



# Being a young British Iraqi Shii in London: exploring diasporic cultural and religious identities between Britain and Iraq

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## Abstract

Relying on an ethnographic research conducted both in the UK and Iraq, this article explores issues of cultural and religious identities among London-based young British Iraqi Shiis. Using Stuart Hall's notions of 'articulation' and 'new ethnicities', I analyse how different realities and experiences of space and class shape young British Iraqi Shiis self-identification in relation to socio-political, religious and ethnic belongings.

**Keywords** Transnational Shii Islam · Iraqi Shiism · Sectarianism · British Shii Muslims

## Introduction

The academic literature on Shii Muslims living in Europe is limited in comparison to the important scholarship on Sunni Muslims. The emerging research on the matter looks at issues of modern forms of religiosity, identity, and senses of belongings with a particular focus on ritual practices. The transnational dimension of Shii identities and religious discourses is often evoked in this scholarship. However, the realities of Shii Muslims are explored either in Muslim majority contexts (Faleh 2003; Louër 2008; Luizard 1991; Mervin 2007) or in Europe (Bowen 2014; Shanneik et al. 2017), but never in both locations and contexts. Furthermore, the literature on young British Shiis is limited to a few works (Spellman-Poots 2008: 40–49; Bowen 2014: 135–164) and

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the particular case of young British Shiis of Iraqi descent is still almost unexplored (see also Degli Esposti in this volume).

The context following the US-led invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003 is characterized by new dynamics within the Shii heartland, notably the cities of Najaf-Kufa and Karbala, as well as within Shii communities around the world. The fall of the Baath authoritarian regime made the visit to the Imams Shrines possible for many Iraqi Shiis around the world. It also created the political and social conditions for the expansion and strengthening of the Najafi marja'iyya authority in and outside Iraq. The transnational dimensions of this new context described a “Shi'a revival” (Nasr 2007) for Shiis and Shii religious authorities deserve further exploration. Moreover, the context following the Iraqi sectarian war in 2006–2007 and the significant rise of sectarian tensions exacerbated with the rise of the Islamic State organisation is also important to explore. The articulation, tensions and relationship between “Islamophobia” and “Shiaphobia” need further analysis.

This article seeks to provide new lights on the transnational dimension of contemporary Shiism in researching young British Iraqi Shiis both in the UK and in Iraq. I explore young educated London-based British Iraqi Shiis' (adherent of the Twelver Shii) religiosities, senses of belonging and self-identifications, relying on an ethnographic research conducted in London, Baghdad (especially its suburb al-Kazimiyya) and Najaf-Kufa. I start by drawing some conceptual considerations regarding the ways to approach religious and cultural diasporic identities using mainly Stuart Hall's notions of ‘articulation’ and ‘new ethnicities’ (Hall 1986, 1996a, b). I engage Hall's conceptualizations with my ethnographic research on British-Iraqi Shiis' senses of religious and cultural identities. In exploring realities of space (London, the UK, Baghdad-al-Kazimiyya and Najaf) and class, I look at young British Iraqi Shiis' self-identifications in relation to different socio-political, religious and ethnic groups in London. Finally, I put in perspective their experience of visiting Iraq after the fall of the Baath regime in 2003 with my own ethnographic research in Shii spaces in Iraq.

## Approaching transnational Shii identities between Britain and Iraq

According to Stuart Hall, the identity of the contemporary subject is fragmented, not fixed, but in constant redefinition and reshaping. His concept of identity is not an essentialist, but a strategic and positional one; it considers that identities are never unified, never singular but multiple and constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic discourses, practices and positions. (1996a). The rise of global capitalism and as a consequence the weakening of nation-state borders and its local forms of identities all contributed to create ‘new ethnicities’ (1996b). Hall proposes a way of understanding how ‘ideological’ elements manage in certain conditions the creation of a coherent set of identity and a way to question how and according to which articulations this set is constructed socially and politically (1996b). Distancing himself from the narrow and often colonial notions of ethnicity, he proposes a new definition based on the realities of the contemporary conjuncture characterized by the contradicting features of globalization that both incorporate and simultaneously produce difference (1996b). The politics of difference suggested by Hall is marked by a conception of identity being the articulation of a field of difference within the individuals and simultaneously another

larger field of socio-cultural differentiation. Moreover, Hall defines articulation as the connection that unifies two different elements under certain conditions. However, this linkage is not necessary, absolute, or fixed:

The ‘unity’ which matters is a linkage between that articulated discourse and the social forces with which it can, under certain historical conditions, but need not necessarily, be connected. Thus, a theory of articulation is both a way of understanding how ideological elements come, under certain conditions, to cohere together within a discourse, and a way of asking how they do or do not become articulated, at specific conjunctures, to certain political subjects. (1986)

This articulation is always contextual and provisional not totally local, neither totally global. Relying on Derrida’s notion of *differance* which is positional, conditional and conjunctural: between the two French words ‘differ’ and ‘defer’ (postpone) meaning is always deferred, and never finished or complete. Therefore, social forces, classes, groups, political movements etc. are not constituted in their unity by objective economic conditions and then become a unified ‘ideology’. The process is quite the reverse. One has to see the way in which a variety of different social groups enter into and constitute for a time a kind of political and social force, in part by seeing themselves reflected as a unified force in the ideology which constitutes them. Thus, diaspora identities as production of different set of cultural imaginaries are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference (Hall 1990, 1997).

Thus, for Hall the global and local are two aspects of the same phenomenon, the binary expression of late-capital formation. He does not simply condemn globalization as cultural homogenization, but notes the oppositional nature of the modern condition: the return to the local as response to homogenization and globalization of culture. According to Hall, the mystification of the local is not better than the global. He finds the boundary crossing aspects of the contemporary conjuncture as expressed in debates on transnational culture and identity, imbued with contradictory but powerful possibilities. People who are so-called marginal groups can ‘speak right across those boundaries’ and ‘across those frontiers’ (1997:38). The ‘politics of difference’ that he proposes is a way of articulating the ‘here’ -being in Britain- and the ‘there’ -countries that the diaspora comes from- in redefining and shaking both (1996b).

Hall’s conceptualisation of diasporic identities, especially regarding its transnational dimension is very relevant to start thinking of British Iraqi Shiis’ identities. The self-identification of the young British Iraqi Shiis I have interviewed in London involves local and global dimensions without being totally one or the other. The fact that identity is perceived as very dynamic and changing according to a complex process involving local and global dimensions as well as the notion of articulation is useful to analyse the ways British Iraqi Shiis relate to transnational narratives of Shii identity as well as to the different imaginaries and spaces they live, visit or feel they belong to. However, in order to follow Hall’s notion of new ethnicities a knowledge of the actual content of the identity narratives of the ‘here’ and the ‘there’ is required. Exploring ethnographically the way young British Iraqi Shiis experience their religious and cultural identity and looking only at the ‘here in Britain’ side of it is not sufficient to grasp the way their version of a ‘new religious ethnicity’ is shaped and has developed. It is necessary to

look at the ‘there in Iraq’ in order to get a more comprehensive understanding of both their ‘Iraqiness’ and their ‘Shii-ness’ and explore their actual meaning as well as their relationship to their ‘Britishness’.

## Situating British Iraqi Shiis in relation to Iraqi Shiism

When examining recent research on the evolution of Shii contemporary identities, it is very important to explore the ways in which Iraqi Shiism and the Shii population is evolving in relation to issues of cultural, religious and political identity. In order to provide the socio-historical background of the fragmentation of Iraqi citizenship, it is important to consider Luizard’s historical research on Iraqi Shiis (1991), Jabar’s socio-political analysis on the Shii movement in Iraq (2003) and Haddad’s more recent research on sectarianism in post-2003 Arab-Iraq (2011, 2014). Sunnis and Shiis have not shared a unified national narrative, symbolism or ideology. Their competing narratives have taken a sectarian dimension, particularly after the brutal suppression of the 1991 uprisings and in a post-2003 era characterized by openly divisive Sunni and Shii narratives and self-identifications. However, as pointed out by Faleh (2003) and Zubaida (1991, 2002), neither Sunnis, Shiis nor Kurds represented homogeneous groups, as class, kin-based positions, regional belongings and political affiliations (nationalists, Communists, Islamists etc.) are also important dimensions of their identities. Nevertheless, historically when nationalism began to spread as a political ideology in Iraq, each group held competing nationalisms: Iraqi-oriented nationalism (‘Iraqism’) was privileged by the Shiis; Arab nationalism was privileged by the Sunnis as it was connected to the rest of the predominantly Sunni Arab world (Faleh, 2003, Zubaida 2002).

Hence, in Iraq, religious and political identities are shaped by global discourses and regulatory regimes, but also within competing local and regional nationalist narratives. Up to the mid-1970s, leftist and more particularly, Communist activism dominated Iraqi political culture. Many prominent Shii clerical families such the Khoei or Bahrul-Ulum families counted numerous Communist activists. The harsh repression of the Baath regime towards leftist and Communist activists resulted in the exile of many of them. It is by the end of the 1970s that Shii Islamism started to become predominant in the political sphere through the emergence of the Daawa movement. Islamists such as Communists experienced the harsh repression of the Baath regime and many of them carried their activism abroad (Faleh 2003). Since the 1970s, London became the city in which these two main trends of political exiles settled and lived with their families. It is the generation of their children that I have observed and interviewed.

Since 2003, the Sunni/Shii divide already deepened by the bloody repression of the Baath regime of the Southern uprising of 1991, became even more prevalent. The very institutionalisation of communal based identities by the US-led occupation administration and the coming to power of a Shii leadership crystalized the divisions among Sunni and Shiis (Ismael and Ismael 2015). As Haddad pointed out, identity politics covered the fluidity, contextuality and complexity of identity-oriented stands and the Shii/Sunni divide itself is also complex (2014). However, the sectarian war in which Iraq was plunged in 2006–2007 was described by Haddad (2011, 2014) as a turning point of Shii-Sunni relations in Iraq, and more generally in the Middle East and globally. The

rise of the Islamic State organisation was very much built upon anti-Shii sentiments and is a revealing aspect of the recent development of sectarianism in the region. I would argue, in the line of Haddad (2011, 2014) and Louër (2008) and Nasr (2007) that the rise of sectarianism is both a produce of a ‘Shii revival’ linked to the coming to power of Shii Islamists in Iraq and the rise of anti-Shii sentiments as well as the exacerbation of Sunni-Shii relations in Iraq and Syria. This phenomenon occurs both locally in the Middle East and among Muslim communities in other contexts such as in the Europe and northern America.

Enriching Jabar, Haddad, Zubaida and Luizard’s work on Shiism and Shii Iraqis with an ethnographic lens can offer an original understanding of Iraqi Shii religious and political identity. Moreover, my fieldwork in both spaces London and in the spaces that Iraqi British Shii feel a sense of attachment such as Najaf-Kufa and the Shii neighbourhood of Baghdad, al-Kazimiyya, can provide a very original and complex understanding of the transnational dimension of Iraqi Shii identity. Relying on Hall’s conceptualisation of identities, characterized by the imbrication of local and global dimensions, allows to understand how Shii political and religious identities are shaped in diasporic spaces as well as in relation the Shii heartland and the relationship between these two spaces.

## Researching young British Iraqi Shiis

My preliminary questions regarding this research on young British Iraqi Shiis were based on my own experience as a daughter of a family of political exiles in France. I have witnessed first as a young person the impact of the fall of Saddam’s regime on both the political and the religious atmosphere that was surrounding me. Then as a researcher, I settled in Iraq between October 2010 and June 2012 to undertake my doctoral research on contemporary Iraqi women’s political activism. I was in a very good position to observe and analyse the evolution of Shii religious and political movement as I lived for almost two years in my family house in al-Kazimiyya, which is the neighbourhood of Baghdad that is situated in the north-west of the city –in the side of the Tigris river called *al-karkh-* and named after the two shrines al Kazimain: the seventh Imam Musa al-Kazim and ninth Imam Muhamed al-Taqi. Al-Kazimiyya is a place of pilgrimage for Shii Iraqis and Shiis all over the world, especially since 2003 as the invasion and occupation of Iraq by the US-led military forces was followed by the takeover of power of Shii Islamists parties who still dominate the central government. As pointed out by many researchers (Louër 2008; Nasr 2007): for the first time in Iraqi contemporary history the category of the population that was at the margin of power since the very formation of the Iraqi state became since 2003 at the center of political power.

My first question when I started this research was how has the post-invasion Iraqi context impacted on young educated British Shii Iraqis. I chose to explore young and educated British Iraqi Shiis (20–36 years old) because I was very curious as an Iraqi who grew up in France, to know how individuals of my generation, daughters and sons of exiled families, educated and brought up in Britain have experienced the fall of the Baath regime and the power takeover in Iraq by exiles who belong to the generation of their parents. My curiosity about London especially was due to the fact that Iraqis in London occupy a certain status in the ‘Iraqi imaginary’ both among diasporic

communities and in Iraq. *Iraqiyyin London* or *ahl London* are identified as a specific category who played a very important role in the political opposition to the Baath regime and played an essential role in the post-invasion regime.

Not being British myself, I was both an insider and an outsider to the individuals and groups I interviewed and observed. As my knowledge and experience of the British context was limited, I decided to have an in-depth ethnographic approach relying on semi-structured interviews<sup>1</sup> and participant observation. My starting point to gather my sample was youth-oriented British-Iraqi Shii organisations and networks in London. Then I have widened my scope and chosen deliberately to interview individuals outside the organisations' environment, at their homes, in the places where they organise religious gathering (*majalis*) or socialise such as in university campuses. I have tried to choose a sample that was as diverse as possible in terms of socio-political and religious profiles: in the university campuses I have interviewed individuals involved in the Absoc -the Ahlulbayt Islamic Society,<sup>2</sup> or in political or charity groups involved in issues such as refugees, Palestine or Islamophobia. I have also selected individuals involved in research or activism related to Shii Islam and Iraq. Thus, my sample is composed of individuals, all sons and daughters of political exiles, who are involved in a form of action in relation to their Shii or Iraqi identity and who are from Shii background whether being 'devout' or not.

Most of the time the interviews were mainly in English, sometimes in a mix of English and Iraqi-Arabic dialect and one totally in Iraqi-Arabic. I learned about the environment in which they grew up in London or in Britain, their education, social class and their religious, social and political views and sometimes engagement. Regarding London itself, space is very important in this research: west and mainly north-west London is where this generation has benefited from Shii institutions and also grew up surrounded by other young Iraqis, especially from the same religious and political background. While in other parts of London, some did not grow up surrounded by Iraqis or grew up in places such as Ealing, for example, where more secular Iraqi groups are settled.

## Exploring British Iraqi Shiis' religiosities

Talal Asad approaches the relationship between "the religious" and the "secular" as porous and interdependent and defines them as not essentially fixed categories (2003). In line with Asad, I am not defining 'religiosity' as disconnected from its social, economic and political context. In fact, I am defining it here as an attachment to rituals and traditions -in the sense of beliefs and practices that are transmitted through generations- and I am using the word 'devout' to describe the actual put in practice of rituals and various acts associated to traditions.

It is possible to identify commonalities in the ways British Iraqi Shiis in London define their religiosity, but I found it very difficult to draw their 'religious profiles' especially in regard to designating them as 'devout' or not. The main feature I easily

<sup>1</sup> In London between November 2015 and June 2016, I have formally interviewed young British Iraqi Shii between the age of 20 to 36 years old: five young men and seven young females.

<sup>2</sup> A Shii Muslim student society.

identified is the fact that none of them created a radical rupture between the sectarian orientation of their family background and their own. None of them defined themselves as non-Shii or have expressed their wish to be defined as solely Muslims, none of them reject his/her Shii-ness, neither claim to be Sunni or Sufi etc. Among all the interviewees, I have not observed any straight rupture, but nuances and differences regarding the mode of religiosity of their families. The individuals' belonging to very practicing religious families or the ones from families not too much into ritualistic religious practices (prayers, *ziyarat* etc.) or in between devoutness and non-religiousness tend to reproduce the religious or non-practising modes present in the family environment in which they grew up. One of my interviewees is a from a Shirazi<sup>3</sup> family and he is attached to Karbala as much as his parents, others are as much attached or detached to the *hawza*<sup>4</sup> as their parents. However, internal debates are present within the household, and some of my interviewees mentioned that they choose to follow another *marja*<sup>5</sup> than the one followed by their parents, evoking issues of generational gap. Often, Muhammed Hussein Fadlallah was mentioned, especially by young women considering his views in terms of gender issues more open than the ones of Al-Sistani.<sup>6</sup> Brothers and sisters as well as husbands and wives differ in the *marja*' they choose and on the importance given to even following one. In this sense, British Iraqi Shii religiosities, as other contemporary forms of religiosities, do follow the individualistic and rationalistic pattern described by Davie and Hervieu-Léger (1996) in their research on modern forms of religious beliefs in Europe. In this sense, their modern religiosity does not differ from the ones observed among second generation Sunni Muslims in the UK and in Europe (McLoughlin and Cesari 2005).

I have managed to identify three main profiles regarding my interviewees' religiosities: the devout and very attached to the traditional *hawza*, the devout but not necessarily attached to the traditional *hawza* and the ones who identify as Shii by culture, the secular Shiis who are not practicing Islamic or specifically Shii rituals. The first remark that can be made is that their Shii-ness is not strictly religious, but bound to a political identity carried at the heart of their parents' political exiles. Even some interviewees whose families fled the Baath regime on the basis of their Communist activism, expressed clearly the fact that their Shii identity also played a role in their exile. Thus, because in Iraq under the Baath regime, especially after the 1980s when Iraq was at war with Iraq, being Shii carried a political meaning (Faleh, 2003; Tripp 2000; Farouk-Sluglett and Sluglett 1987), it is impossible to disconnect the religious from the political in the Shii identity claimed by my interviewees' parents. This politico-religious legacy has been transmitted to the children who are aware of the political meaning of being an Iraqi Shii. It can be argued that this particular awareness explains the continuity and lack of rupture with their Shii-ness by all the young British Iraqi Shiis I met, whether devout or not.

The second remark that can be made regarding these ideal types, also bound to my interviewees parents' trajectories, is that in Iraq itself, the very diversity of the political, religious and social experiences of Shiis makes it difficult to categorize them as such (Faleh, 2003, Zubaida 1991, 2002). As mentioned before, many

<sup>3</sup> Followers of Muhammed al-Shirazi who tends to focus on Muharram rituals and on the city of Karbala.

<sup>4</sup> Shii main religious educational institution based in Najaf.

<sup>5</sup> *Marja*' or *Marja' al-taqlid* is the highest religious authority in Shii Islam, many Shiis consider that they should choose and follow one *marja*' that will provide them religious guidance.

<sup>6</sup> This was also observed by Shanneik (2013) among the diaspora and Deeb (2006) in the Lebanese context.

individuals who belong to these prominent religious families were active members of the Iraqi Communist parties back in the 1960s and 1970s and forced to exile for their political activism. The repression of Communist activism in that period in Iraq also carried a sectarian anti-Shii dimension, the Shii-ness in question could have concerned individuals who were not particularly devout. This diversity of views is also present among diasporic Iraqis and their children; one of my interviewee belongs to one of these prominent Shii religious families and is very critical of the involvement of prominent members of his own family in the post-2003 political life in Iraq. Two of my interviewees whose parents supported the invasion of Iraq as they pushed for the fall of the Baath regime and end their political exile, expressed their opposition to the war and told me about their participation to the anti-war movement in London at the time of the US-led invasion of Iraq.

However, the politico-religious meaning of being a Shii, despite being always present in my interviewees' self-identifications, is not fixed and is changing as the children of the exiles Shii Iraqi families in London have re-defined their affiliation to Shii-ness growing up in the diaspora. Noor Y., 26, graduate from a prestigious central London university as well as from an Islamic Shii college, grew up in a council estate in north-west London. She attended one of the girls Shii primary school and participates to religious gatherings and *majalis* from time to time. Like many British Iraqi Shiis I met, her family's religious and political background is a mix of Communism and Islamism that appeared in her case among her father's side of the family originally from southern Iraq. Despite growing up and being as a primary school student educated in a very Shii religious environment she decided not to follow any particular religious group and is critical of certain practices among Iraqi Shiis in London. Like several of my interviewees, she noticed a significant change in the expression of religiosity among her friends after the change of regime in Iraq in 2003:

I would say that the Shiis have always been more self-aware of what their identity is as Shii. In and of itself there is that sectarian element already, if you are a Shii person because it's just how you're brought up, isn't it? But I think after that it became more about 'us' and 'them'. More about, 'We've been suffering for years'. It wasn't about the collective, it was like, 'We've been suffering for years. This is our revenge for what happened in the past!' But I have to say, actually sadly, I would say the youths, the people that are my age they're either extreme in the sense that they are very, very Shii and very heavily religious and on the exterior level outwardly Shii and Muslim. Because you know they have that Arbæen procession that they do in Hyde Park. A lot of my friends do go to that and they think that it's the right thing to do in this country, even though I find it bizarre that you would do that here when no one really gets what you're talking about or even marching for. But again that's your personal choice, whatever. But a lot of them became really apathetic about what their identity is.

One of my oldest interviewee Shayma O., 35, grew up in Ealing in a secular Communist southern Iraqi family culture, noticed the same kind of evolution in the rise of the importance of 'being a Shii' after 2003, and even more during the sectarian conflict of 2006–7 in Iraq.

I have to say in the time that I grew up there wasn't an issue, it was not an issue for me. I think even growing up I didn't even know what I was. It was only when someone asked me one time at school, I was like, 'I think I'm Shii'. It was literally like that. Obviously I discovered who we were but it was such a non-thing. It became an important thing after the war and especially after the sectarian war. I was asked to define who I am and to define myself as a Shii, despite not being at all a religious person.

Shayma sometimes attend events related to Shiism such as conferences on Ashuraa that she perceives as 'Iraqi event' granting her knowledge about her southern Iraqi culture. Her secular background and absence of interest in matters of religion and religiosity results in her lack of insistence on her Shii identity and the fact that she privileges to mention her Iraqi cultural identity. Her example is a good illustration of how communal sense of belonging is central in the way individuals decides to put forward their Shiiness or Muslimness. Just as many individuals who are culturally Muslims but are not interested in religious matters are identified as Muslims as a result of the rise of Islamophobia and the racialization of Islam in Europe, Shayma is identified as a Shii as a result of the rise of sectarianism.

### **Feeling Shii: confronting different 'others', self-identifications and senses of belonging**

In the line of Stuart Hall, I argue that contemporary identities are the result of the articulation of multiple local and global identities, and thus relational and related to multiple 'others'. In understanding process of othering, it is possible to attempt to draw identity constructions. In other words, in understanding who is the 'other' and what is the nature of the relationship to this 'other', features of the 'self' can be defined. Who are the 'others' for British Iraqi Shiis, and what are the nature of their relationships to these 'others' and how does it impact on their self-identifications? In reflecting on this issue, it is possible to draw the content of Hall's articulation and show how interactions between different kind of 'selves', and narratives of selfhood define British Iraqi Shiis' senses of belonging and identities.

All my interviewees consider that they are 'lucky' to live in London, they are all apologetic about London's diversity and openness to its non-white residents. Some of them who studied or lived outside London for a period of time talked about their feeling of not being considered as British by other 'white British'. However, they defined themselves as British and Iraqi or British-Iraqi and consider that diversity and openness to difference are the main features of being 'a Londoner'. Shayma O., 35, who grew up in Ealing considered being from London very positively:

I was just one of many and I didn't really think about my race. I never think about my race in London. I never think about my colour. I never think about those things. And let me tell you that it's the only place in the world that I've travelled and been to that I feel that I never have to think about it. That's not to say there's no racism ... But in my day-to-day life I'm just me. So growing up in London, no I never felt different... It was wonderful to be a part of this city. I really enjoyed

it. I think I had a very average childhood in London in that I went out with my friends. My world was limited to largely Ealing and surrounding areas. Even Central was like ‘Whoa!’ until I got to university and my world expanded...

Considering space here is absolutely central, Shayma’s family decided to settle in Ealing when they arrived in London, as many Iraqi secular and leftist families, while the more religious Iraqi Shii families, often exiled for being active in the Shii movement against the Baath regime settled in north-west London. Many of my interviewees are from north-west London, and the most attached to their Shii politico-religious identity are the ones very much integrated within Shii religious institutions and centers concentrated in this area of London. Among them, Hussain J., 30, one of the leading member of young British Iraqi Shii networks and charities in London, grew up in north-west London in a quite homogenous Shii Iraqi environment, he belongs to a family active in the Shii movement in Iraq and in the Iraqi political opposition based in the UK. For him, who has been educated in local state schools in which the majority of students are non-white, confronting otherness could be meeting non-Shii or secular Iraqis in London:

So growing up in the Willesden Green, and growing up in London in particular, although my education was in mainstream schools, state schools but the majority of my interests... a majority of my friends, let’s say and activities that I used to do, and events that I used to attend were all within my Shii Iraqi community. So there was not much integration. The majority of my friends were Iraqi Shiis. And now actually since we’ve started becoming active and reaching out to other community and society members we now have a lot of friends from different religious backgrounds. So I would say around like where I had 5% non-Shii friends, now I have 30-40%. So we grew in that circle. [...] I did experience racism to a certain degree but being honest, being in a state school and in a very, very diverse community which is Brent. North-west London has Brent, Harrow and other boroughs. And I was in the borough of Brent and it is very diverse, cosmopolitan ... It was easy for me because I had, especially the school that I went to, 80% were non-white British. [...] Now we do try to open ourselves now to other kind of Iraqis. For example recently I attended event in other parts of London, with people focusing on arts and culture even music evenings. That’s very new. So you would see those who are less religious, who are less conservative, you would see them there. And it’s very interesting because you come and see Iraqis that you’ve never seen in your life, that you haven’t interacted with. And very professional people, very educated and nice, well-mannered. And you think to yourself, ‘OK, what am I doing? Why am I just...’ Even within our community where even within a closer circle of just the conservatives. So it’s very interesting. And also that was the first instance where I came across Iraqis from different backgrounds.

Zaynab Z., 30, from an upper-class Iraqi Shii family very much involved in post-2003 politics grew up in west London and had never really been in other parts of London before she joined a University in East London where she encountered a new environment:

I’d never set foot in East London until I went to university, very different, very nice environment. Maybe half the people were Asian, a lot of Muslims. My best

friends were two Turkish girls - one Turkish-Kurdish and one just Turkish - one Pakistani girl. Those were my four friends. But there were also those in the Shii student's group, there were Iraqis, there were Shiis.

Space in London also means class and as expressed very clearly by Hayder H., 22, student in a central London university, growing up in a council estate environment is not the same as living among upper-class Arabs in west London:

In terms of social group, you tend to see the wealthy Iraqi families will stick together, having the same type of views. The working class Iraqis they tend to stick to themselves, they appropriate a lot of the London culture.... I am not going to say street culture but you know... and that would depend on which school you went to...you know..... if you are from a wealthy or middle, your parents are going to send you to private school where you're going to stick with your friends... then go to university and so on... if you're coming from a working class family... especially in the first generations Iraqis, parents are baffled... they don't know much about London... they're sent to very very bad schools... the fact that they make something out of themselves is a big thing. I do feel there's a divide and that divide deeply correlates with all other sorts of divides... you know, the family background, whether they're secular or religious... a lot of the time they'd be secular wealthy Iraqis and religious wealthy Iraqis and you know, they'll stick together because of the common fact of wealth rather than the families' backgrounds.

Haydar's depiction of the social class dimension is very relevant to what I have observed during my fieldwork. The youngsters I have spoken to who grew up in council estates and attended local state schools tend to relate to the other non-whites and Muslims with whom they grew up as much as to their 'Iraqi community'. On the contrary, the young British Shii Iraqis I have met who grew up in houses in west and north-west London, would tend to be less aware of other social, religious and ethnic groups. However, as Husain's example shows, some young British Shii Iraqis who attended state schools remained confined in their 'Iraqi Shii community' through their integration into Shii institutions such as mosques, Saturday Arabic schools and religious events. It is also very significant to note their changing experiences from childhood, high school and university where they moved to other parts of the city and encountered different social, religious and ethnic backgrounds.

All my interviewees expressed their awareness of racism and Islamophobia but on a more global scale rather than as an individual local and personal experience. If some of them narrated several experiences of racism on the basis of their religion, such a Zahra Z. who experienced animosities regarding her *hijab* in her workplace. They relate the impact of Islamophobia to Iraq and the Middle East as they have a very strong opinions around issues such as the 'war on terror' and its implications for the Middle East and for Muslims in general. However, their narratives of experience of discrimination was not centered around being a Muslim at an individual and personal level. Very interestingly, for most of my interviewees, the personal and individual experiences of discrimination is mostly within Muslim communities, among Sunni Muslims, especially since 2003 and even more 2006–7.

Their experiences of being treated as 'others' focus on Shiophobia as much as on Islamophobia.

Noor Y. was very active in her university Palestine society and in anti-Islamophobia campaigning. She defines her religiosity in a non-traditional way despite attending a primary Shii school and going to *majalis* from time to time. She expressed the fact that she often had to silence her Shii identity in order to be part of the 'Muslim community' in London:

Most of my friends are Sunnis. [...] There was a large Muslim community at my Uni when I was there. There were about 400 people in the society and I think there are only about four that were Shisi, and the rest were all Sunnis. And it was very, very frowned upon if you were Shii. Generally it was not acceptable. I remember one year with one of my friends, we launched a campaign to get him elected to be the president and they basically disallowed his campaign. And even though they didn't admit it, it was very obvious that it was because he was Shii. Thinking about it now one of my friends who is half-Palestinian half-English guy who I met at Uni. He's a very strict Sunni and when push comes to shove if we're having a discussion he'll say, 'Oh well yeah, but you would say that, you're Shii!' [...] So there is this stigma attached to, 'Oh we let more things go!' Like we're more easy, even though I don't see that at all. I think we're actually quite conservative. But there seems to be this conception that. 'Oh yeah... you're allowed to wear nail varnish, or you're allowed tattoos. Therefore you're a bit more liberal.' They seem to not understand that we don't necessarily hit ourselves during Muharram. I'm over-explaining that. I don't want to explain it anymore because I've never done that in my life. I've never slashed my head with a knife. I have also heard critiques about me not wearing the *hijab* and to be honest I tend not to talk about it and also not about Shiism with them and the fact that I am from a Shii family. It's totally cluttered with misconceptions and assumptions that are all untrue. [...] Some of the public figures we have in this so-called, I wouldn't say British, but just globally the Muslim leaders that are out there are very miseducated and they're feeding that misinformation about Shiis and what they stand for.

Many of my interviewees mentioned the conflicts between the Sunni Islamic Society (Isoc) and the Shii Islamic Society (Absoc) in their universities. I heard many times that in males prayer rooms their *torbah* (piece of clay on which Shii Muslims pray) was several times thrown away, and about the regular conflicts around the use of the prayer room itself. I collected many stories of clear discrimination on the basis on their Shii background faced by my interviewees. For example Zahra Z. who was a candidate to be a student rep' at her university narrated that a group of Sunni Muslims from Isoc initiated a campaign against her on the basis of her Shii background in order to get a Sunni Muslim elected at her place. Another example, Zaynab Z. told me that in 2006–7, when she was a medical student in one of East London universities, she started to experience discrimination as a Shii person among her Sunni friends. She experienced harsh criticism for performing Muharram and Ashuraa rituals and stated that at the time it was difficult because of the tensions regarding the sectarian events in Iraq and in the

Middle East in general to set up an Absoc at her university. Thus, with a group of Shii Muslims she created a society for ‘peaceful dialogue’, avoiding to use any word that would indicate the Shii identity of the group.

However, if some express the fact that this experience of discrimination push them to stay among Shiis, most of the young British Iraqi Shiis I have interviewed express their rejection of sectarianism and insist on preserving the unity of ‘Muslims’ in a context marked by Islamophobia, while at the same time working on creating spaces for the expression of their Shii belief and identity. I have observed that the more they are politicized and involved in pluralistic groups (Muslims and non-Muslims and Sunni and Shii) -such as Palestine Society, anti-Islamophobia movement etc. - the more they are aware of the risk of falling into identity politics. Most of the individuals I interviewed are very critical of the game of ‘playing the good Muslims’. When I have asked them about what I have witnessed in the Arbaeen March in 2015 in London and the Shii social media campaign stating: ‘All Muslims are not Isis, but all Isis are Sunnis’. Most of them reacted insisting on the necessity to be united against Islamophobia. However, several of my interviewees also expressed negative perceptions of Sunni Muslims depicting them as ‘not open’ and sometimes conflating Sunnism with Wahhabism.

### Between imagined and ‘real’ Iraq

In Baghdad-al-Kazimiyya and Najaf-Kufa, I have mainly observed and taken notes of conversation and situations. I talked to individuals in al-Kazimiyya who were exiled Iraqis and have settled back in Iraq and *hawza* representatives in Najaf-Kufa. I have also asked local people in al-Kazimiyya and Najaf-Kufa, about their perceptions of the circulation of families from outside Iraq within Iraq and its impact on Shii religious, social and political spaces and networks. My stay in Iraq in March 2016 coincided with the emergence of a strong social movement denouncing the new regime’s sectarianism and expressing exacerbation towards the new political elite. This movement called *al-harak al-sha’bi* (‘the popular movement’) that started in the summer 2015, had just been joined by the very influential Sadrist movement. I arrived in Baghdad at a time where its leader Muqtada al-Sadr joined civil society activists in their sit-in outside of the concrete T-walls of the Green Zone to call for radical reforms and a change of government. It was thus a situation in which the new Iraqi political leadership in Baghdad heavily composed of exiled Iraqis among which many *Iraqiyyin London* were targeted in the slogans and considered responsible for the rise of sectarianism and the social, economic and political crisis in the country.

This reality did not affect my interviewees’ plans to visit Iraq, and their views regarding the current political situation and the involvement of London-based exiled political leaders in the post-2003 context differ greatly. Some of them condemn the post-2003 political regime, while others are more nuanced in their critique. Clearly their level of criticism is linked to the level of political engagement of their parents -fathers for all of them- in the new post-2003 regime. Two of them have their fathers involved at

a very high political level in Iraq since the fall of the Baath regime and they were cautious in the way they evoked their father's political implication invoking a 'bad regime' with good individuals. Two others have a father who settled back in Iraq without being particularly politically involved in any party. This very direct relationship of these British Iraqi Shiis with their country of origin, either through their fathers' political involvement or physical presence in Iraq highlight the way in which their personal lives is strongly related to Iraq.

All of my interviewees visited Iraq after the fall of the Baath regime, even when only for a few days during which they visited southern Iraq (Najaf-Kufa and Karbala and for one Basra). Half of them have a parent (mainly a father) who settled back there permanently or is living in between Iraq and London since 2003. One has bought a property in Najaf, several have charity projects in Najaf and Karbala. I would say that the interest for either Baghdad or Najaf and Karbala are good criteria to grasp the way my interviewees actually define themselves first as Iraqi or first as Shii. The ones who identify as Iraqis firstly and then as Shii would be the ones who would express more interest about Baghdad and Iraq as a whole and consider Najaf and Karbala and the other shrines either as sacred places or as places of cultural heritage. The ones who would care primarily about Najaf and Karbala and not so much about Baghdad would tend to define themselves primarily as Shii and secondarily as Iraqi or Arab. The strength of their relationship to Iraq crosses the Iraqi-Shii or Shii-Iraqi differences as it is present among the ones that are devout or not, and more attached to Baghdad or Najaf and Karbala.

A lot can be understood from my interviewees' experiences of going to Iraq, mostly during Ashuraa and al-Arbaeen but also for some of them just to visit family in Baghdad, Basra or other cities, or to do both at the same time. A clear feature also emerging from my interviews is that the more religious among them expressed that they do not experience a 'cultural shock' when being in Iraq among their relatives as they feel familiar with the conservative environment of Najaf, Karbala and al-Kazimiyya. The less religious ones have had a ambiguous experiences and often felt out of place because of religious conservatism, especially for the ones among the young women I interviewed who do not wear the *hijab*. However, all of them realized that their language was different from the locals, as well as their mentality as Haydar H. expressed it:

The first day I was in Najaf... You'll never ever get 'oh you are from Najaf or you're Iraqi'... I spoke with them in Arabic, they asked me 'where are you from? From the way you dress, the way you approach me... you're not Iraqi'... So yeah, you get that a lot, so you feel like a bit of an outsider when you go there. You also have this thing... the Iraqis will see you like... the fact that you come from London and you escaped it all... Naturally when you come back from Iraq, you sort of get that feeling that I am actually an Iraqi... obviously I am born and raised in London but I feel... you sort of sympathize with your parents' views and you sort of sympathize with the fact that they're not home, despite you being at home. So you do have this thing when you come back like 'oh I am Iraqi'. And you know, the cultural exchange when you go there.... You know, you will bring it back with you... even small little stuff... like you know, filling the cup of tea to the top! (laugh) And the thing is that obviously, most of our parents taught us this... so I feel like... you know when your parents teach you this from a young

age and when you do go back to Iraq, it's not such a shock, you know the culture there, you know... So I guess it's just the way you've been raised up. Essentially the same culture... in a mass scale.

All of my interviewees expressed admiration, love and a quite idealistic views of Iraqis that they all depicted very positively as 'generous', 'resilient' and 'people of good manners'. Some are regularly in touch with their relatives there, but most of them rely on their parents to 'stay in touch' with their family 'back home'.

One of my interviewee Jawadein, 20, is a Shirazi and goes to Karbala several times a year as he is very active in organizing events and activities related to Shirazi Shiism in London. He is also active in helping refugees in the Calais camp, as well as in initiatives such as 'feeding the homeless' launched by the Absoc. Jawadein is the only interviewee that goes to Iraq that often and it is clear that it is related to the importance he gives to performing religious rituals in Karbala. Jawadein evokes his experience of going to Iraq, especially to Karbala and his sense of belonging to different spaces related to Shii Islam:

First time I went, every shop I go to 'where are you from?', straight away !...because there're key words... like 'amou, al'afoo'... words they don't use like that... Second year, they know straight away I was from Karbala. Now, they go like 'oh your house is up there right ?...' they think I am from there. For me, it was easy to integrate with them, very easy. I stay next Abul Fadhel's shrine, it's heaven for me. Alhamdulillah, it's heaven for me. Even the *hawza*, I know them well, they're very close to me, the teachers there. So everytime I go, I attend a few classes. But to go and study a whole *hawza*, I don't know... it's open, I don't restrict myself. For the people who are here in London. I am someone who is serving the community and the things I am doing are useful for the community. I feel I am helping. So if I finish my work here, my studies... I'd love to go. I can be between the two countries, coming and going but it's difficult. You see I have got a lot of responsibilities, *majalis* here, projects of mine. One sister is married to my Mum's cousin, living in Iran. She grew up here but she moved to Iran. My other sister is not married, she is living here, she is a lawyer. [...] it's difficult for women to be in Najaf or Karbala because you can't move around as freely as here, there is the issue of shame. And you know the mentality is different. Yeah, for example, I am here, freedom of speech and alhamdulillah I have studied to an extent that I can criticize some people's approaches... But there, because they haven't seen the world as a whole they are stuck... for example my cousin is stuck with Al-Sistani. Me, I go there and say that I don't feel comfortable with this or that, they all come and say 'no you can't talk like that about Sistani, you can't speak about his work like that !'... I never said the man was wrong, you can't criticize and that's their mentality. Whereas us, I don't blame anyone, I take knowledge from all people... you see the hall is open to all, the mosque is open to all. There, they don't have that, same thing everyday.

Jawadein's words is revealing of a pattern I have observed among devout Shii Iraqis in London, especially the ones involved in initiatives related to Shii Islam and community work: their sense of belonging is plural. For Jawadein, Shii spaces in London and in Iraq are all spaces of belonging. He feels connected to these spaces as 'homes' in which

both his religious practice and community work found their place of deployment and meaning, provide him a role as a religious and community activist. The different trajectory within his own family with his older sister marrying a relative and settling in Iran and his other older sister working as a lawyer in London also highlights the individuality of the trajectories within a single family. However, his awareness of differences in mentality and ways of thinking between London and Karbala shows that he still feels essentially as a ‘Londoner’ which explains its plan to live ‘in between’ in the future as he privileges his role as a community leader in London.

Most of the other young individuals I have interviewed would go once or twice a year, often during Muharram. All of my interviewees expressed their wish to go often, spend part of the year but not to settle and live there in the long term. Only one of my interviewees, Zaynab Z. is seriously planning to settle in Najaf with her husband to open a medical clinic and work there as a medical doctor. Zaynab Z. is the only interviewee who is married to an Iraqi who grew up in Baghdad and is related to a Shii Islamist movement in Iraq and a leading figure for Shii youth in London. Her father is part of the new political elite who took power in Iraq in 2003. In London, her engagement goes from organizing *majalis* in her house, actively participating to Muharram celebrations to collecting money for charities in Iraq. She evoked the difficulty, as someone who grew up in London, to settle back to Najaf for her medical clinic project:

My problems with Najaf... and my husband has quite a few friends there, I have some cousins there who are all from Baghdad but moved to Najaf. The problem with Najaf is that the people there are very traditional and very different: women don't drive. They do work, but you can't go out without a *abaya*. Very conservative. And just their whole attitude is quite different. But the thing is the nice thing about Najaf is that you don't have... so the problem with Baghdad is the security is really bad, and you never think it's an issue to stop you from living somewhere but the traffic is really bad. You can't get from A to B. It's so difficult to go anywhere...[...] Because of the conservative atmosphere. I think it would never be twelve months in a year I'd be there. I think I'd be quite a lot of months here, probably two months there, one month here, or something like that. I think the difficulty will be when you have kids and you need to decide what schools to choose, because that will determine where you are going to be. I'm just taking it one step at a time, because the parents had a house in Baghdad, so they sold it and they bought one in Najaf and that's probably where we'll live. So we'll kind of have something set up. I've got one daughter now, she's still young. I don't know. I'll have to wait and see.

Zaynab's words about the challenges faced to settle back in Najaf echoes Jawadein's remarks about the mentality differences between their ‘growing up environment’ and Iraq despite feeling that they belong to both places. They pointed out the possibility to live ‘between the two places’ which indicates their sense of belonging to both, as belonging to one does not exclude the other. Interestingly, Zaynab's sister Hawra who is ten years younger than her has a more distant relationship to Iraq and is more engaged with British news and politics. She is an active member of her university's Absoc and defines herself as a leftist involved in issues such as demands around the decrease of university fees and justice in Palestine. When I interviewed them, I noticed

straight away the differences in terms of mastering the Iraqi dialect: the older sister has a good level of Arabic and Iraqi (despite a very strong British accent) and follows the news in Iraq on a daily basis while the younger sister's Iraqi is weaker, and she is more interested in politics in the UK than in Iraq which news she does not follow regularly. The differences between the two sisters reveal a certain generational gap in which the elders in the family are more related to their parents' sense of belonging and 'culture' and the youngsters feel less connected. It also highlights as in the case of Jawadein the individuality of the trajectory as senses of belonging differ within a single family.

My observations in Najaf reveal that the wish expressed by British Iraqi Shiis to circulate between Britain and the Shii parts of Iraq is disconnected from the existence of institutions or spaces that would accommodate them there. At the very religious and institutional level my discussions with *hawza* representatives in Najaf revealed that the *hawza* is not really prepared or has not done that much to create spaces adapted to Shiis from the West. As an example, a centre was created in 2004 at the initiative of a Shii cleric who was exiled in Europe and whose son is an important young Shii *da'i*<sup>7</sup> there. He decided to settled back in Najaf and create a centre that would work on promoting the *hawza* abroad after it has been weakened by the Baath regime, and also to offer training and support to Shii communities outside Iraq. He decided to create in 2007 in the *hawza* '*qism al-tabligh al-khariji*' (department of external preaching) directed mainly to the Shii Iraqi population living abroad and he set up within the *hawza* curriculum '*ajalsa ingiliziyya*' (English session). However, the number of students from abroad, especially the West, is very limited and the courses he proposed in English are very informal. Moreover, in Najaf religious summer schools in English such as the ones that exist in Iran for example that many of my interviewees have attended do not exist. Thus, despite its willingness to grow and become a centre for the its Shii communities abroad, the *hawza* in Najaf is not yet really ready to welcome Shii population living in the West and a British Iraqi Shii who does not master Arabic cannot technically benefit from a formal *hawza* training in Najaf. This situation contrasts very much with the number of religious institutions directed to Muslims in the West in Sunni Muslim majority countries such as Egypt and Syria.

## Conclusion

The fluid, multilayered and changing dimensions of identities in Hall's notions of articulation and new ethnicities are clearly visible among the young British Shii Iraqis I met and observed in London. Their self-identifications as Shiis are the product of transnational narratives of Shiism, the realities of Iraqi Shiism and their social and religious experiences in London. It is impossible to isolate religious from the socio-political identities of these individuals who are all sons and daughters of political exile families. Whether devout or not, their Shii-ness transcends religion, and constitute politico-religious identities shaped by different articulations. These articulations are composed of their parent's exiles narratives linked to the realities of Shii identities in Iraq, their own experiences of being non-white and non-Sunni Muslims in London as well as their connections to Iraq through their visits after 2003.

<sup>7</sup> Arabic term for religious preacher.

Space is very important in the formation of their identities as an area of London such as Brent provides social and educational institutions to the ones among them who seek to socialise in their Iraqi Shii groups. The imbrication of space and class creates different articulations: the upper-class Iraqis in houses in west and north-west London in private schools and the working and lower middle class in council estates and state schools, determined the type of social and ethnic groups they socialize with. However, space and class are changing dimensions in their life as the university spaces opened new horizons and new interactions. In these new interactions the ones with Sunni Muslims seem to be most tense and problematic as their narratives equate Islamophobia to Shiaphobia.

Their imagined Iraq is Najaf, Karbala, Al-Kazimiyya for the ones among them who are the most attached to their Shii-ness, it is Baghdad and the south of Iraq for the ones who insist on being as much Iraqi and Shii. However, despite their attachment to and idealisation of Iraq, their Britishness is clearly revealed by their will to live in London and their attachment to its diverse social and ethnic environments. Iraq is the place of the holy shrines, part of their culture, one of the homeland they feel they belong to, but London is their home, the place in which they envisage their future. Their attachment to Iraq is strong and is interestingly not directly related to the political development in the country characterized by tensions regarding the ‘Iraqis from abroad’ and the lack of institution to welcome them.

Going back to Hall’s notions of ‘articulation’ and ‘new ethnicities’, British Iraqi Shiis cultural and religious identities are the product of the transnational dynamics characterizing their specific Iraqi and Shii diasporic communities. Their cultural and religious self-identifications articulate the transformations of the socio-political and the religious ‘here’ in the UK and ‘there’ in Iraq. At the intersection of the different spaces defined by class, religion and national borders, the mix of their Britishness with their Shii-ness and Iraqiness forms what Hall calls new ethnicities.

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