

Abdessamad Belhaj – Bianka Speidl:

FITNA RISING: THE SUNNĪ-SHĪ'Ī CLASHES IN WESTERN EUROPE

ABSTRACT: This paper aims to present the recent clashes between Sunnīs and Shī'a in the UK, which brought the Sunnī-Shī'ī divide in Europe into the public attention as a potential threat to social cohesion. While these clashes could be considered, for the time being, as low intensity conflicts, the situation could change in the near future: the increasing number of Shī'a in Europe and the escalating conflicts between Sunnīs and Shī'a in the Middle East, fuelled by the Sunnī radicalisation on the rise and the expansion of Shī'a networks, could involve Muslims in Europe in a confrontation. Other incidents in the Netherlands, Germany and Belgium attest to rising Sunnī-Shī'ī sectarianism in Europe.

KEYWORDS: Sunnī, Shī'a, sectarian conflict, radicalisation, Europe, fitna(sedition)

INTRODUCTION

Sectarianism is not a new phenomenon in Europe. Suffice it to refer the reader to Yugoslavia, which collapsed because of sectarianism leading to disastrous wars and crimes against humanity. However, the Sunnī-Shī'ī sectarianism brings two particularities of sectarian violence into Europe. On the one hand, Muslim societies failed to secularize and build modern nations, and Sunnī-Shī'ī sectarianism is but a symptom of this failure. In particular, Middle Eastern societies are interwoven with traditional ethno-religious identities, and the geopolitical opposition between Iran and Saudi Arabia profits from these internal divisions and pushes them to the extreme implications. On the other hand, some immigrant communities who live in visible and invisible ghettos in Europe maintain their traditional identities, reproduce religious, ethnic, social and political patterns, with the same religious rhetoric and around the same fault lines that exist in the Middle East. Moreover, immigrants are connected to transnational communities affected through media and personal links by the events and strategies of the states and actors involved in the Sunnī – Shī'ī sectarianism.

The purpose of this paper is threefold. First, we aim to identify the Sunnī-Shī'ī clashes in the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany and the UK. Second, it is intended here to analyze the religious and political motivations behind the current clashes. Third, we illustrate the ongoing process from a less studied angle, highlighting the major venues of instrumentalising Shī'ī identity by Iran. We argue that the ethno-religious-politics of the Middle East has direct impacts on the Sunnī-Shī'ī divide in Western Europe, mirroring the conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia in the Middle East. Importing and reproducing sectarianism in the already unstable European context severely reduces the chances of establishing the much desired social cohesion in European societies.

THE NETHERLANDS: A WAR OF WORDS

On 26 February 2006, Iraqi Shī'a organized a manifestation in The Hague in front of the Dutch Parliament. The organizers described it as "a wave of tumultuous anger against the enemies of Shī'a and the disbelievers".¹ At the manifestation the organisers read to the participants who came from the Netherlands and Belgium the declaration of al-Sistānī. This manifestation was a reaction to terrorist attacks in Iraq against Shī'ī sanctuaries. However, the reaction of the Shī'a in the Netherlands actually imported the conflict to a peaceful European country, entangling Muslims in a vicious circle of violence. Diffusing the sectarian conflict in Iraq outside its geopolitical context, all the more that in the current circumstances it seems to be unsolved or unsolvable, is a psychological-political process that can be best expressed by the Arabic term *fitna* (sedition). It is through successive emotional reactions that sectarianism flourishes in Iraq, and elsewhere. Through the following statement, the organizers channelled Middle Eastern tension to the Netherlands:

The School of Ahl al-Bayt is the source of true Islam, which teaches us moderation and peace, love and goodness for all humanity, and this school is witnessing its history by calling for noble values and unity, tolerance and patience... The terrorists who committed the crime of the destruction of the sacred shrines of Imams proved with this heinous attack that they are not Muslims, although they claimed to belong to Islam and to be Muslims but Islam is innocent from them and they do not even belong to humanity, far from its values and principles. Therefore, we call upon the United Nations and the governments of the world and the institutions concerned to denounce this disgraceful crime strongly and help the Iraqi people, oppressed by all possible means in its response to terrorism and its quest to protect its children and their holy places... We announce from here our support for the blessed guidance in Najaf, led by the cleric Sayyed Ali al-Sistani, may he long live, and we call on our people, and our brothers in Iraq to abide by the guidance's instructions and pay obedience and respect to him.²

This declaration draws on some of the classic motifs of sectarianism: binary thinking (us and them), religious identities (*Ahl al-Bayt*), dehumanizing the others, loyalty to a charismatic figure involved in sectarian violence, etc. The importation and staging of these motifs increases the inevitable tensions between the Sunnīs and the Shī'a in the Netherlands. Recently, Yassin Elforkani a young Sunnī imam in Amsterdam confirmed the increasing tensions between the two communities in the Netherlands. He claims that "the growing differences between Sunnīs and Shī'a were intensified since the conflict in Syria has been going on (...) besides a theological difference, there is a political difference".³ Both declarations, that of the Shī'a side and that of the Sunnī imam, fail to keep a distance from the Middle Eastern conflicts.

Another provocative and confusing manifestation has been organized by the Rotterdam Shī'a Muslim community against radicalization. Compared to the first manifestation the difference lies in Ḥussayn replacing al-Sistānī but the same manichaeism (Shī'a vs. salafism which is equalled with terrorism) and self-victimization are still central to the discourse.

¹ *Tazāhura kabīra fī Hūlandā istinkāran li-jarīmat al-i'tidā' 'alā al-aḍriha al-muqaddasa fī Sāmarrā'* <http://yazahra.org/1/samaraa/holland%20tadahora.htm>

² Idem.

³ "Jammer dat je een shi'iet bent" <http://www.nrc.nl/handelsblad/2014/01/24/jammer-dat-je-een-shiiet-bent-1338210>

Shiawaves, a Shīʿī website, described the manifestation as follows:

The march was both in honor of Imam Hussein, peace be upon him, and in memory of the victims of terrorist attacks. The silent demonstrators marched from the Schouwburgplein, through the Hofplein, the Coolsingel and Meent and then back to where they started. By participating in such marches, demonstrators tried to distance themselves from Salafism. The demonstrators also marched for Imam Hussein, peace be upon him, whose ideology stand for justice, freedom, and equality.⁴

Demonstrating as Shīʿa, and not as Muslims, against radicalization is clearly a sectarian act and the underlying premise is that radicalization is a Sunnī problem. The march deliberately confuses past and present in order to extend the credit it mythically adduces to past (Ḥussayn) and present (current Shīʿa), thus presenting the Shīʿī community peaceful while pointing at the Sunnīs as supporters of oppression and terrorism. This mythical selectiveness occults that Shīʿa political movements were the pioneers of Islamic radicalization in the eighties with Khumaynī, Ḥizbullāh, kidnapping westerners, committing suicide attacks and the aggressive sectarian policies of Iran. The self-victimization of Shīʿa as a minority is also a recurrent strategy: the same way Ḥussayn stood up against the injustice of the Umayyads (Sunnīs), the Shīʿa today have the legitimacy of fighting Sunnīs. It is implied also that Salafism and Sunnīs persecute the Shīʿa the same way the Umayyads oppressed Ḥussayn. The construction of the self as a victim is a well-known mechanism of perpetrators of crimes against humanity while, as it stands today, the Shīʿa are a majority in Iraq, supported by a Shīʿī country, Iran, controlling most of the country with paramilitary groups conducting crimes against humanity. The parallel with Ḥussayn allows the Shīʿa ideologues and strategists to cover the extreme violence they are involved in both in Iraq and Syria. Sectarian movements construct false realities wrapped up in religious symbolism and linking past apprehensions to current politics in order to develop a strategy of radical change of borders and power balance.

BELGIUM: THE BURNT MOSQUE OF ANDERLECHT

On 12 March 2012, Rachid El Boukhari, a Moroccan of 35, living in neighbouring Belgium, set fire to the Reda mosque, located in the district of Anderlecht, Brussels. The fire caused the death of the imam of the Shīʿī mosque, Abdellah Dahdouh, also of Moroccan descent, and led to the arrest of Rachid El Boukhari at the scene. The latter had explained his actions as “revenge against Shīʿī Muslim leaders, he said, who committed crimes against Sunnī Muslims in Syria”.⁵ He made his decision to attack the mosque under the influence of images of the current situation in Syria broadcast by Arab media; as he put it, he “wanted to do something to scare the members of the Shīʿī community which he considers responsible for the violence against Sunnīs in Syria.”⁶

⁴ “Shia Muslims march against radicalization in the Netherlands” <http://shiawaves.com/english/world/2043-shia-muslims-march-against-radicalization-in-the-netherlands>

⁵ “L’homme qui a mis le feu à la mosquée d’Anderlecht a été condamné à 27 ans de prison” <http://www.lesoir.be/726839/article/actualite/belgique/2014-12-05/l-homme-qui-mis-feu-mosquee-d-anderlecht-ete-condamne-27-ans-prison>

⁶ “Mosquée Reda: Une haine qui brûle et qui tue” <http://www.lalibre.be/actu/belgique/mosquee-reda-une-haine-qui-brule-et-qui-tue-51b8e72fe4b0de6db9c5d13e>

This justification of the Sunnī-Shīʿī conflict in Syria illustrates the fragility of borders between the Middle East and Europe once more. In Brussels the cafés and restaurants owned by Arabs constantly broadcast the violent manifestations of the Sunnī-Shīʿī divide in the Middle East. In addition, both Iranian- and Saudi-backed websites spread hate speech in French. Above all, Sunnīs perceive the expansion of Shīʿī propaganda among the Moroccan community as an aggression and treachery.

The Reda mosque is actually the *Reda Cultural and Islamic Centre*, founded in 1994. Beside its ritual function the Centre organizes conferences, offers religious courses and a social centre of the Shīʿī community. The imam, Dahdouh converted in early 1980s, in the wave of the expansion of the Iranian Islamic revolution and Khumaynī's propaganda. Dahdouh studied in Iran for several years. The discourse articulated by the Centre focuses on Ḥizbullāh, religious nationalism, Khumaynism, and anti-Americanism. Members of the Centre manifest regularly in Brussels, carrying the flags of Ḥizbullāh and Naṣrallāh's pictures.⁷

The jury of the Belgian court which judged Rachid El Boukhari declared him guilty with aggravating circumstance of homicide, sentenced him to 27 years, but acquitted him of the aggravating circumstance of terrorism. The jury stated that:

Terrorism is unfounded because it is not proven that the accused has seriously damaged Belgium or an international organization. Moreover, it does not appear that the accused is a religious fanatic. He is not a practicing Muslim and did not act on behalf of a particular ideology. He seems to have been inspired only by massacres in Homs in Syria, he saw on Al- Jazeera television channel.⁸

Isabelle (Soumaya) Praile, a high representative of Shīʿa in Belgium, being the only Shīʿī member of the Muslim Executive of Belgium when the events happened, acknowledged the tensions between the two communities. However, she referred to the responsibility of Sunnī foreign imams who preach intolerance against other religious communities as the cause of the clash, accusing the growing influence of the Salafī trend, in Belgium, and calling the Executive and the authorities to reassure the Shīʿī community⁹. Praile asserted that "There is a strong sense of insecurity in the community and the attack on the Reda mosque can be a trigger of other incidents."¹⁰

This attitude of victimization by the Shīʿa in Belgium cannot be sustained. If there is no clear separation from Iran's or Ḥizbullāh's policies in the Middle East and the propaganda activities are not frozen, tensions will remain and other clashes are highly probable. The minister of the Interior J. Milquet was more prudent, compared to Praile, admitting that some Sunnī mosques that could be subject to retaliation for the death of Dahdouh were the subject of appropriate protective measures.¹¹

⁷ Dassetto, F. *L'iris et le croissant: Bruxelles et l'islam au défi de la co-inclusion*, Louvain-la-Neuve : Presses universitaires de Louvain, 2011, p. 280.

⁸ Rachid El Boukhari condamné à 27 ans de réclusion <http://www.levif.be/actualite/belgique/rachid-el-boukhari-condamne-a-27-ans-de-reclusion/article-normal-356553.html>

⁹ L'attentat visant la mosquée d'Anderlecht <https://www.senate.be/www/?Mlval=/Vragen/SVPrintNLFR&LEG=5&NR=6284&LANG=fr>

¹⁰ Idem.

¹¹ Idem.

Conversations with the Sunnīs who live in the Muslim districts of Brussels and media reports show the aggressive campaign of converting Sunnī Moroccans to Shīʿism. Independent Moroccan newspaper *Assabah* expressed deep concerns and spoke even of a “sweeping wave of *shīitisation* of Moroccans in Europe”¹². It estimates the number of Moroccan Shīʿa to 20,000 and the total number of Shīʿa in Belgium to 30,000, the majority of which live in Brussels.¹³ The two reasons of such active conversion are related to propaganda in favour of the Islamic revolution in Iran and the Shīʿī *daʿwa* activities, through mainly associations, libraries and mosques.¹⁴ Sunnī Moroccans perceive this massive conversion as an act of destabilization of a community already fragile for social and economic reasons. It is also viewed as an infiltration to diminish the role of Morocco in Belgium and to increase the influence of Iran in Western Europe.

GERMANY: ON BEING A SATELLITE

The “Shīʿi Federation in Germany” (IGS) is the main organization of Shīʿa in Germany. It was founded in 2009, and represents the Shīʿī communities of Iranian, Iraqi, Lebanese, Pakistani, Afghan, German and Turkish origins in Germany.¹⁵ In February 2015, it issued a statement expressing appreciation and gratitude to ‘Alī Khāmeneī and promised to transmit his message to both Muslims and non-Muslims in Germany. The statement reads as follows:

In the name of Allah the Merciful. Our peace and greetings to Your Eminence. Western nations recently received your bright and valuable letter, which is comparable to the Renaissance in Europe; for which the great thinkers and scientists in Europe fought for; that era that liberated peoples of the world from ignorance and perdition. The period of renaissance occurred thanks to the Muslims, and without them it could never been possible; your speech reminded us of this episode. We the peoples of Europe extend our sincere thanks to you for your great interest in our future and spiritual and social circumstances! Your concern for the generations living in very long distances from you and embracing different beliefs from yours shows how great you are and how extensive is your view about things! Today, as Muslims live in Europe in very difficult conditions, we would like to inform you that the Union of Shiʿa in Germany (IGS) is seeking on behalf of all the Shiʿa in this country to devote all its strength to remove suspicions about Islam, the religion of mercy and affection. We also try our best to get the support of political decision-makers in Germany to stop the extremist currents of racial discrimination against Muslims; and following the example of the Messenger of compassion Muhammad, we seek to promote unity between societies; your speech strengthened our resolve in this direction (...)¹⁶

¹² *Madd shīʿī yaktasiḥ al-jāliya fī Awrūbbā* http://www.assabah.press.ma/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=45398:2013-08-12-11-01-59&catid=113:2010-10-19-10-58-51&Itemid=798

¹³ *Idem*.

¹⁴ *Madd shīʿī yaktasiḥ al-jāliya fī Awrūbbā* http://www.assabah.press.ma/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=45398:2013-08-12-11-01-59&catid=113:2010-10-19-10-58-51&Itemid=798

¹⁵ Rosenow-Williams, K. *Organizing Muslims and integrating Islam in Germany: New Developments in the 21st Century*, Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2013, 167.

¹⁶ Shīʿat Almāniyyā See: <http://kayhan.ir/ar/news/14844>

This statement shows clearly and overtly that the Shī'ī organization in Germany sees itself as a satellite of Iran's supreme leader in Germany. Loyalty to Khāmeneī implies a series of important decisions: paying 20 percent of the income to him, which is a decent amount of Euros, providing information, appointing imams to the mosques who are faithful to Khāmeneī, supporting Iran's policies, pressure on Germany, active propaganda, etc.

The support of Iran extends, naturally, to Ḥizbullāh. In 2006 radical Shī'a manifested against Germany's support for the Israeli campaign against Ḥizbullāh.¹⁷ In May 2014, radical young Shī'ites supporting Ḥizbullāh opposed a manifestation against the regime in Syria, organised by Salafis.¹⁸ The verbal violence of the young Shī'a, well-shown in the video, illustrates their vulnerability toward the Shī'ī rhetoric of Iran and Ḥizbullāh. Although Salafis present themselves through sectarian ideology and acts by reacting violently, the Shī'a display the same sectarian violence, and unveil the sectarian culture in which they are brought up, even if born and raised in Germany.

In Germany, the most important Shī'ī centre is The *Islamisches Zentrum Hamburg* (IZH, Islamic Centre in Hamburg). It is also a contact point for Shī'ī Muslims in Europe. Many other Iranian-backed facilities established in Berlin, Frankfurt am Main and Munich, are affiliated with the IZH. As the *2004 Annual Report on the Protection of the Constitution* by the Federal Ministry of the Interior of the Federal Republic of Germany says about the IZH: "It is the most active propaganda centre in Europe, providing a high-level point of contact to the highest spiritual revolutionary leader in Iran, Ayatollah Khamenei. The Iranian constitution envisages the world-wide spread of the so-called Iranian style Islamic system as founded by Ayatollah Khomeini in 1979 (...). The IZH is also the point of contact for Shiites from other countries, for example Turkey and Lebanon."¹⁹

According to the same report, Shī'ī propaganda actively uses the Internet. Thus Internet portal Muslim-Markt (www.muslim-markt.de) "is operated by Dr Yavuz Özoguz, a Shiite of Turkish descent. In connection with this activity he was given a three-month suspended prison sentence for incitement to hatred (...) Yavuz and Gürhan Özoguz, two brothers, revealed their close links to the Iranian Islamist government system in an interview in June, when they said that 'only a theocracy has a true constitution' and 'Imam Khamenei instructs us'."²⁰ Regarding Teheran's hidden agendas realized through its Foundations such as the *Ahlul Bayt*, an earlier case back in 1992 is worth mentioning, when the assassination of four leaders of the Iranian Kurdish Democratic Party proved to be linked to the Imam 'Ali mosque in Hamburg.²¹

¹⁷ Sirseldoudi, M. "Violent Jihadi Radicalisation in Europe and Conflicts in the Muslim World", in: *Countering Terrorist Recruitment in the Context of Armed Counter-Terrorism Operations*, ed. Siddik Ekici and al., Amsterdam: IOS Press, 2016, p. 200.

¹⁸ See excerpts of these clashes in: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6PL7HWp21kw>

¹⁹ Federal Ministry of the Interior of the Federal Republic of Germany 2004 Annual Report on the Protection of the Constitution. See the report at: http://www.bmi.bund.de/SharedDocs/Downloads/EN/Broschueren/Verfassungsschutzbericht_2004_en.pdf%3F__blob%3DpublicationFile.p.234-235.

²⁰ Idem.

²¹ Wilford, M. "The Assassins' Trail: Unraveling the Mykonos Killings" <http://www.worldaffairsjournal.org/article/assassins%E2%80%99-trail-unraveling-mykonos-killings>

THE UK: VIOLENT DISORDER

Similarly to Germany, Belgium and the Netherlands, the UK is the scene of three factors of clashes between Sunnīs and Shīʿa: the Shīʿī active propaganda, the Middle Eastern context and acts of violence. Two figures of active Shīʿī propaganda Sayed Ammar Nakshwani and Yasir al-Habib are worth mentioning here. Nakshwani, a Persian Iraqi, was well-known before 2014 for his violent speeches against “the enemies of Ḥussayn”, and has become even more famous as he has issued several videos against ISIS since 2014.²² Nakshwani’s provocative attacks on Sunnīs led to a reaction from the other side. He left the UK, taking the *Imam Ali Chair of Shīʿa Studies* at Hartford Seminary in the USA. To justify this decision Nakshwani complained about death threats and acts of vandalism:

They would sometimes target my house and call me and say, ‘Hey *rafidi*, watch your back’. One time there was a call at midnight where they said your dad has gone out and we can see him at the supermarket. They had followed him and were watching him. (...) I made the decision to move to the US alone as I needed to get out and at least provide a safety net for my parents. The police didn’t really do anything — each time it was a case of ‘we will look into it’ (...) Most Sunnis are disgusted by ISIS and their actions but we have to ask serious questions of where this group has come from and which ideas have fed them.²³

The very last sentence “Most Sunnis are disgusted by Isis and their actions but we have to ask serious questions of where this group has come from and which ideas have fed them” illustrates the false logic of sectarianism as in the last decade Nakshwani himself largely contributed to the sectarian setting in which young Shīʿa and Sunnīs live in the UK. As a Shīʿī leader’s, his statement is a clear accusation of Sunnism of being the hotbed of ISIS, which could only cause Sunnīs to radicalize further. It is a sectarian argument against sectarianism. His moving to the United States with the same mind-set promises a bright future for sectarianism in the USA.

Another controversial and radical Shīʿa preacher Yasir al-Habib, from Kuwait and based in London, exemplifies the high risks of sectarianism in the UK. Al-Habib sparked a controversy against ʿĀʿisha, Muḥammad’s wife, a highly respected figure of Sunnism, leading him to disputes in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and elsewhere. He opened a mosque recently named al-Muhassin in Buckinghamshire. Some of his declarations state that the Prophet Muḥammad was assassinated by his wives, ʿĀʿisha and Ḥafṣa, and companions, Abū Bakr and ʿUmar²⁴. Consequently, Sunnīs accuse al-Habib of being a “hate preacher” who makes ludicrously blasphemous remarks”.²⁵ Here is an example of al- Habib’s *fitna*, calling to celebrate the death of ʿĀʿisha:

²² See for example his violent video: *The Origins of ISIS* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=orxVODpOL6s>

²³ Sectarian hatred at the heart of British Muslim community <http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/faith/article4527003.ece>

²⁴ Meet the Controversial Cleric Threatening to Turn UK Muslims Against Each Other https://www.vice.com/en_uk/read/meet-the-controversial-shia-cleric-bringing-sectarian-tension-to-the-uk

²⁵ Meet the Controversial Cleric Threatening to Turn UK Muslims Against Each Other https://www.vice.com/en_uk/read/meet-the-controversial-shia-cleric-bringing-sectarian-tension-to-the-uk.

When it was announced that Margaret Thatcher was dead, there were hundreds of people across the UK who celebrated her death, threw street parties and rejoiced over the news... We will [also] take such an event as a chance to present our case against Aisha, who we have evidence poisoned the Prophet. But it will not shift on the street level from our part and you may take that as a solemn commitment from us.²⁶

Nakshawani and al-Habib entertain a political imaginary the consequence of which is violence. Thus, a group of salafis led by Anjem Choudary organized a protest in London against the Shī'a's support for the Syrian regime, leading to fights between Shī'ī individuals and salafis in the Shī'ī neighbourhood of Edgware Road. This incident was described as the "first case of Muslim sectarian violence in Britain"²⁷ and the involved group of salafis was sentenced for "violent disorder".²⁸ The British press narrated the clash as follows:

That afternoon Mohammed El-Hariri, a Shia Muslim who has run a business in the area for 12 years, was walking along Edgware Road on his way to meet his friend, Fahad Fahad. He noticed a large group dressed in Islamic salafī dress. They were protesting against Shia Muslims, chanting sectarian slogans and carrying inflammatory banners. The banners were in Arabic and contained phrases including 'Shias are unbelievers' and 'Shia will destroy Islam and Muslims.' Other banners condemned Alawites, the Shii denomination of the Syrian leader, Bashar Al-Assad. Mr El-Hariri started to talk to one of the group of protesters - in particular Horner, who he described as a white male with a shaved head and a ginger beard. As he did so he was attacked while another man poured water on him. He was then punched repeatedly by other members of the group...

Sectarianism is not caused by such clashes; it is a political-religious culture and action in which members of both communities dwell permanently. As a matter of fact, the idea of a "Shī'ī area in London", is a symptom of sectarianism and the fact that the political tensions and conflicts of the Middle East appear in the streets of European capitals, questions the whole political culture of many immigrants who reside in Europe. Sectarian rhetorical violence lies at the heart of modern Shī'ism and Salafism and creates conditions for escalating clashes. Additionally, sectarian identities, being primary among many Sunnis and Shī'is, prevent any serious process of integration as European citizens.

IRAN AND THE SHĪ'Ī SECTARIANISM IN EUROPE

The above mentioned examples attest to how Iran attempts to realize its political ambitions in the European context. Among security experts, there is consensus with regard to acknowledging that Iran uses Shī'ī Islam as a political instrument.²⁹ However, regarding Teheran's intentions, there are two opposing views: that it takes advantage of the actual political

²⁶ Idem.

²⁷ Radical Sunni Islamists face jail for attack on group of Shi'ites 'in first case of Muslim sectarian violence in Britain' <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2662726/Radical-Sunni-Islamists-face-jail-attack-group-Shiites-case-Muslim-sectarian-violence-Britain.html>

²⁸ Idem.

²⁹ Puelings, J. "Fearing a 'Shiite Octopus'. Sunni – Shi'a relations and the implications for Belgium and Europe." *Egmont Paper* No. 35, January 2010.

developments, which implies some degree of passivity, or that it – directly and actively – generates them. In our evaluation, the political use of confessional identities in itself – either as an action or as a reaction – is the chief source of conflict import that restrains Muslims in a vicious circle in their European country of residence.

Considering the venues of instrumentalising Shīʿī identity we can identify 3 major areas:

1. *Daʿwa*, that is proselytising among Sunni Muslims in Europe;
2. Recruitment among local (European) Shiʿa for militias in the Middle East;
3. Importing the political conflicts (e.g. those of Syria, Iraq and the Gulf) by protesting with confessional slogans and by presenting themselves as natural allies against terrorism merely due to their Shiʿi identity as a minority.

These fields, however, are interconnected. In the aftermath of the success of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, the export of the ideology of the victorious Shīʿī political Islam took various forms, among them proselytising among Sunni immigrants in Europe. It was considered as an instrument of *al-madd al-shīʿī* (the Shīʿī expansion) because it did not simply mean a change of rites but that of political allegiance.³⁰

The large scale establishment of Shīʿī mosques, schools, charity organisations and cultural centres started after the death of Khumaynī as part of a new, more tactful political and diplomatic strategy known as the *siyāsat-i dast-i gol* (policy of a handful of flowers).³¹ Iran is concerned with the preservation of a distinct Shīʿī identity even in the remotest places, conducting in this regard an intensive theological-political *daʿwa*. A key actor in this enterprise is the *al-Majmaʿ al-ʿālamī li ahl al-bayt* (The World Association for the People of the House of the Prophet), in addition to TV channels such as *al-Manār* (Lebanese) or *al-ʿĀlam* (Iranian), and the Internet, all of which became instruments of spreading the Shīʿī world view and the political messages of Tehran. Another organization, the Imam al-Khūʿī Foundation, which is particularly active in the U.S. and Great Britain, received a General Advisory Status to the United Nations in 1997.³²

Due to the developments in global and regional politics and in the changing climate from 2003 on, Teheran's ambitions became more assertive.³³ This means more explicit, politically loaded preaching, and even launching calls to action. In this framework the primarily non-political establishments became centres of political agitation and even recruitment.

Currently the European *Ahlul Bayt* organisation is one of the factors in maintaining the informal ties between prominent Shīʿī organisations across Europe.³⁴ Additional factors include: the transnational character of Shīʿism, the emulation of various *marājiʿa* located in places distant from one's country of residence, the highly emotional character of Shīʿī religiosity, self-victimisation and identification with the oppressed. All these factors provide a fertile ground for a strategy of Iranian infiltration. This strategy uses the Shīʿī communities residing in whatever corner of the world to realise Iran's political ambitions and to hinder a serious and strategic co-operation among Muslims against terrorism.

The tendency to put in the foreground a sectarian Shīʿī rhetoric loaded with stirred emotions and historical references is well exemplified by the call to action that appeared

³⁰ Puelings, 31.

³¹ Puelings, 16.

³² Puelings, 33.

³³ Puelings, 17.

³⁴ Van den Bos, M. "European Shiism? Counterpoints from Shiites' Organization in Britain and the Netherlands", *Ethnicities*, v12, n5 (2012), p. 560.

on the website of the *Ahlul Bayt Islamic Mission* in 2014 following the attack of Samarra by the ISIS. The text refers to a statement by ‘Alī al-Sistānī.³⁵ However, it significantly distorts the original message that avoided the use of sectarian expressions or ideas. (The highlights are kept from the original.):

Takfiri terrorists attacked the city of Samarra targeting the Shrine of Imamayn al-Askariyyaen (AS). ... *The situation is so serious and threatening that ... the grand Marja’at in Iraq has pronounced a statement demanding and commanding the obligation of believers to take arms in defense of Iraq, its citizens, and the holy shrines of our beloved Imams (AS).* ..The time for test has come for the believers who claim to love and follow Imam Husain (AS) and it is not a coincidence that the recent events have transpired in these auspicious days of 15th of Sha’ban where we celebrate the birth of our Living Imam (AFS) and yearn for his hastened reappearance while we are fed up with overwhelming injustices and oppressions of today. The Karbala of yesterday has emerged in our age in time and it is here today – in Iraq – and the enemy is none other than the ignorant Takfiris who blatantly condemn the followers of AhlulBayt (AS) and openly call for the shedding of their blood with the intent of eradicating us and expanding their rule in the region far and wide. How are they different than Yazid and Ibn Ziyad (LA)? They are one and the same, they are their extension living today who carry their evil and corrupted agenda and seek to put out the light of Allah (SWT) personified in the holy household of the Prophet (SA)... *The call of grand Ayatullah Sistani applies to all believers and not only the Muqaledeen (those who perform Taqleed) of his Eminence as the cause he is calling for is for the safety of Islam and the Muslims and our sacred mausoleums.* At this stage where the declaration is *Wajib Kefa’ee*, perhaps not many of us are obliged to join the forces of defense. But surely, as believers we must brace ourselves in preparation to sprint for action and prepare ourselves mentally and practically to act if this declaration converts to *Wajib Ayni* (compulsory act which is obligatory on each and every individual). ...Brothers and sisters, what are we waiting for? ...We must be ready to sacrifice, leave everything behind us and run for the defense of truth and its supporters, representatives, and relics.³⁶

This declaration calls the Shī‘ī communities for action; it is in line with the many calls to *jihad* by al-Sistānī and the Iranian *marja’* Nāṣier Makārim al-Shīrāzī, who declared a – global – war against “the Takfiri terrorists and their supporters from the Arab countries and America...[who will be] soon faced with an unprecedented multi-million army, the young lover of Islam and Ahlul-Bayt”.³⁷ Following the publication of the call, emotions went uncontrolled among the Shī‘a of north-west London and people started booking flights to Iraq.³⁸

In fact, al-Shīrāzī’s statement is linked to the priorities of the Iranian leadership much more than it is a sign of concern and solidarity with their Iraqi brethren. Two years earlier, in 2012, Western intelligence officials warned that Iran’s supreme leader ‘Alī Khāmeneī stated that Iran’s national interests had been “threatened by a combination of the U.N. sanctions

³⁵ <http://www.sistani.org/arabic/statement/24906/>

³⁶ <https://archive.is/0hhfz#selection-713.340-713.480>

³⁷ <http://www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=13930402000472>

³⁸ Malik, S. “Shia cleric tells British Muslims not to join fight against Isis in Iraq” <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jun/15/shia-british-muslims-fight-isis-iraq>

imposed over Iran's nuclear programme and the West's continuing support for Syrian opposition groups attempting to overthrow the Syrian government". Therefore Iran "cannot be passive" in the conflict and "should demonstrate to the West that there were 'red lines' over what it would accept in Syria, and that a warning should be sent to 'America, the Zionists, Britain, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and others that they cannot act with impunity in Syria and elsewhere in the region.'" Khamenei allegedly ordered Qassem Sulaymānī, the Quds Force commander, to intensify attacks against the West and its allies around the world.³⁹

In the same year, 2012, a grandiose mosque was inaugurated in Helsinki, financed by the notorious Ahlul Bayt Foundation,⁴⁰ which back then had already run about 70 Shī'ī Islamic centres worldwide. The project was the second in Scandinavia after a similarly oversized mosque had been constructed in Copenhagen, financed by the same resources.⁴¹ As we can observe on the basis of the mentioned warning examples, the current violence in the Middle East and the evolvement of radical salafī terror organisations, al-Qā'ida and later ISIS, provide an opportunity for the revival of militant Shī'ī Islamic ideology that Iran seems to be more than ready to put in use under the banner of fighting terrorism. As such, it opens the door for constant tensions since whenever the Iranian style Islamism clashes with ISIS sympathisers it is the confrontation of two, radical, transnational, apocalyptic ideologies which threatens social cohesion and security in Europe.

The fact that Iraqi soldiers in significant numbers are abandoning the battlefield and joining the migrant wave heading for Europe is more than worrying in this context. As the *Reuters* reported in September 2015 "fighters from the national army, police and special forces as well as Shia militias and Kurdish *peshmerga* have left in recent months or plan to go soon. A special operations member based in Ramadi said the elite unit alone had seen more than 100 fighters leave for Europe in the past six months."⁴² Maintaining and intensifying a sectarian environment can prove to be highly dangerous once kin states, Iran or Saudi Arabia, decide to use these clashes to make pressure on European societies and states.

CONCLUSION

The roots of sectarianism lie in the way communities and identities are constructed and direct violence is but a spectacular way of letting out the inherent violence in the social structures (segregation, communities etc..) and allegiances (to Khāmeneī, etc.). This everyday symbolic and social violence can erupt whenever sectarian individuals or groups meet.

Sunnī-Shī'ī clashes in Western Europe indicate two threats to social cohesion: the vulnerability of identities and the infiltration of European societies by kin states. First, the vulnerability of individuals to ethnic-religious identities makes them loyal to the charismatic or traditional authorities in the kin state (Iran and Saudi Arabia) and untie their links, if

³⁹ Coughlin, Con. Iran's supreme leader orders fresh terror attacks on West <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/iran/9490878/Irans-supreme-leader-orders-fresh-terror-attacks-on-West.html>

⁴⁰ "First Mosque for Shia Muslims Opens in Finland". <http://en.abna24.com/service/europe/archive/2012/05/24/317240/story.html>

⁴¹ "Disputed mosque in Copenhagen approved." http://www.dr.dk/Nyheder/Andre_sprog/English/2011/08/26/082529.htm

⁴² "Some Iraqis ditch fight against Islamic State for life in Europe." <http://tribune.com.pk/story/960284/some-iraqis-ditch-fight-against-islamic-state-for-life-in-europe/>

they exist at all, to European citizens. Second, the strategies of infiltration and pressure on European states and societies by kin states intensify as Iran and Saudi Arabia ignite conflicts in the Middle East.

REFERENCES

- "2004 Annual Report on the Protection of the Constitution". Federal Ministry of the Interior of the Federal Republic of Germany. http://www.bmi.bund.de/SharedDocs/Downloads/EN/Broschueren/Verfassungsschutzbericht_2004_en.pdf%3F__blob%3DpublicationFile
- Coughlin, C. "Iran's supreme leader orders fresh terror attacks on West". <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/iran/9490878/Irans-supreme-leader-orders-fresh-terror-attacks-on-West.html>
- Dassetto, F. *L'iris et le croissant: Bruxelles et l'islam au défi de la co-inclusion*, Louvain-la-Neuve : Presses universitaires de Louvain, 2011.
- "Disputed mosque in Copenhagen approved." http://www.dr.dk/Nyheder/Andre_sprog/English/2011/08/26/082529.htm
- "First Mosque for Shia Muslims Opens in Finland". <http://en.abna24.com/service/europe/archive/2012/05/24/317240/story.html>
- "Jammer dat je een shi'iet bent". <http://www.nrc.nl/handelsblad/2014/01/24/jammer-dat-je-een-shi-iet-bent-1338210>
- "L'attentat visant la mosquée d'Anderlecht". <https://www.senate.be/www/?Mival=/Vragen/SVPrintNLFR&LEG=5&NR=6284&LANG=fr>
- "L'homme qui a mis le feu à la mosquée d'Anderlecht a été condamné à 27 ans de prison". <http://www.lesoir.be/726839/article/actualite/belgique/2014-12-05/l-homme-qui-mis-feu-mosquee-d-anderlecht-ete-condamne-27-ans-prison>
- "Madd shī'ī yaktasiḥ al-jāliya fī Awrūbbā". http://www.assabah.press.ma/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=45398:2013-08-12-11-01-59&catid=113:2010-10-19-10-58-51&Itemid=798
- Malik, S. "Shia cleric tells British Muslims not to join fight against Isis in Iraq". <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jun/15/shia-british-muslims-fight-isis-iraq>
- "Meet the Controversial Cleric Threatening to Turn UK Muslims Against Each Other". https://www.vice.com/en_uk/read/meet-the-controversial-shia-cleric-bringing-sectarian-tension-to-the-uk
- "Mosquée Reda: Une haine qui brûle et qui tue". <http://www.lalibre.be/actu/belgique/mosquee-reda-une-haine-qui-brule-et-qui-tue-51b8e72fe4b0de6db9c5d13e>
- Puelings, J. "Fearing a 'Shiite Octopus'. Sunni – Shi'a relations and the implications for Belgium and Europe." *Egmont Paper*. No. 35, January 2010.
- "Rachid El Boukhari condamné à 27 ans de réclusion". <http://www.levif.be/actualite/belgique/rachid-el-boukhari-condamne-a-27-ans-de-reclusion/article-normal-356553.html>
- "Radical Sunni Islamists face jail for attack on group of Shi'ites 'in first case of Muslim sectarian violence in Britain'". <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2662726/Radical-Sunni-Islamists-face-jail-attack-group-Shiites-case-Muslim-sectarian-violence-Britain.html>
- Rosenow-Williams, K. *Organizing Muslims and integrating Islam in Germany: New Developments in the 21st Century*, Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2013.
- "Sectarian hatred at the heart of British Muslim community". <http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/faith/article4527003.ece>

- “Shia Muslims march against radicalization in the Netherlands”. <http://shiawaves.com/english/world/2043-shia-muslims-march-against-radicalization-in-the-netherlands>
- "Shī‘at Almāniyyā". <http://kayhan.ir/ar/news/14844>
- Sirseloudi, M. “Violent Jihadi Radicalisation in Europe and Conflicts in the Muslim World”, in: *Countering Terrorist Recruitment in the Context of Armed Counter-Terrorism Operations*, ed. Siddik Ekici and al., Amsterdam: IOS Press, 2016.
- “Some Iraqis ditch fight against Islamic State for life in Europe.” <http://tribune.com.pk/story/960284/some-iraqis-ditch-fight-against-islamic-state-for-life-in-europe/>
- "Tazāhura kabīra fī Hūlandā istinkāran li-jarīmat al-i‘tidā’ ‘alā al-aḍriḥa al-muqaddasa fī Sāmarrā’". <http://yazahra.org/1/samaraa/holland%20tadahora.htm>
- "The Origins of ISIS". <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=orxVODpOL6s>
- Van den Bos, M . “European Shiism? Counterpoints from Shiites' Organization in Britain and the Netherlands”, *Ethnicities*, v12, n5 (2012)
- Wilford, M. “The Assassins’ Trail: Unraveling the Mykonos Killings”. <http://www.worldaffairsjournal.org/article/assassins%E2%80%99-trail-unraveling-mykonos-killings>
- <http://www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=13930402000472>
- <http://www.sistani.org/arabic/statement/24906/>
- <https://archive.is/0hhfz#selection-713.340-713.480>