelver Shi'ite theology today, even though there are significant differences between the two, including in the area of the imamate and intercession. The founding fathers of Mu'tazilism were almost exclusively Sunni. However, while a few neo-Mu'tazilites do now exist among modernist Sunni thinkers, Mu'tazilism was decisively excluded from Sunni orthodoxy long ago and the school itself disappeared. The

¹⁴⁵ For Shi'ism and Mu'tazilism, see: Moojan Momen, *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam. The History and Doctrines of Twelver Shi'ism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987), pp. 77-82.

Mu'tazilite-inspired rationalist theology of the Shi'ites is thus very different from Sunni theology.

The theological point most often argued on Shi'ite sites is that one must refrain from attributing any limitations or dimensions to God. The following hadith is frequently cited:

Narrated Abu Huraira: Allah's Apostle said, "Every night when it is the last third of the night, our Lord, the Superior, the Blessed, descends to the nearest heaven and says: Is there anyone to invoke Me that I may respond to his invocation? Is there anyone to ask Me so that I may grant him his request? Is there anyone asking My forgiveness so that I may forgive him?"¹⁴⁶

Abu Hurayra, it should be noted, is a Companion of the Prophet and hadith narrator who is suspect in the eyes of Shi'ites. The belief apparently attributed by Abu Hurayra to the Prophet here is that God literally rose above His throne. This, in the Shi'ite view, is blasphemous because it assigns to God a physical and temporal location. Shi'ite rationalism rejects any such possibility; passages in the Quran (cited below) that seem to speak of God's physical aspects are interpreted, in Mutazilite fashion, metaphorically. Of course, Sunnis, apart from a few extremists, also do not believe in the physicality of God or anthropomorphism. The majority of Sunnis take the position that one should refrain from exegesis or analogies based on such verses of the Quran and hadiths; one should simply reserve judgment as to their possible meaning, on the grounds that God's attributes and actions cannot be fully comprehended. Nevertheless, as seen on the website referred to above, Shi'ites continue to attribute that belief to Sunnis while at the same time intimating that to refrain from judgment amounts to simply refusing to discuss the issue despite the fact that the Prophet could not have left such crucial matters unsettled.

Whereas rationalist Shi'ite theology deems God to be Omnipresent, the Sunnis, many activists claim, confine Him to a particular location above the sky. The indictment becomes more

¹⁴⁶http://www.wilayat.net/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&catid=55:tauheedshirktawassulshafaat-general&id=573:allah-descends-to-lowest-heaven

pointed as Shi'ite sites begin to detail supposed Sunni beliefs in regard to God's body parts. The Quran (and several Sunni hadiths) make reference to God's face,¹⁴⁷ shin,¹⁴⁸ eyes,¹⁴⁹ and hands.¹⁵⁰ One verse appears to assert that believers will see God in paradise: "unto its [the gaze's] Lord, it looketh".¹⁵¹ Shi'ite polemicists, in return, relate the Quranic conversation between God and Moses in which Moses asks God to reveal Himself, but is told "By no means canst thou see Me [directly]"¹⁵² Shi'ites also point out that the Quran states: "No vision can grasp Him, but His grasp is over all vision: He is above all comprehension, yet is acquainted with all things."¹⁵³

How, Shi'ites ask, can Sunni literalists claim that it is possible to physically see God, yet not see Him? Is this a matter of Divine permission or sanction? Or is it actually one of God's quintessential attributes that He cannot be perceived by the human eye? If the latter, then there is an inconsistency between divine permission on the one hand, and prohibition on the other - a paradox that Shi'ite rationalist logic cannot admit. This line of argument is reproduced on many Shi'ite websites that attack Sunni beliefs.¹⁵⁴ Shi'ite activists thus assert that Sunni theology lacks cohesion. Sunni exegesis too is said to be inconsistent; Sunnis, Shi'ites claim, cherry-pick the verses and hadiths they wish to interpret literally, while interpreting others metaphorically.¹⁵⁵

¹⁴⁷ Qur'an 2:115.

¹⁴⁸ Qur'an 68:42.

¹⁴⁹ Qur'an 52:48.

¹⁵⁰ Qur'an 5:64.

¹⁵¹ Qur'an 75:23.

¹⁵² Qur'an 7:143.

¹⁵³ Qur'an 6:103.

¹⁵⁴For example: <http://www.imamreza.net/eng/imamreza.php?id=3332>; <http://www.al-islam.org/peshawar/3.3.html>;
<http://www.shiachat.com/forum/index.php?/topic/234974343-wahabis-beleive-god-has-a-body/>

¹⁵⁵ For instance, the verse, "But those who were blind in this world, will be blind in the hereafter, and most astray from the Path" (17:72). If interpreted literally, this verse would imply that blind people will not enter paradise. However, that interpretation is unanimously rejected and the metaphorical meaning of being 'blind' to the truth accepted.

Shi'ite activists, to be fair, do not always paint Sunnism with a broad brush; they do specifically mention and malign Wahhabis and Salafists (whom they seem to equate with one another), as they are widely regarded as strict literalists in their interpretation of the Quran and are the main adherents and proponents of the Wasitiyya Creed, a work of the 13th-century scholar Ibn Taymiya in which the efficacy of theology is denied.

Nevertheless, Shi'ites, as seen on the websites referred to above, intimate that failure to rigorously establish God's incomparability opens the door to anthropomorphism and that Sunnis in general are in danger of falling into the trap of the Salafists. There also seems to be some attempt here to split Sunnis and bring the non-Salafi/Wahhabi majority to the side of the Shi'ites, a strategy already discussed. Though in some ways a fine point of theology, the doctrine of God's attributes is a powerful point of attack since it concerns the basic concept of divinity. Shi'ite sites do not, of course, go into the finer arguments and nuances. The center of their argument is really the accusation of anthropomorphism, which is vivid and easily understood – web-friendly, one might say - even if not exactly accurate.

Conclusion

Sunni-Shi'ite dialogue has come a long way in the past century. Attempts made in the mid-twentieth century at reconciliation by well-respected scholars from the two major schools of Islam and years of bridge-building have been undone by wars – the conflict in Iraq and others – which have inflamed partisanship. We stand at a crucial juncture in relations between Sunnis and Shi'ites as sectarian conflict intensifies in many areas of the Middle East, India, Pakistan and Afghanistan. The advent of the internet, a global arena in which any and all can feign erudition and participate represents another step in the evolution of the debate. The internet changes both the nature and impact of “dialogue” (in fact, of polemic) by enabling the proliferation and sharing of ideas instantly and on an international scale. In this work, we have examined both the content of Shi'ite internet polemic and the effect of the medium through which it is communicated. These must be studied together.

We saw that Shi'ite internet propagandists take two distinct approaches; in this thesis, I have devoted a chapter to each. In Chapter One, we explored material aimed at rapprochement apparently designed to draw in a Sunni audience. Although there are many sites of this kind, varying in range and sophistication, they employ similar strategies. Shi'ite “rapprochement” sites begin by establishing the esteemed status of the ahl al-bayt - the “People of the House” or Family of the Prophet - in the Quran. Then, hadiths from Sunni sources praising the Family are showcased and paraded in order to further drive the point home. Once the status of the ahl al-bayt has been established, the Sunni, it is hoped, begins to acknowledge, even if reluctantly, the grounding in Sunni sources that Shi'ites possess and perhaps even their superior knowledge. Sunnis, it is imagined, will be surprised to find themselves alerted to a rich sea of tradition existing in their own source texts. Citation of the Quran, a shared source, and erudition exhibited

in detailed references to hadiths (which conservative Sunnis are especially attached to) should, in the estimation of Shi'ite authors, impress and draw in surfers who come across rapprochement-oriented internet sites.

With the family of the Prophet— in the Shi'ite definition, Muhammad, Ali, Fatima, Hasan and Husayn – virtually beatified, the audience, it is thought, will be ready to learn about the centerpiece of Shi'ite belief, the doctrine of Imamate. Imamate is lent legitimacy not only by the necessity that the Family and its descendants rule, but the proposition that the community needs leadership and that this logical necessity was met by the Prophet prior to his death through the appointment of Ali ibn Abi Talib as the first Imam. Shi'ite propagandists avail themselves of all sources, including the Bible, in order to justify these claims. Finally, they attempt to draw parallels between themselves and potentially aligned parties and groups such as relatively moderate Sunnis and Sufis, hoping to create affinity with Shi'ism by widening the gap and intensifying the animosity those groups have toward Wahhabis, the most hostile adversaries of Shi'ism.

Although the sites examined in Chapter One present themselves as being aimed at rapprochement, the aim is evidently not mutual understanding, but demonstration of the rightness of the Shi'ite position. The “unity” (a word frequently used) of the Muslim community supposedly desired would involve Sunni surfers wholly accepting the doctrine of the Imamate, which means effectively accepting the whole Shi'ite worldview; although the sites are careful not to lay out the full implications, for instance by refraining entirely or to a large extent from denigrating the Sunni Companions.

Rapprochement sites are more likely to be successful in reassuring Shi'ites of the reasonableness of their own doctrine. A member of the besieged Shi'ite minority consulting such

material can feel that he or she is not an outsider or ‘heretic’ as Sunnis claim, but a full member of the Muslim community according to the Sunni sources themselves, which are presented as confirming Shi’ite beliefs. Shi’ites may, in fact, be largely the intended audience for rapprochement-oriented sites, even though the sites seem to deploy strategies aimed at the imagined psychology of Sunni readers. As far as the material is actually aimed at Sunnis, the authors make a grave mistake in resorting to the esoteric exegesis that is typical of Shi’ism, since both conservative and liberal modern Sunnism considers “straightforward”, literal interpretation to be the only legitimate approach to the scriptures.

The approach explored in Chapter Two is more open and aggressive. In this class of sites, the Shi’ite penchant for attacking the Companions of the Prophet or Sahaba revered by the Sunnis – the caliphs Abu Bakr, Umar, and Uthman, and others –whom they find disagreeable at best and nefarious at worst is given free rein. The method employed is meticulous dissection. The sites begin by pointing to alleged discrepancies in Sunni tradition, beginning with the problematic definition of Sahaba, which secures the status of any and all individuals proclaiming their faith while having met the Prophet regardless of any hidden motives, despite the fact that the Sunni source texts themselves acknowledge the existence of hypocritical Companions.

Shi’ite activists follow up this initially sally with what can only be called wholesale character assassination of prominent Sunni Companions, beginning with Abu Bakr, whom they charge with the usurpation of Ali’s rightful caliphate. Umar is painted in even darker colors, along with the daughters of both caliphs, Aisha and Hafsa respectively. Furthermore, the martyrdom of Husayn is exploited as clear evidence of the corrosive corruption of the early Islamic leadership and state, the terrible culmination of a gradual decline which, it is strongly implied, began at the very moment these Sahaba embraced Islam.

Thus Shi'ite propagandists blame Husayn's murder on the corrupt leadership of Yazid, while Yazid's appointment to the position of Caliph is in turn blamed on his father Muawiya, who seems to represent 'evil incarnate' due to the wars he waged against Ali during his own difficult and ultimately tragic Caliphate. The conspiratorial chain extends to Uthman, who is linked to Muawiya through political and familial ties. Since Umar and Abu Bakr preceded Uthman's leadership, the guilt of Husayn's blood comes full circle. The scenario presented of Sunni history is of gradual descent into chaos, a great contrast to the order that would have been ensured, in the Shi'ite view, by the legitimate Imamate. Shi'ite sites maintain that these events not only marred the past but tainted basic Islamic teachings, including beliefs regarding God and His Messenger. History and theology go together, as one would expect in a Shi'ite worldview; although the emphasis is on history and above all personalities, since these are more tangible and easily comprehensible for a popular audience.

Thus again, though the Shi'ite internet campaign, which is essentially aimed at proselytization, may draw in the occasional Sunni reader through "rapprochement" and convince a few others with a fearsome arsenal of evidence and proof, the reality remains that the material is less likely to draw in Sunnis than equip Shi'ites with the means to preach their faith or, more likely, defend themselves. Defense, including offence as a defense, is likely to be the more typical stance of a peripheral sect—keeping in mind the small proportion in the community of all Shi'ites combined - when confronted with their dominant counterpart.

There is also, as suggested in both chapters, a contradiction or clash between the two types of Shi'ite polemical sites. The second type tends to undermine the presentation given in the first. One type of site claims that Shi'ism is really the same as Sunnism if Sunnism is properly understood; but the second aims to demonstrate that Sunnism is riddled with inconsistencies, and

in fact rotten to its foundations. The first refrains from insulting the Companions, while the second denigrates them openly. The contradiction is easily seen by even casual users in the brief, simple texts featured in the open, instant medium of the internet.

In the introduction to this thesis, we quoted Sökefeld's observation that cyberspace has afforded minority sects the 'luxury' of publicly and proudly propagating their viewpoints with little to no consequence or repercussion. In view of my findings, this argument needs to be qualified. First, the internet can serve not only as a medium for the 'renaissance' of minority 'pride', as Sökefeld sees it, but also a forum for the release of centuries of pent-up rage. The contemporary religious scene is as riddled today with religious intolerance as it ever was. We see a shift only in the medium of expression of age-old prejudices. Instead of state-sponsored inquisitions and pogroms (not to say that this is itself a thing of the past), we now have internet partisanship. It often seems that the socially and politically impotent use the internet as a gateway for self-aggrandizement and dissemination of views that would find little to no acceptance in respectable academic circles.

Second, Sökefeld's research was based on the experience of a minority Shi'ite group, the Alevis of Turkey. The Alevis have cultivated an identity that does not depend entirely on Islam. Acceptance by Sunnis is not very important to the Alevis, nor do they aspire to bring Sunnis into their circle. Twelver Shi'ites, on the other hand, are Muslims who want to be at least accepted by Sunnis and tend to believe that their truth should become the truth of Islam overall. Clearly, the way the internet is used and the effect it has for a minority depends on the nature and position of that minority. Twelver Shi'ite sites tend to be more defensive or "offensive-defensive" than proud.

One wonders where Muslims would go from here. It seems likely that the internet will only further divide Shi'ites and Sunnis, as any impulse toward rapprochement seems to yield to escalation and inflammatory attack. In the Introduction, I pointed out that the strategy of the original Rapprochement movement was to focus on law, an area of approximate convergence in which commonalities could be emphasized. This approach depends on careful discretion by a committed elite, a strategy not favored by the indiscrete, popular medium of the internet. In cyberspace, disagreements are not so easily swept under the rug. The internet has, indeed, created awareness, but that has been used to manipulate rather than enlighten the masses. The paradox is that in the information age, when data is more easily available and transferrable, people who are socially isolated and perhaps alienated can fragment information and turn it to their own purposes. With a wealth of information to choose from, internet "authors" are able to create and repeat truths by cutting and pasting in the manner of a collage. This is evident in both Shi'ite and Sunni polemical sites; I was able to produce characterizations of the vast number of sites because they endlessly re-cycle material.

The anonymity surfers may find behind a computer monitor is also a negative factor. Rather than address their co-religionists directly, surfers are forever insulated from the humanity in the dehumanized 'other' and relieved of trying to encounter it. The authors of the sites I examined do not say who they are, although they do extensively cite authored sources to lend an air of respectability. At most, the name of a group is associated with a site, but those groups are also shadowy and not easily traceable.

It may be said that all these features of internet polemic are found in some way in polemic in general. The point I would like to make is that the internet *amplifies* the negative. We note with some apprehension the unrestrained and irresponsible indulgence in argument and hate

the internet has helped foster. If websites featuring gratuitous sex and violence dominate internet traffic, then little serves to reign in the passions and vigor of a young zealot out to devour the catalogue of polemic in order to feed and express his or her prejudices.

What is really striking and disappointing is that there are no sites devoted to encouraging temperate and responsible discussion. Most encourage polarization, and a few also seem to incite violence. One possible explanation for the complete lack of moderate voices and constructive activity may be that this would require more learned discourse and scholars to produce it, while that kind of material and personality is unlikely to use the popular medium of the web as an outlet. Dialogue and rapprochement between Shi'ites and Sunnis has never been a mass movement so that ordinary people might think of establishing internet dialogue forums.

The lack of genuinely scholarly and thus, hopefully, more moderate activity in cyberspace related to Shi'ite-Sunni relations is partly attributable to changes in patterns of authority. Scholars, sheikhs, mullahs, and ulema - as far as moderate material can be found in their work - are canvassed by the polemicist only to confirm his or her pre-conceived notions. The very nature of internet polemics is anti-intellectual. Rather than sincerely exploring the others' points of view and seriously exploring traditions and sources, it employs debate-club techniques to refute the positions of one's opponents. In this endeavor, isolated pieces of evidence – sound-bites, in effect – are privileged by authors and most likely to be heard by a rapidly surfing audience. Rarely if ever in my research did I see any effort to take into account reputable contemporary scholarship in the field of inter-sectarian dialogue or debate.

Muslim scholars had already lost some of their authority before the internet ever appeared on the horizon because of a change from a system of apprenticeship in learning, in which knowledge was cultivated at the feet of pious scholars, to learning through print in the

twentieth century. This development along with an emphasis on direct access to the scriptures and religious intuition and action resulted in the tradition being more decentralized and unsupervised. Traditional authorities did respond by making good use of print media; but the internet now poses an even greater challenge. In addition to the factors discussed above, the diffusion of pseudo-knowledge through the unchecked corridors of the internet may be likened to a cancer in that, while quite easily detectable, it is immensely difficult to excise. It cannot be isolated to simply one colony of sites in cyberspace. It travels, to extend the analogy, through the veins of cyberspace from one website to another through links and clicks, leaving its victims with something far more dangerous than ignorance, the illusion of knowledge.

This work has focused on Shi'ite sites, leaving Sunni anti-Shi'ite sites for future research. I can, however, make a contribution to that research by noting some differences between material posted by the two groups.

Although Shi'ite sites differ in style, there is a noticeable pattern altogether of what one might call consideration for feelings. Approaches and attacks are gradual and measured, as illustrated in the first but also second chapters of the thesis. The language of Shi'ite sites is persuasive and a kind of tactful pace is used to actually build an argument. These qualities do, as I said, vary; but when the Shi'ite sites overall are compared to Sunni material, the lack of 'political correctness' in the latter is striking. Tactfulness and gradual building of arguments is completely missing from the numerous anti-Shi'ite sites posted by Sunni propagandists.

This difference is a result of the minority and majority status of the two groups, or more exactly, the perception by an overwhelming Sunni majority that the small Shi'ite minority is heretical or unbelieving. Shi'ites usually do not hold this view of Sunnis; they rather consider them to be uninformed or misled. Thus, Shi'ite sites generally try not to frighten away a

potential Sunni audience, while also comforting their fellow Shi'ites by suggesting that the divide between them and the Sunni community is not so great. The aims are proselytization and, more to the point, positive self-presentation. The goal is to prove Shi'ite positions, including through the use of Sunni sources, and not to exclude Sunnis, which would not in any case be possible or meaningful since they comprise eighty-five to ninety percent of Muslims.

Sites mounted by the Sunni majority, however, pull no punches. Contrary to Shi'ite sites, they acknowledge little or no commonality between the Shi'ite tradition and their own. There is, evidently, no need for the majority to convince the minority of its position or assure its members that they are ultimately compatible with them. Excluding Shi'ites from the community is similarly unproblematic; in fact, a strong theme of the sites is that Islam would be strengthened if this could be done. Sunni propagandists seem to fear what they perceive to be the Shi'ites' greatest weapon: ignorance. They feel the need to 'sound the alarm' to wake the Sunni world to what they believe to be the growing threat of unbelief spreading in the community and weakening it from within.

Another stark contrast is use of quotations. Both Sunni and Shi'ite sites quote each other's sources. However Shi'ite sites will utilize Sunni sources both to confirm their own doctrine (as seen in Chapter One) and attack supposed inconsistencies (Chapter Two). Sunni sites, on the other hand, limit their use of Shi'ite material to presenting quotations that can serve as evidence for more effective attacks; Shi'ite material is used as first-hand proof of unorthodoxy or unbelief. As the dominant majority, Sunni apologists certainly do not require Shi'ite material to verify their belief; Sunnis consider themselves independent and sovereign. Shi'ites, on the other hand, always have to deal, even in their polemic, with being a besieged minority.

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