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Creating a Diasporic Public Sphere in Britain: Twelver Shia Networks in London

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ABSTRACT

Since the 1980s, the Borough of Brent, in north-west London, has been a major global hub of transnational Twelver Shiism. With the influx of Iraqi refugees, many clerical leaders of Twelver Shia Islam established their European headquarters in Brent, and, in addition to Damascus and Tehran, London became a major centre of Iraqi diaspora politics during Saddam Hussein's regime. The transnational networks and organizations based in Brent engage in an Islamic 'transnational public space', which Bowen defines as a globally operating discursive 'field of Islamic reference and debate'. Based on ethnographic research in London, the article provides novel insights into the Twelver Shia Muslim organizational field in Britain and its engagement in 'an alternative diasporic public sphere' that articulates issues and contestations specific to Shia Muslims living in Britain: what does displacement and migration mean for Shia Muslims who have often escaped oppression, war and civil conflict; how do Shia Muslims in Britain define their relationship to Sunnis in the context of rising sectarianism in the post-Arab Spring Middle East; how do Shia Muslims position themselves towards Iran and its aspiration to be the political leader of global Shiism?

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Introduction

This article investigates how Twelver Shia networks and their spatial manifestations in London are involved in 'the creation of alternative diasporic public spheres in Britain' (Werbner 2004, 895). Since the 1980s, the Borough of Brent, in north-west London, has been a major global hub of transnational Twelver Shiism: with the influx of Iraqi refugees, many clerical leaders of Twelver Shia Islam established their European headquarters in Brent, and London, in addition to Damascus and Tehran, became a major centre of Iraqi diaspora politics during Saddam Hussein's regime, in particular of Shia Islamist parties and movements (Rahe 1996). The resultant transnational networks and organizations engage in an Islamic 'transnational public space', which Bowen (2004, 880) defines as a globally operating discursive 'field of Islamic reference and debate' that argues about the place of Islam in European societies while retaining reference points to the wider Muslim world and traditional centres of normative authority within Islam, located outside of Europe.

Research on the formation and articulation of a Muslim diasporic consciousness in Britain has primarily focussed on the experience of Sunni Muslims, particularly those of South Asian background (Werbner 2002a, 2002b, 2003, 2004; McLoughlin 2010, 2013, 2017; McLoughlin and Zavos 2014), while the particular diasporic experience of Twelver Shia Muslims in Britain has only recently been considered more extensively in academic research (Spellman 2004; Gholami 2015; Dogra 2017; Shanneik 2017; Degli Esposti 2018). Taking Twelver Shia networks and communities as a case study, the article provides novel insights into the Twelver Shia Muslim organizational field in Britain and its engagement in ‘a conflictual diasporic Muslim public sphere’ (Werbner 2004, 895) that articulates issues and contestations specific to Shia Muslims living in Britain: what does displacement and migration mean for Shia Muslims who have often escaped oppression, war and civil conflict; how do Shia Muslims in Britain define their relationship to Sunnis in the context of rising sectarianism in the post-Arab Spring Middle East; how do Shia Muslims position themselves towards Iran, the regional Shia hegemonic power with its aspiration to be the global political leader of the ‘Shi’i International’ (Mallat 1998)?

The discussion of these questions in the article is based on ethnographic research in London between September 2014 and November 2016.¹ Ethnographic fieldwork was undertaken in Arabic, Persian and English at numerous religious gatherings in 12 community centres and five private homes, mostly located in Brent. As part of the research, 32 semi- and unstructured interviews and seven focus group discussions were conducted, primarily with the male elites within these networks and community centres. The article thus presents original insights into the diversity of Muslim diasporic consciousness in Britain, the discursive formations of diaspora communities and their multi-local connectivities.

Islam and alternative diasporic public spheres

In discussing transnational Islam, Bowen (2004, 880) distinguishes three dimensions: the actual movement of Muslims from one location to another, transnationally operating Islamic networks, organizations and institutions and, finally, ‘a global public space of normative reference and debate’. The third dimension, a discursive field of Islamic normativity and legitimacy, involves Muslim actors in Europe or North America who debate the place and nature of Islam within these particular Muslim minority contexts while retaining reference points to the wider Muslim world and traditional sources and centres of normative authority within Islam: they debate on ‘how to become wholly “here” and yet preserve a tradition of orientation toward Islamic institutions located “over there”’ (882).

Werbner (2004, 895) observes that diasporas as de-territorialized social formations entail a strong ‘representational’ dimension: organizational structures need to be established that represent the diaspora’s interests to the wider public and bestow sufficient credibility and legitimacy to suggest that particular organizations and networks are ‘authentic’ representatives of a particular diaspora. Within an Islamic context and following Bowen’s observations, successful claims to representativeness require the diaspora’s engagement and embeddedness in the global Islamic field of normativity and legitimacy. In addition, Werbner (2002a, 125) broadens the meaning of diaspora. For her, ‘diasporic, rather than simply ethnic or religious, is an orientation in time and space – towards a

different past or pasts and towards another place or places'. Transnational Islamic formations, such as the Muslim minority presence in Europe and North America, are therefore diasporic in that they engage with a global discursive field of Islamic normativity that is rooted in the past, and maintained by current global networks of Muslim authorities across the globe.

Werbner (2002a, 121) also emphasizes another dimension of diasporas. As 'deterritorialisated imagined community' formed by a collective memory, they contain a sense of 'co-responsibility' for their members. At the same time, diasporas are internally diverse and socially heterogeneous: 'diasporic groups are characterised by multiple discourses, internal dissent, and competition for members between numerous sectarian, gendered or political groups, all identifying themselves with the same diaspora' (123). Diasporas are therefore 'complex and segmented' (Werbner 2004, 900). Their members might unite for particular causes and present themselves as a homogenous social group, pursuing shared interests, while in other circumstances they might be in conflict with one another over resources, ideology, representation, politics or religion. Such internal communal contestations and debates are articulated in 'a local diasporic public sphere' (Werbner 2002a, 898), often invisible to the wider public sphere. Taking the case study of transnational Twelver Shia communities in London, this article examines how Twelver Shia networks create an alternative diasporic public sphere in which intra-communal contestations are articulated.

Brent as global hub of transnational Twelver Shiism

The more formalized structures of religious authority in Twelver Shiism and the location of specific centres of authority have given Shia clerical networks a transnational or – prior to the formation of nation-states – a trans-local character (Louër 2008; Corboz 2015). The most important seminary institutions (*hawza*) of Twelver Shiism are based in the shrine cities of Najaf in Iraq and Qom in Iran, which also host the most senior clerical authorities. In addition, the *modus operandi* of clerical authority within Twelver Shiism facilitates their transnational reach: any lay Shia Muslim needs to follow a recognized senior cleric, referred to as grand ayatollah or *marja' al-taqlid* (source of emulation) (Walbridge 2001, 3–13). Emulating a particular senior cleric not only entails following his religious edicts and teachings but also paying religious taxes (*khums*) to him. As channels of communication between their followers and for the collection of religious taxes, senior clerics run a network of representatives (*wukalā'*), who act as local agents in particular localities across the world and, as members of a particular clerical network, ensure its transnational reach. The most senior and most widely followed cleric in contemporary Twelver Shiism is Iranian-born Grand Ayatollah Sayyid 'Ali Sistani (b. 1930), who was trained and is based in Najaf and heads a network spanning the entire globe (Rizvi 2018).

The formation of Shia Islamist movements in the latter half of the twentieth century further added to the transnational nature of Twelver Shiism. Shia Islamist parties in countries like Kuwait, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia were initially offshoots of Iraqi parties such as the Da'wa Party (*Hizb al-Da'wa*), which is the most important Shia Islamist party in Iraq and was in government between 2005 and 2018 (Jabar 2003, 73–143; Louër 2008, 82–88). Given the leading role clerical authorities played in the formation of these parties in Iraq, their spread to the other Arab Gulf countries was facilitated by existing clerical networks between Iraq and Shia communities in the Gulf monarchies (Louër 2008).

A third factor facilitating a further transnationalization of Twelver Shia religious and political networks lies in the experience of oppression and persecution of Shia clerical and political actors within autocratic Middle East regimes. The rise of Saddam Hussein in Baathist Iraq after 1968 led to the oppression and persecution of Iraqi Shia political and clerical dissidents, particularly after the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979. For most Iraqi Shia activists, neighbouring countries in the Middle East such as Iran, Kuwait or Syria were destinations of their exile (Mervin 1996; Louër 2008; Szanto 2012).

From the mid-1980s, London became an important destination for Iraqi Shiis. While Iranian clerics and the Khoja community initially played a central role in establishing a religious infrastructure in the capital city in the 1970s, Iraqi Shiis began to dominate the institutional field of Shiism in London from the late 1980s. There are at least 20 Shia community centres located in Brent, representing different national backgrounds and also different religious and political factions within contemporary Shia Islam. These community centres, referred to in Arabic and Persian as *husayniyya*, are not mosques but congregational halls used for Shia commemorative ceremonies and rituals. While Iraqi centres constitute the majority of networks present in Brent, other centres and initiatives are run by Iranians, Afghans, Gulf Arabs and South Asians.

One of the oldest and most prominent Shia organizations in Brent is the Al-Khoie Foundation, which was established in 1989 to manage the two independent schools on its premises. Given the oppression of Iraqi Shiis following their uprising in southern Iraq in 1991, it became the global headquarters of Grand Ayatollah Abu al-Qasim al-Khoie (1899–1992), the most senior Shia cleric based in Najaf in the latter half of the twentieth century and teacher of many prominent contemporary clerics such as Sistani. After his demise, the Foundation re-invented itself as a transnational NGO with various branches across the globe running community centres, schools and orphanages in Paris, New York, Montreal, Mumbai, Islamabad, Bangkok, Najaf, Mashhad and Qom (Al-Khoie Foundation [2015], 99–149). Internationally, it is well-connected to organizations and individuals such as the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva, making regular interventions in its sessions, the Jordanian Royal Institute for Inter-Faith Studies, established by Hasan ibn Talal, and Ali al-Hashimi, the judicial and religious advisor to the president of the United Arab Emirates (86–88). At the national and local level, the Al-Khoie Foundation is known for its various outreach activities to the wider public, having become in the eyes of the British public and government officials the quasi-official representative of Twelver Shia communities in Britain.

Dar al-Islam, established in Brent in 1993, is the official representation of the Da'wa Party in Britain. Having Iraqi Shia Islamists as its main constituency, Dar al-Islam – like the Al-Khoie Foundation – primarily attracts middle- and upper-class educated professionals. Unlike the Al-Khoie Foundation, Dar al-Islam's religious, political, educational and cultural activities have a primarily diasporic character; engagement with the wider British public in the form of interfaith dialogue and local civic activism is not visible, as Dar al-Islam has served as a local centre for politically active Iraqi Shiis forced into exile while Saddam Hussein's regime was in power.

Other Iraqi Shia centres in Brent similarly focus on catering for the spiritual and religious needs of their diasporic communities in an attempt to re-create the homeland abroad. The community centre Rasool al-Adham, for example, which began to organize from the mid-1980s, represents a different social segment and religious faction of the

Iraqi Shia diaspora. Rasool al-Adham primarily attracts a lower-middle-class and working-class congregation. Members of this congregation mainly come from Karbala, the Iraqi shrine city where the third Shia Imam Husayn is buried. Being the followers of the prominent clerical Shirazi family that originally hailed from Karbala – Muhammad al-Shirazi (1928–2001) and his younger brother Sadiq al-Shirazi (b. 1942) – attendees of Rasool al-Adham, are also referred to as Shirazis (Jabar 2003, 216–224; Louër 2008, 88–99).

A more controversial spatial manifestation of the Shirazi network is the Fadak al-Asghar centre run by the controversial young Kuwaiti cleric Yasser al-Habib (b. 1979), who arrived in the UK in 2004 after being convicted in Kuwait of inciting sectarian hatred. Al-Habib received his scholarly training from members of the Shirazi family, initially from Muhammad Rida' al-Shirazi (1959–2008), a son of Muhammad al-Shirazi, and later from Muftaba al-Shirazi (b. 1943), a young brother of Muhammad al-Shirazi, who had settled in London in 1979. Al-Habib's sermons and speeches are broadcast on the centre's own satellite channel Fadak TV and contain explicit anti-Sunni sectarian discourses and offensive statements about figures revered in Sunni Islam such as the Prophet Muhammad's wife Aisha and many of the Prophet's Companions, particularly the second caliph 'Umar ibn al-Khattab. Equally, al-Habib is extremely critical of the clerical establishment based in Najaf and openly hostile to the political and religious leadership of the Islamic Republic of Iran, accusing both of an appeasement policy towards Sunnis. Al-Habib's centre is based in Buckinghamshire, outside of the main centres in Brent. Given his controversial discourse and activities, he is shunned by mainstream organizations and networks in London and has a difficult relationship with the more established Shirazi *ḥusayniyya* in London, Rasool al-Adham.

Regional identity markers and a desire to re-create the homeland in the diaspora are evident in the activities of the Al-Husseini Association (*al-majlis al-ḥusaynī*), referred to as the 'Balaghiyyeh', which is run by the Balaghi family from southern Iraq. In the past, the family rented a tent (*khayma ḥusayniyya*) to hold gatherings, but since 2014 it has used an old warehouse as the location for its activities. The Balaghiyyeh is a good example of the spatial 'extension' (Knott 2009, 156) that religious diasporas undertake. The Balaghiyyeh connects Brent with southern Iraq by recreating the rituals, discourses and overall atmosphere of a commemorative gathering in the homeland, and there is a strong emphasis on the role Shia rituals play in maintaining that emotional and imagined link. The Balaghiyyeh attracts first-generation émigrés from Iraq but also a significant young audience consisting of recent arrivals who fled Iraq after 2003.

The Islamic Centre of England, located in Maida Vale not far from the main Iraqi Shia centres in Brent, is the official representation of the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Ali Khamenei (b. 1939). It is one of the largest Shia centres in London, providing a number of educational, religious, pastoral and charitable services, publishing various magazines and running conferences and interfaith and intra-faith meetings. Financial resources provided by the office of the Iranian Supreme Leader make this centre one of the financially most robust in the UK. As the actual number of practising Iranian Shia Muslims would not warrant such a centre, the Islamic Centre of England seeks to have a much wider appeal, catering for Shia Muslims from a variety of backgrounds. Religious activities are provided in Persian and also in Arabic, Urdu and English. Furthermore, this is the only Shia centre that provides sustained and systematic support services for converts to Shia Islam, running training courses and other activities for them.

Creating Shia diasporic identities in London: discursive elements

The major Twelver Shia institutions and organizations in Brent and the transnational networks they are part of provide a good example of the complexity and segmentation of diasporas (Werbner 2004, 900). Being situated in Brent, within walking distance and sharing a small diasporic space, they represent different clerical and political allegiances and orientations and hence compete with each other for followers and as representatives of normative Shiism in the diaspora. At the same time, these networks, despite competition and at times open hostility, exhibit a sense of diasporic 'co-responsibility' (Werbner 2002a, 121) that transcends clerical factionalism and political divergences. This co-responsibility is visible in the familial and personal relations between members and leaders of these networks, which defy existing doctrinal and ideological boundaries (Maurielle 2018). This also becomes evident in the public representation of the 'Shia community' by organizations such as the Al-Khoie Foundation and at public displays of a common Shia identity, as during the annual processions during 'Ashura' and Arba'in in the centre of London, in which a broad spectrum of Shia communities participate (Degli Esposti 2018).

Equally, these community centres participate in a global public sphere of Islamic discourse; some centres and individual figures derive their authority and legitimacy from their connections to their respective clerical or political centres of authority, or alternatively by contesting them, and seek to emplace Shia Islam in the diaspora by engaging with normative discourses in the Middle East. However, given the role that London has played as one of the global hubs of transnational Twelver Shiism and of exilic headquarters of Iraqi Shia organizations in particular, the Twelver Shia diaspora has not only received discourses from the Middle East and used them to legitimize their own diasporic presence but has equally shaped the ideological and sectarian formations in the Middle Eastern 'heartlands' of Shiism. These networks have thereby created diasporic alternative public spheres that are inherently multi-local: from localized contestations around how to practise and represent Shia Islam with transnational references to Islamic notions of authority and normativity, to shaping discursive formations within the 'Shi'i International' more globally. In the following, discourses observed during 'Ashura' after the rise of ISIS in Syria and Iraq from 2014 to 2016 will be discussed in order to examine how these networks are involved in, respond to and impact on the global Shia public sphere.

The first ten days of the Islamic month of Muharram, known as 'Ashura', constitute the peak of the Shia religious calendar. During these days, Shiis across the world remember the martyrdom of Imam Husayn in Karbala, in southern Iraq, in 680CE, when he and his family and entourage were killed by the forces of the Umayyad caliph Yazid. 'Ashura' memorial gatherings (*majlis al-ʿazāʾ*) are usually held in the evening and include a fairly fixed format with some cultural variations in different ethnic groups: a memorial lecture narrates the martyrdom events on each of the ten days, culminating in the narration of the killing of Imam Husayn (*maq̄tal*) on the tenth day of 'Ashura'. The lecture is followed by the congregation rhythmically beating themselves (*laṭmiyya*) to articulate grief while devotional poetry is recited in praise of Imam Husayn, his entourage and other members of the Prophet's family (*ahl al-bayt*). Some groups engage in self-flagellation (*taṭbīr*) on the tenth day of 'Ashura' to commemorate the actual killing of Imam Husayn. Passion plays, whether in the form of the more elaborate Iranian *taʿzīyeh* performances or the more rudimentary *tashābih* of Iraqi and other Gulf Arab Shiis, re-

enact scenes of the battlefield in Karbala and its aftermath. Finally, mourning processions on the day of ‘Ashura’ and visiting the tomb of Imam Husayn in Karbala, preferably 40 days after his death (*arbaʿin*), conclude the mourning period in the Shia religious calendar (Nakash 2007, 115–137).

The concentration of several Shia centres in Brent leads to a vast array of activities, with some groups hiring venues for the occasion, and many memorial gatherings are also held in private homes. Observing the memorial lectures and ritual activities provides a good opportunity to identify transnational discursive formations in different community centres, which usually invite external speakers and poetry reciters (*rādūd*, *mullā*) during ‘Ashura’ and compete with each other to attract the most popular speakers and reciters. The memorial lecture itself is given by a scholar with some formal religious training and narrates or refers to particular events of Karbala, drawing out a general moral and spiritual message. Very often, the lecture applies specific Karbala events to current local, national and transnational contexts and circumstances and may have overt or implicit political connotations. This technique of applying the ‘Karbala paradigm’ (Fischer 1980, 19–26) – a narrative of the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad making a stand against an oppressive and illegitimate ruler and the ultimate sacrifice – is referred to as *nuzūl* (lit. ‘descent’) in Arabic and *gorīz* (lit. ‘projection’) in Persian (Afary and Anderson 2014, 47).

The technique of *nuzūl* or *gorīz* expands Twelver Shia discourses across space and time and exhibits a diasporic orientation: it has a transnational or trans-local character, with its references to authority figures based in the Middle East and is also trans-temporal, utilizing mythico-historical reference points in the Shia ‘collective past’ (Werbner 2002a, 121). Each centre’s political orientation, the ethnic and socio-economic demographics of its congregation and concomitant expectations, and the style and ideological orientation of the speaker determine to what extent and in which way *nuzūl* or *gorīz* is applied. The following examples give an idea of the different ways the Karbala narrative, other mythico-historical references and clerical authority were framed by speakers at the major community centres in Brent between 2014 and 2016.

Migration and diaspora

Given the diasporic location of the Shia community centres in London and the experiences of forced migration and exile of their founders and the majority of the members of their congregations, it is natural that the themes of migration, displacement and diasporic identity feature in the discourses during ‘Ashura’. The lectures given and interviews conducted during ‘Ashura’ in autumn 2015, specifically, also reflected the impact of the refugee and migrant crisis of the summer of 2015, during which many Iraqis fled their country following the ISIS advances in much of Iraq. Themes addressed in the lecture revolved around the question of whether and when it is legitimate to leave an ‘Islamic country’ and what are the consequent responsibilities of the diasporic Shia community. They also engaged with the question of what integration means and what overall role the diasporic Shia presence in the West might entail for the wider Shia Muslim world. These issues and debates were discussed with reference to relevant authoritative sources, particularly traditions attributed to the Prophet Muhammad or the Twelve Imams, or to the ‘Karbala paradigm’ when discussing the moral and spiritual lessons of Imam Husayn’s martyrdom and its relevance for Shia Muslims living in the West.

In 2014, the Al-Khoie Foundation invited an Iraqi speaker, based in Denmark, who gave an eloquent and intellectualized account of the early days of the events leading up to the martyrdom of Imam Husayn. He discussed the notion of ‘emigration (*hijra*)’ in Islamic history as well as in the history of other religions. The initiation of Imam Husayn’s campaign, leaving Medina for Karbala, was likened to the *hijra* of the Prophet Muhammad from Mecca to Medina, and the exodus of Abraham from his home town and of Moses and the Israelites from Egypt to the Holy Land, and the emigration of Imam ‘Ali from Medina to take up residence in Kufa. According to the speaker, love for the homeland is encouraged and leaving it is ‘disapproved (*makrūh*)’ in Islamic law when proper Islamic institutions such as mosques and seminaries exist there and it is possible to practise Islam. However, emigration is required when it is no longer possible to practise Islam in a particular place and its very existence depends on emigrating to another location. Imam Husayn thus fulfilled a trans-historical prophetic and soteriological paradigm with his own exodus, ensuring the survival of ‘authentic’ Islam, its spiritual purification and the salvation of his followers.

The speaker moulded his presentation around different discursive layers: Imam Husayn’s own actions were likened to an interreligious prophetic paradigm but, at the same time, his move to Karbala mirrors the specific migratory experiences of the speaker and his congregation: they had to leave Iraq as they could not freely practise their religion in their country of origin. The analogies created between the Iraqi congregation’s experiences of displacement and migration and the lives of mythical figures also provide their settlement with a positive interpretation – as an opportunity to practise Shia Islam freely.

More critical views of the emigration of Shiis from Iraq were also articulated. The organizers of the Balaghiyyeh follow the clerical leadership of Sistani, and his London representative and son-in-law, Murtadha Kashmiri, regularly attends and speaks at the gatherings. In one of his talks, given during ‘Ashura’ in 2015, he was critical of young Iraqis leaving their country, ‘the country of the Commander of the Faithful [Imam ‘Ali] (*balad amīr al-mu’minīn*)’. This statement was motivated by the migrant and refugee crisis Europe experienced in the summer of 2015, which included the influx of Iraqis fleeing ISIS. At the same time, Kashmiri acknowledged the particular challenges of raising Shiis in the diaspora, stressing the importance of learning Arabic as ‘the language of our creed (*lughat ‘aḳīdatinā*)’. A year later, in 2016, in one of first nights of ‘Ashura’ of that season, Kashmiri emphasized the role young Shiis in the West play as representatives of Islam and as role-models for Shia Islam who should aspire to the highest moral standards and follow the laws of Islam (including women wearing the Islamic headscarf) while at the same time respecting the laws of the country in which they reside. In addition, young Shia Muslims have the responsibility to follow the authority of senior clerics as ‘the leadership of the jurisconsults (*qiyādat al-fuqahā*)’ provides the ultimate protection of religion, particularly in a non-Muslim diasporic context. In these statements, a more ambivalent view of displacement and migration comes to the fore: they contain a reprimand to young Iraqis leaving their country in 2015 and present the Shia presence in the diaspora as a challenge that can only be mastered by respecting the authority of senior clerics in Najaf. Kashmiri thereby intended to ensure the transnational reach of clerical authorities based in Iraq and the diasporic orientation of Shia communities in the West to these authorities.

The fear of losing one's religious and cultural identity in a Western minority context and the need to preserve it emerged as a theme in lectures at other community centres as well. The speaker at Rasool al-Adham during 'Ashura' 2015 introduced one of his lectures with the remark that the greatest mistake any 'community (*umma*)' can make is to leave its foundations. He referred to an anecdote from Japan at the time of the Meiji restoration (1868–1912), when young men were sent to the West as students of modern sciences. Many came back wearing European dress or putting forward Western ideas and, if they had become entirely Westernized, they were executed. The reference to Japan is here deliberately chosen as an example of a non-Western, Asian society that managed to modernize while apparently retaining its cultural identity. For the speaker, the case of Japan illustrated that each community needs to find meaning and solutions to its challenges by using its own cultural resources. Islamic culture is based on the Qur'an, the unity of God and the prophethood of Muhammad. Adhering to Islamic principles, and for Shiis in particular 'the culture of Husayn (*thaqāfat al-ḥusayn*)' will have an impact on the society in which Shiis live. The speaker referred to another historical example when the Ilkhanid ruler Mahmud Ghazan (1271–1304) and his brother Oljeitu (1260–1316) converted to Shia Islam after they had observed the processions in Karbala commemorating the martyrdom of Imam Husayn.² Similarly, the presence of Shiis in the West and the preservation of their culture, which includes most importantly the performance of rituals, will attract non-Muslims to Islam. Just as the first Ilkhanid rulers, initially representing a non-Muslim superior power, were attracted to Islam through the rituals commemorating Imam Husayn, so would people in the West embrace Islam when Shiis exhibit 'the culture of Husayn'.

Preserving Shia identity in the diaspora is presented differently in the Balaghiyyeh and Rasool al-Adham. While Sistani's representative in London, Kashmiri, emphasized adherence to the clerical establishment in Najaf and upholding Islamic moral principles, the speaker in Rasool al-Adham underlined the centrality of rituals not just to preserve Shia identity in the diaspora but also to attract non-Shiis. Neither discourse actively encourages any kind of civic engagement but rather they emphasize elements that make Shia Muslims clearly visible as such. The speaker at the Arabic *majlis* at the Islamic Centre of England went beyond simply preserving one's identity in the West in one of his lectures during 'Ashura' 2014, when the evening lecture was dedicated to the companions of Imam Husayn (*āṣḥāb al-ḥusayn*) and their virtues. For the speaker, one of their virtues was that they did not blindly followed rumours or hearsay but critically scrutinized information they received. Similarly, Shiis living in the West should not follow news stories about the Middle East blindly but should confirm their veracity. The speaker referred to the fatwa that Sistani issued in 2014 in which he declared that the military battle against ISIS was *jihād*. According to the speaker, media outlets globally and in the UK misrepresented the fatwa as encouraging Iraqi Shiis to fight against Sunnis. Therefore, it is necessary for Shiis living in the West, young Shiis in particular, to overcome their silence and to publicly redress these misrepresentations. For the speaker, civic engagement also entails reading the local newspaper and understanding local issues in order for Shiis to be actively involved in their solution and thereby raise the public profile of Shiis in the West. Switching from Arabic to English, he concluded: 'We live and work in Britain and take citizenship. So we need to live as the British live.'

A number of interviewees, when reflecting on the role of Shiis living in the West, also referred to a prominent eschatological Prophetic tradition according to which one of the signs of the imminent arrival of the Day of Judgement is that the sun will rise in the West. Giving it an allegorical interpretation, respondents understood the tradition as meaning that true Islam will be revived in the West or the West will be the place where true Islam can be practised. While such statements were made in personal interviews with respondents, the public endorsement of such a reading of the tradition and its meaning for Shia Muslims in the West was given by Sistani's representative, Kashmiri, in his lecture in the Balaghiyyeh in 2016. He referred to the tradition and used it to underline the important role Shia Muslims play in the West as role-models and representatives of Islam. Such a creative re-reading of an eschatological tradition gives the Shia presence in the West a much more significant role in protecting and restoring Islam: the diaspora in the West does not just pose a challenge for Shiis to maintain their identity; it becomes the locus of reviving their identity in a socio-political context that is not marked by oppression, conflict and war.

Sunni–Shia sectarianism and the rise of ISIS

The rise of ISIS in 2014 and their explicit anti-Shia hostility were also reflected in the discourses coming from 'Ashura' lectures between 2014 and 2016, often involving wider considerations of the relationship between Sunni and Shia Islam. Shia speakers exhibited different degrees of sectarianism. Their discourses ranged from emphasizing Islamic unity, to veiled criticism of Sunnism as being the breeding ground for radical interpretations of Islam, to explicit anti-Sunnism.

The speaker in Dar al-Islam during 'Ashura' 2014, for instance, enumerated the motives for Imam Husayn's campaign: he fulfilled the will of God by sacrificing himself and intended to make a stand against the Umayyad dynasty, whose rule was marked by 'corruption (*fasād*)' and 'terror (*irhāb*)'. While the speaker did not make any overt references to the rise of ISIS, his choice of words characterizing the Umayyads presents ISIS as their latter-day manifestation. The analogy between the Umayyad dynasty and ISIS became more apparent when he referred to the first Umayyad caliph Mu'awiya (602–680), who killed his opponents and then engaged in sexual intercourse with their widows – an anecdote that resonates with the actions of ISIS fighters who enslaved the daughters and wives of Yezidis after killing their fathers and husbands.

A much more explicit sectarian tone was adopted by the speaker at Rasool al-Adham in 2014 in light of the rise of ISIS. His series of memorial lectures was entitled 'school of terror (*madrasat al-irhāb*)', of which ISIS is but one of the latest manifestations. However, for the speaker, ISIS is not just a contemporary product of the perversion of the Umayyad dynasty – which also holds an ambivalent position in Sunni historiography. The 'school of terror' is a veiled reference to Sunni Islam more generally and its inherent deficiency resulting from its rejection of the infallible guidance of the family of the Prophet and the Shia Imams. As a consequence, Sunni Islam is bound to degenerate, as ISIS most plainly illustrates. To demonstrate this further, the speaker referred to Khalid ibn al-Walid (585–642), an initial opponent of Muhammad and the early Muslims in Mecca, who later became the most prominent and effective military commander of the growing Arab-Muslim empire under the first two caliphs. Widely respected among Sunni Muslims as

a capable military leader and Companion of the Prophet, Shia Islam portrays him as a major opponent of ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib. The speaker at Rasool al-Adham referred to an anecdote during the *rida* wars under the caliphate of Abu Bakr, when renegade tribes tried to break away from the early Islamic community. Khalid ibn al-Walid played a central role in defeating these tribes and as part of his military campaigns killed the tribal leader Malik ibn Nuwayrah, who was accused of retaining *zakāt* payments. For the speaker at Rasool al-Adham and in line with the general Shia view, Khalid killed Malik in order to engage in sexual intercourse with his wife. For the speaker, Khalid was ‘a murderer and adulterer (*qātil wa-zānī*)’ who executed an innocent Muslim in order to rape his wife – setting the precedent for his latter day followers in ISIS.

While these examples were given to particular congregations in the community centres and exhibited different attitudes towards Sunnism, the public display of Shia communal identities similarly demarcated Shia Muslims from ISIS. The ‘Ashura’ processions in central London are good example of this particular discursive demarcation. In 2014, posters proclaiming ‘Shia Muslims standing against terrorism’, ‘Shia Muslim are the biggest victims of terrorism’ or anti-ISIS slogans were carried by some participants. At the start of the actual procession, brief speeches were given in different languages – including in English, thereby targeting a wider audience as the gathering between Marble Arch and Hyde Park Corner was observed by the public. One of the speakers, a female British convert to Shia Islam, responded to critics within the Shia community who said that one should not openly remember Imam Husayn and the events of Karbala in order to avoid being perceived as sectarian. However, for her, remembering Imam Husayn provides an opportunity to present a different image of Islam that stands in stark contrast to ‘the travesty of Islam’ promulgated by ISIS.

While these discourses contain veiled anti-Sunni references and more or less direct criticism of figures venerated in Sunni Islam, the community centre Fadak al-Asghar led by the Kuwaiti cleric Yasser al-Habib exhibits the strongest and most explicit anti-Sunni discourses, specifically targeting highly-venerated figures in Sunni Islam who were known for their opposition to ‘Ali and his family. Al-Habib gained global notoriety in 2010, when he celebrated the death of Aisha and also revived the tradition of cursing the first two caliphs, Abu Bakr and ‘Umar ibn al-Khattab – a practice regularly performed in his own lectures and by members of his congregation. In addition, he created new terminology to refer to Sunnis, calling them ‘bakri’, followers of Abu Bakr; for him, only the followers of the family of the Prophet (*ahl al-bayt*) can claim to follow the *sunna* of the Prophet. However, most attacks by al-Habib and his followers are directed against other Shiis, whether they follow Khomeini’s ideology of the guardianship of the jurisconsult (*wilāyat al-faqīh*) or the clerical establishment in Najaf. In his nomenclature, he refers to these Shiis as ‘batri’, a pejorative reference to a branch of the Zaydi sect that exculpates the first two caliphs, Abu Bakr and ‘Umar, from deliberately depriving ‘Ali of his position as successor to the Prophet Muhammad, on the basis that they were unaware of ‘Ali’s designation and hence cannot be accused of having usurped the caliphate (Haider 2014). In a personal interview with the author, al-Habib used the term ‘batri’ for any Shii ‘who calls for people to respect Abu Bakr, ‘Umar and Aisha, stays silent about them, defends them, supplicates for God to be pleased with them or justifies and belittles their crimes [against the family of the Prophet]’.³ Any Shia who seeks a rapprochement with Sunnis is, for al-Habib, a modern manifestation of the “Batriya” to which the current Iranian regime belongs’.⁴

Al-Habib's lecture – delivered in immaculate classical Arabic – on the last night of 'Ashura' in 2015 mentioned a decision by the Egyptian government to bar Shiis from performing a pilgrimage (*ziyāra*) to the shrine of Imam Husayn at the al-Husayn Mosque in central Cairo. Referring to the Shia past of Cairo with al-Azhar being initially a Shia institution of learning, al-Habib decried this violation of the religious freedom of Egyptian Shiis: 'If Muslims are barred from praying at al-Aqsa [in Jerusalem], they talk about religious freedom. But where is religious freedom here?' Al-Habib compares this ban with a recent publication by an institution associated with the shrine of the first Shii Imam, 'Ali, in Najaf. The book added praise to the names of Abu Bakr and 'Umar whenever they were mentioned including the phrase – common in Sunni Islam – 'may God be pleased with him (*radīya allāh 'anhū*)'. For al-Habib, this example illustrates how the clerical establishment in Najaf follows 'batri' Islam; rather than denouncing the first two caliphs as enemies of the family of the Prophet, they are given honorific titles to seek rapprochement with the Sunnis. For al-Habib, the Egyptian government decision to ban Shia rituals at the al-Husayn Mosque, and the veneration for the Sunni caliphs articulated in official publications of the clerical establishment in Najaf, show that both 'bakri' and 'batri' Islam are two sides of the same coin: both stand in opposition to the teachings of the family of the Prophet.

The above statements engaged in various degrees of anti-Sunni sectarian discourse to demarcate Shia Islam clearly from radical and militant interpretations of Sunni Islam, to denounce Sunni Islam as inherently deficient, or to antagonize Sunni Muslims and the political and clerical establishment of Shia Islam in Iran and Iraq who seek to overcome sectarian tensions. On the other hand, discourses emerged that supported Islamic unity and rejected sectarian differences, which had become more pronounced in the Middle East from 2003 onwards and much more so after the rise of ISIS in 2014. In his 'Ashura' lecture in 2015 at the Balaghiyyeh, Kashmiri, as Sistani's official representative, emphasized Islamic unity: all Muslims should be united under 'one single creed (*kalima wāḥida*)' and their sectarian differences should not matter: 'There is no Shia, no Sunni.' Kashmiri connected this emphasis on unity with the lesson to be drawn from the events of Karbala: 'Love (*maḥabba*), concord (*ittilāf*) and unity (*waḥda*) are among the objectives of the revolution of Husayn (*thawrat al-ḥusayn*).' Statements such as these reflect the views of Sistani, who has countered the sectarian conflict in Iraq since 2003 with various fatwas and declarations; they also reflect the immediate threat posed by ISIS in Iraq at that time and aim to counter the impression that the militant struggle against ISIS is implicitly directed against Iraqi Sunnis. The fight against ISIS was framed as a national struggle of all Iraqis, regardless of their religious background (Abdo 2017, 22–23). Statements such as these, directed towards Shiis living in the West, also respond to and are intended to counter the appeal of figures like al-Habib and their anti-Sunni sectarian discourse.

Attitudes towards the Islamic Republic of Iran and political Shiism

Within the discourses coming from the various community centres and their congregations on the Islamic Republic of Iran, its ideological foundations and political Shiism more generally, three different attitudes can be observed: (i) views in clear support of the Iranian regime and the concept of *wilāyat al-faqīh*; (ii) community centres and

groups taking a neutral stance by espousing non-political forms of Shia Islam or not commenting directly on politics; (iii) and various stances that are a more sceptical or oppositional to the Islamic Republic.

The Islamic Centre of England is the official representation of the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 'Ali Khamenei, in the UK. The speaker at the Arabic gathering in 2014 switched in his lecture between Arabic and English. His English interventions addressed young Shiis in the audience, urging them to integrate into European societies and to become civic actors. In Arabic, he engaged in a defence of *wilāyat al-faqīh*. Responding to those Shiis who deny or question the 'blessings (*barakāt*)' of *wilāyat al-faqīh* and consider that Iran, its ideological reading of Shia Islam and its policies are harming Shiis, the speaker presented Iran as the regional and global guardian of Shia communities. In the regional context of the Middle East, he suggested that Shia communities in Bahrain, the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon should form a loose political and military union under the leadership of Iran in order to ensure their survival against the onslaught of radical militant Sunni movements such as ISIS. The speaker's discourse responded to transnational events in the Middle East, and also articulated a supra-national unity of the Shia *umma* and suggested the political formation of a 'Shi'i International' led by Iran to protect Shia communities in the Middle East.

Discourses such as these seek to make Khamenei's political authority relevant to Shiis living outside of Iran, both in the Middle East and in the West, by projecting his authority as the political leader of the 'Shi'i International'. Such a reading does not challenge or undermine the clerical leadership of the senior clerics based in Najaf but does provide a political counterweight to their more cautious interventions, in particular on political issues affecting Shiis outside of Iraq. Proponents of this reading presented acceptance of this model as particularly urgent in light of the rise of ISIS, the crackdown on the Shia opposition in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia in 2014, and the civil war in Yemen.

However, such discourses in clear support of the Iranian regime do not represent the only type of attitude espoused by Shia congregations based in London. Many community centres adopt a neutral stance towards the Iranian regime and promote apolitical forms of Shiism, focussing on ritual activities. A good example of this approach is the Balaghiyyeh, which focusses on the re-creation of Iraqi Shia folk culture for the diaspora in London. While they maintain good relations with Sistani, if political statements are made from the pulpit by figures like Kashmiri, they reflect the official line of the clerical establishment in Najaf and are concerned with issues affecting Iraq.

A group of Iranian Shiis living in north-west London has organized religious activities since 2012. Without a physical space of their own, the group has used various facilities in the area. Attendees at their events are religious middle- and upper-class Iranian Shiis and also include a number of second-generation Iranians living in London. While not articulating an oppositional stance to the Islamic Republic and the Islamic Centre in London, the organizers characterize themselves as 'non-political' in their approach. Their choice to run a Persian-speaking programme outside of the Islamic Centre provides them with more freedom in terms of speakers they can invite to give lectures, the performance of rituals, and their own particular style, as well as their outreach to segments of the Iranian Shia diaspora who are not secular but would not feel comfortable attending religious events run by organizations associated with the Supreme Leader of Iran. In 2015 and 2016, the group invited a religious speaker from Iran who belonged to a prominent family

of preachers. His father had been a popular preacher in Iran before the Islamic Revolution and part of the so-called *velāyatīs*, a group of scholars and popular preachers (*vo'āz*) who emphasized submission to the authority (Arabic: *wilāya*, Persian: *velāyat*) of the Twelve Imams. The *velāyatīs* particularly opposed the activities and discourses of 'Ali Shari'ati (1933–1977), an important ideologue of the Islamic Revolution, whose public lectures in Tehran played a significant role in mobilizing young Iranian Shiis in the lead-up to the Revolution (Rahnema 1998, 266–276).

At the religious gatherings in London, the preacher's lectures mostly focus on spiritual topics or the correct performance of rituals. In one of his lectures, the speaker emphasized the central authority of the Mahdi, whose sovereignty (*velāyat*) overrides any other authority, whether political or religious, including the authority held by the clerics and even the authority of one's parents. Taking this point even further, the speaker stated that all the writings and scholarship of the clerics are obliterated in the presence of the Mahdi. Such statements are *prima facie* common iterations of fundamental precepts of Twelver Shiism – also contained in Article 5 of the Iranian Constitution, which refers to the Mahdi as 'the sovereign of the age (*valī-ye 'aṣr*)'. Upon his appearance, any religious and secular authority will be made redundant. However, such an emphasis on the absolute sovereignty of the Mahdi, even during the time of his occultation, could be understood as a veiled criticism of the political system in Iran, where the country's Supreme Leader is invested with almost all the spiritual and secular prerogatives of the Hidden Imam.

Sceptical attitudes and different assessments also became evident at a private commemorative gathering in Brent, during which participants expressed different attitudes about the role of Islam in a modern state. One representative, associated with the Al-Khoie Foundation, referred to the Western trajectory with the separation of church and state and relegation of the church to the role of providing social services and dealing with spiritual matters. For him, this historical development – albeit presented in rather simplistic terms – has been successful. He was particularly critical of the Islamic Revolution and the creation of an Islamic state in Iran as having been damaging for Shiis worldwide. Other participants in the gathering disagreed with him, rejecting the secular separation between church and state as not applicable to Islam. In relation to the Islamic Revolution, some of them conceded that perhaps under Khamenei the Iranian regime had become dictatorial but this was not the case when Khomeini led the Islamic Revolution.

Even figures from Shia Islamist organizations that were initially created with Iranian support expressed sceptical views of Iran's political role in the region and its claims to leadership of Shiis worldwide. An Iraqi activist who moves between London and Iraq was one of the founding members of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), the umbrella organization for Iraqi Shia dissident political groups, created in 1982 under Iranian patronage. On the relationship between Iraq and Iran, the activist distinguished between Arabs and Iranians and their dissimilar cultural identities and referred to the much longer presence of Shia Islam in Iraq compared with Iran. He not only disputed the political hegemony of Iran over Iraqi Shiis but also emphasized the priority and superiority of the clerical establishment in Najaf over Qom: 'Najaf speaks for Shia Islam, not Qom.' The seminary institutions in Qom are only a couple of decades old, while Shia educational institutions in Najaf date back centuries.

The most vocal rejections of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the ideological orientation of the regime and any form of political Shia activism came from members of community

centres associated with the Shirazis. An attendee of Rasool al-Adham expressed hostile views of Khomeini and the Islamic Republic of Iran as the greatest force harming Shiis today: 'Khomeini was worse than the Wahhabis, Saddam Hussein and Hizb al-Baath together.' Hizbollah's policy of taking hostages during the Lebanese civil war, as well as the protracted war with Iraq – which Khomeini could have ended earlier – are for him the main reasons why the image of Shia Islam has been tarnished in the West. Khomeini's attraction to Islamic mysticism makes him equally suspect. Muhammad al-Shirazi and other clerics associated with the Shirazis have made strong statements against mystical approaches to Islam, declaring anyone subscribing to such ideas to be a non-Muslim. To the astonishment of the respondent, somebody like Khomeini, who cannot even be considered a Muslim because of his mystical inclinations, is considered by many Shiis to be a great Muslim leader.

Similar strong statements came from members of the congregation of Fadak al-Asghar led by Yasser al-Habib, who referred to Khamenei as leader of the 'batri' Shia. While cursing the enemies of the family of the Prophet more generally or those responsible for the murder of Imam Husayn and his family in Karbala, such as Yazid ibn Mu'awiya, is not uncommon among Shia communities, members of Fadak al-Asghar also curse Abu Bakr, 'Umar and Aisha. In addition, during rituals performed on 'Ashura' in 2015, curses were pronounced against representatives of the Islamic Republic of Iran and its ideological foundation: 'Cursed be Khamenei and Khomeini (*'ala khaminā'i wa-khumaynī al-la'na*)! Cursed be the guardianship of the jurisconsult (*'ala wilāyat al-faqih al-la'na*)!'

Other members of the congregation at Rasool al-Adham, when asked what is specific about the Shirazi approach to Shia Islam, referred to the principle of separating religion and politics as its main characteristic. They distinguished two types of Shiism: 'political Shiism (*al-shī'a al-siyāsiyya*)' and 'religious Shiism (*al-shī'a al-'aqqā'idīyya*)', with the Shirazis representing the latter. Blending religion and politics ultimately corrupts religion and its doctrines. Iran, despite claiming to be a Shia state, exercises political control on both the doctrines and rituals of Shia Islam and thereby stifles two central elements of Shia Islam. The clerical leadership of the Shirazis is free from political interference and hence independent from any kind of government influence and control – demarcating the Shirazis from other contemporary movements in Shia Islam that are too political or too close to particular political regimes.

Such contestations around the regional and global role of Iran illustrate how 'the Muslim diaspora also opens up a diasporic space of critical dissent' (Werbner 2002a, 130): anti-Iranian attitudes are more difficult to articulate in such strong terms in Middle Eastern Shia contexts, let alone extreme forms of anti-Sunni sectarianism as promoted by Yasser al-Habib. The diasporic space allows the development of discourses and rituals outside of normativities created by nation-states in the Middle East, which are often autocratic or conflict-ridden, and clerical authorities. Attitudes towards Iran also serve as an area of contestation to mark boundaries between different Shia communities and their transnational networks and to articulate different visions of Shiism, either promoting a sense of global Shia political activism, spearheaded by Iran, or restating 'utopian visions' (129) of Shiism that are not contaminated by the caveats of *realpolitik* and are articulated in de-politicized notions of clerical authority and an emphasis on ritual practice.

Conclusion

The examples discussed in the article illustrate the segmentation of the Shia Muslim diaspora in Britain, whose doctrinal, ideological and political contestations are articulated in an alternative diasporic public sphere informed by geopolitical developments in the Middle East post-Arab Spring, political and clerical authority figures based in Iraq and Iran, and the mythico-historical tropes of a collective Shia past. The discourses presented also confirm Bowen's (2004, 891) observations that the 'transnational Islamic sphere of reference and debate' is not necessarily 'post-national' as it is concerned with events in various nation-states in the Middle East, Iraqi domestic politics and the role of Iran as a regional hegemonic power in particular, and the role of Shia Muslims in Britain in presenting an alternative image of Islam that contrasts with militant and violent articulations of Sunni Islam.

The discussion above equally illustrates how diasporas are 'chaorders, chaotic orders' (Werbner 2002a, 121) that act fairly independently from any centre and lack 'a central command structure' (123), despite the efforts of the clerical establishment in Najaf and the Iranian regime to extend their transnational reach to Shia Muslims in the West. As these examples illustrate, such efforts can either be ignored or outrightly challenged. At the same time, Twelver Shia networks share and utilize a similar discursive and symbolic mythico-historical repertoire and participate in, respond to and impact on the transnational (Shia) Islamic public sphere. Doctrinal, ideological and political contestations reveal the power relations between the various networks that either seek to ensure the transnational influence and relevance of the Shia centres of political and clerical authority in the Middle East or contest their legitimacy and authority in order to appeal to the increasing number of those Shia Muslims in the diaspora that are disaffected from them.

Notes

1. Funding for this project was provided by the Gerda Henkel Foundation as part of the project "'Karbala in London": Transnational Shia Networks between Britain and the Middle East' (2014–2016).
2. On Mahmud Ghazan's conversion to Islam, see Melville (1990). It is not entirely clear from where the notion comes that he and his brother converted to Shia Islam.
3. Email Interview, 1 March 2016. London: Office of Sheikh al-Habib.
4. Ibid.

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