

# **Associational Life, Print Culture and Political Thought in Najaf, 1905-c.1941**

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**This thesis is submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

## *Personal Declaration*

This thesis is the result of my own work and includes nothing which is the outcome of work done in collaboration except as declared in the preface and specified in the text.

It is not substantially the same as any work that has already been submitted before for any degree or other qualification except as declared in the preface and specified in the text.

It does not exceed the prescribed word limit for the History Degree Committee.

**Thesis Abstract: Associational Life, Print Culture and Political Thought in Najaf, 1905–c.1941, Christopher Cooper-Davies**

This thesis analyses Najafi intellectual and political activity in the first half of the twentieth century. One of the most important Shi'i religious and scholarly cities in the world, Najaf was transformed by the momentous political and social changes wrought by the demise of the Ottoman Empire and the formation of the Iraqi nation state. Despite increased interest in Iraqi intellectual and political life during this period, the Najafi Nahda remains a poorly understood phenomenon, especially in English language scholarship. This thesis addresses this shortfall by asking how Najafi public life was transformed by modern political and technological developments, as well as how its inhabitants responded to the seismic political, social and cultural challenges which accompanied imperial decline and quasi-colonial national integration. Drawing from journals and newspapers published in Najaf, other published material such as memoirs and pamphlets, as well as the British diplomatic and colonial archive, it explores Najafi ideas about social reform, constitutionalism, religious renewal, colonialism and nationalism. It pays special attention to the institutional settings for these debates, specifically the city's *majālis*, its print culture and political parties. The principal argument of the thesis is that the full-scale transformation of the Najafi public sphere during this period created the political conditions for a number of locally produced ideologies and modernity projects, which had important implications for the development of anti-colonial nationalism, Islamism and, later still, leftist radicalism in Iraq. Recentring the political and intellectual history of Iraq on a peripheral city such as Najaf engenders a more holistic interpretation of Iraqi history in the twentieth century. It avoids some of the pitfalls of Baghdad-centred or elite/colonial-based histories, which tend to dismiss peripheral voices as non-nationalist, extremist or sectarian.

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## *Introduction*

On 2 August 1935, a Lebanese-Iraqi student in the Najafi *hawza*, Muhammad Sharara, wrote about the Arab Nahda in his weekly column for the Najafi newspaper *al-Hatif*. He framed the article as a discussion between several educated men in a Najafi *majlis*, a traditional institution of associational life where men gathered to discuss *adab*, religion and – at least by the twentieth century – politics. The ‘vehemence of the debate and discussion which had broken out among the brothers’ was so intense, according to Sharara, that it unsettled the ‘beautiful clear sky and the gentle breeze.’ Some in attendance argued that the Arabs were still ‘slumbering in the stupor of deep sleep’; others that they had ‘risen anew’; one man talked without reason or logic. Then ‘Mr S’ (*al-ustādh sīn*), a ‘knowledgeable and cultured man, with good morals, experience, expertise and a love of the Arabs’ took the floor. He had been educated in the ‘West’, but he was not a Western apologist. The West’s power and money, he argued, was equally responsible for ‘delaying and blocking’ the Nahda. Overcoming this impediment required inculcating the ‘lessons of sacrifice’ in the upcoming generation. Pondering the discussion at home after the *majlis*, Sharara picked up a book about the battle of Yarmuk, where the Arabs had defeated the Byzantine Empire in 636 despite being heavily outnumbered. From this historical example, he realised the sanctity of Mr S’s remarks. *Nahdas*, he concluded – which ‘spread to the world in a few days and build in a few hours what generations build in years and months’ – required personal sacrifice.<sup>1</sup>

Sharara’s article was social commentary, in keeping with the political outlook of early twentieth century Najaf. This illustrious Shi’i holy city and centre of religious learning was a central node in the production of nineteenth and twentieth century Arab political thought. The

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<sup>1</sup> *Al-Hatif*, 13, 2 August 1935, 1.



Najafi men who wrote, published, discussed, assembled and argued throughout this period framed social progress as a productive and self-sacrificial endeavour. The civic practice of affecting the Nahda involved writing in journals, opening schools and societies, and pondering the big social, cultural and political questions of the day. As Sharara's piece highlights, social divides were less between traditionalists and Westernisers, but between the old pursuit of personal interest (*al-shahwa*) and the new altruism of reform.

Sharara's article also spoke to the institutional arrangements of the Najafi public sphere, the relationship between print culture and association life, and the role of the *majālis*. His decision to frame his article around a *majlis* showed the important role of such traditional institutions for producing and legitimising Najafi public opinion. It functioned alongside new forms of print culture: his book on the battle of Yarmouk and his own article, written in the modern genre of the newspaper. Despite this, the significance of his subject matter and the weight of his conclusions were all heightened by his framing of the discussion within the parameters of a physical *majlis*. According to Sharara's idealist musings, this was a site of uninhibited public discourse between anonymous individuals, devoid of social hierarchies. In reality, such anonymity seldom existed. *Majālis* were equally sites for the reinforcement of social hierarchies as they were sites for their deconstruction. Yet this did not diminish their capacity to act as places for the production and dissemination of new ideas, nor to evolve in response to political and cultural change.

This thesis analyses the cultural and political production of the Najafis who attended such institutions in the early twentieth century. Despite increased attention in recent years on intellectual life and politics in monarchical Iraq, the Najafi Nahda remains an understudied phenomenon outside of Arabic historiography. This is despite the historic and contemporary significance of the city as a site of Shi'i education and intellectual production. Scholarship tends to focus on Baghdad, capital of Iraq since 1920. Such a focus is not unjustified, given the

centripetal pull of Baghdad as a political and cultural centre. However, it leads to a distorted interpretation of political and intellectual life in Iraq which either ignores or mischaracterises peripheral voices.

To address this shortfall, this thesis embarks on a close reading of Najafi newspapers and journals published between 1910 and 1941. It looks specifically at the following titles: *al-Ilm*, *al-Hira*, *al-I'tidal*, *al-Najaf*, and *al-Hatif*, as well as *al-Nahda al-Iraqiyya* and *al-Irfan* (the last two were not published in Najaf). It supplements these with other published sources, including contemporary works of science, politics and history, as well as memoirs and diaries, written either for publication or compiled from unpublished fragments. These sources are occasionally interspersed with material from the British diplomatic or colonial archive. However, my intention is to avoid over reliance the well-worn colonial sources, in order to facilitate a fresh perspective from Najaf itself. While some of this material has been discussed by historians before, as of yet it has not been deployed to serve my central aim, which is to explain how Najafi intellectuals responded to the seismic changes sweeping their city in the first decades of the twentieth century. The thesis traces developments in Najafi associational and print culture in relation to these changes, with an eye to understanding transformations in Najafi conceptions of legitimate political community, and the meaning and priorities of religious, political and social reform.

The thesis does not focus on any single individual, organisation or group, but tries to synthesise the multigenerational and multifaceted personnel and institutions of the Najafi Nahda into a coherent narrative. While the main focus is on the institutional and material bedrock of the Nahda – the *majālis* of scholarly families and the printing press – there are several reoccurring and fascinating characters that deserve general introduction. The main and most recurrent protagonist is the poet, activist, judge and politician ‘Ali al-Sharqi (b.1892), who started life as a rebellious *‘alim* and poet in the late Ottoman period. He was one of the

first Najafis to put his creative talents towards imagining the new Iraqi nation in the 1920s, as a political activists and historian. This activism earned him employment as a Sharia court judge in the 1930s and, later still, appointment as minister without portfolio in a number of Iraqi governments in the late monarchical period.<sup>2</sup>

Slightly older than al-Sharqi, two of the most prolific reformist ulama of Najaf in the early twentieth century were Hibat al-Din al-Shahrastani (b. 1884) and Muhammad Husayn Kashif al-Ghita (b. 1877). Both men were responsible for writing and publishing reams of articles, books, fatwas and petitions, while promoting markedly different political and reformist priorities. Born to a wealthy family spread out across Iraq and Iran, al-Shahrastani was originally from Samara. He came of age during the tense anti-colonial atmosphere of the 1892 tobacco boycott, which the *Marja'* Mirza al-Shirazi orchestrated to protest against an unpopular Iranian government concession to a British company.<sup>3</sup> Al-Shahrastani founded the first Arabic language journal in Najaf and became the second Minister of Education in Iraq in 1921. Al-Ghita, on the other hand, hailed from one of the most prestigious scholarly families in Najaf. While he took an interest in publishing from a young age, he consistently demurred al-Shahrastani's proclivity for constitutional politics. His life was devoted to writing on an astoundingly diverse array of topics, as well as travelling the Middle East in hope of igniting Islamic unity.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Al-Shaykh Agha Buzuruk al-Tihriani, *Tabaqat A'lam al-Shi'a: Nuqaba al-Bashr fi al-Qarn al-Rabi' 'Ashar*, Vol. 16 (Beirut: Dar Ihya al-Turath al-Arabi, 2009), 1368; Ja'far al-Khalili, *Hakadha Araftuhum*, Vol. 2 (Baghdad: Dar al-Ta'aruf, 1968), 365–66; Awwad 'Abd al-Husayn Mahdi, *al-Shaykh 'Ali al-Sharqi: Hayatuhu wa-Adabuh* (Baghdad: Wizarat al-Thaqafah wa-l-Ilm, 1981), 35–46.

<sup>3</sup> Al-Sayyid Muhammad Mahdi al-Alawi, *Hibat al-Din al-Shahrastani* (Baghdad: Matba'at al-Adab, 1929), 3, 6.

<sup>4</sup> For a flavour of the extensive literature on al-Ghita in European languages, see: Elisheva Machlis, *Shi'i Sectarianism in the Middle East: Modernisation and the Quest for Islamic Universalism* (London: IBTauris, 2014); Silvia Naef, 'Un Réformiste Chiite — Muhammad Husayn Âl Kâshif al-Ġitâ'', *Die Welt Des Orients* 27 (1996): 51–86; Elisheva Machlis, 'A Shi'a Debate on Arabism: The Emergence of a Multiple Communal Membership', *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 40, no. 2 (2013): 95–114; Hasan 'Ali Turki 'Abbas, 'Imam Kashif al-Ghita, The Reformist Marja' in the Shi'ah School of Najaf' (Arizona, University of Arizona, 1997).

Finally, the thesis patches together the stories of several men from the first generation of Najafis to come of age in the post-Ottoman world, such as Yusef Rajib (b. 1900) Ja'far al-Khalili (b. 1904), Muhammad Rida al-Muzaffar (b. 1904), Muhammad 'Ali Kamal al-Din (b. 1900), Husayn Muruwwa (b. 1910) and Sharara (b. 1906). While all these men and their ideas will be introduced and analysed in more detail, I want to comment here on a common characteristic shared by many but seldom acknowledged in political and intellectual accounts. That is, that for all their political work and activism, most of their lives were packed with intense personal instability and tragedy. Al-Sharqi, al-Shahrastani, Muruwwa and al-Muzaffar all lost their fathers in their youth.<sup>5</sup> Al-Sharqi was raised thereafter in the family home of his uncle, al-Shaykh 'Abd al-Husayn al-Jawahiri, father of the famous Iraqi poet Muhammad Mahdi al-Jawahiri. The advent of war and revolution brought severe hardship to all of the Middle East, especially southern Iraq. Friends and relatives were killed or exiled. But peacetime life also came with surprises: one of al-Sharqi's most famous poems was a eulogy to his first wife, who died unexpectedly on the day of their wedding.<sup>6</sup> Meanwhile, al-Ghita's memoirs are awash with heart-wrenching accounts of the loss of several of his children.<sup>7</sup> Assessing the impact of these personal tragedies on these men's political and intellectual production is difficult. But acknowledging such tragedies is important. It forces us to appreciate that these are human stories, not only of people grappling with momentous political, social and cultural change, but also with the ebbs, flows and tidal waves of real life.

The Najafi experience of modernising political, social and cultural change was shared with most other parts of the Ottoman Empire and, indeed, the world. Yet Najaf's peculiar religious, geographical and geo-political position make it an intriguing case study. The rapidity of modern change was embodied by new technologies and modes of political and social

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<sup>5</sup> Al-Alawi, *Hibat al-Din al-Shahrastani*, 10–11.

<sup>6</sup> Al-Khalili, *Hakadha Araftuhum*, Vol. 2, 370, 373.

<sup>7</sup> Muhammad Husayn Kashif al-Ghita, *'Uqud Hayati* (Najaf: Maktabat Imam Kashif al-Ghita, 2012), 122, 164.

organisation, as well as the global slide from the age of empires to that of nations and nationalism. Najaf itself witnessed the introduction of the printing press and the first flirtation with constitutional governance within the space of five years. It experienced no fewer than five revolutionary moments between 1905 and 1920 and six different types of administration between 1914 and 1922, although some lasted less than a month. Such changes reorientated Najafi mentalities and aspirations, paving the way for new forms of political consciousness.

Sharara himself is a good reflection of this. His family dispatched him to Najaf in the mid-1920s, expecting him to return to his village in adulthood to provide religious services. One can only speculate as to their shock when he eventually returned to Lebanon, not as a fully trained *'alim*, but as a card carrying communist. He was far from exceptional in this regard. The question of how a religious city such as Najaf produced so many radical thinkers in the mid-twentieth century has captivated historians and worried Shi'i ulama in equal measure.<sup>8</sup> It is not the central concern of this thesis. What this thesis asks, instead, is what were the institutional, intellectual and historical processes that made new forms of political consciousness possible, whether they be anti-colonial, nationalist, Shi'i Islamist, radical leftist or some combination of all four?

The thesis argues that these forms of consciousness were products of the Najafi Nahda, that elusive moment of intellectual energy and activity lasting throughout the first half of the twentieth century. I am using the term Nahda loosely, to denote both an emic actors' category as well as the various 'modernity projects' launched by Najafis in response to political, economic and geo-political changes. The thesis does not hold that modernity was a 'clearly

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<sup>8</sup> Silvia Naef, 'Shi'i-Shuyū'i or: How to Become a Communist in a Holy City', in *The Twelver Shia in Modern Times*, ed. Werner Ende and Rainer Brunner (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 255–67. The Shi'i ulama's anxiety about the spread of Communism in Najaf was one of the main impetuses for the religious revival movements of the 1950s, including the writing of Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr's *Iqtisadna*. See Adil Ra'uf, *al-'Amal al-Islami Fi al-'Iraq Bayna al-Marja'iyya Wa al-Hizbiyya: Qira'a Naqdiyya Li-Masirat Nasf Qarn (1950 - 2000)* (Baghdad: al-Markaz al-'Iraqi li-I'lām wa-l-Dirasa, 2006), 24–31.

bounded' or 'totally coherent object' imposed on Najaf, nor does it claim that Najaf was the site of a coherent alternative modernity. It instead finds modernity in the 'series of interlinked projects' of Najafis who responded positively to the creative opportunities thrown open by political and social rupture.<sup>9</sup> The entanglement of these projects and their relation with the modern state represents one of the persistent problematics of modern Middle Eastern history.

While change is of course a dominant theme of the thesis, its central argument is that the foundation stone of the Najafi Nahda was a traditional institution of Najafi associational life, the *majālis*. These are the main focus of chapter one, which analyses associational life and print culture in late-Ottoman Najaf. It argues that *majālis* served as spaces for the negotiation of new political currents, the producer of public opinion and the institutional planks for more formalised associational activity. The Najafi Nahda can therefore be seen as the historical evolution in the role and remit of the *majālis*. Such an observation has implications for our understandings of the shape and potential of the public sphere in the modern Middle East, and the capacity of seemingly traditional institutions of associational life to reforge themselves into sites of political deliberation, critical debate and opinion formation.

Despite this institutional continuity, the Najafi Nahda was ideologically dynamic. Chapter two offers a close analysis of Najaf's only pre-war Arabic journal to show how reformist priorities and conceptions of legitimate political community reflected the idealism, trans-regionalism – as well as the waning liberal hegemony – of the first decades of the twentieth century. Chapter three, which deals with the years of war and revolution, recounts the unravelling of these heady pre-war dreams. It shows how nationalism was not an external imposition on Najaf, but a locally produced discourse and project, which evolved as a vernacular of colonial resistance through the 1910s. Chapter four approaches Arabist civil

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<sup>9</sup> Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2003), 13.

society in Najaf in the interwar period and argues for nationalism as a pedagogical project aimed at undermining Najaf's innate cosmopolitanism. This nationalist discourse produced its opponents and corollaries. Enmeshed within its universal rights-based agenda were the seeds of Sharara's radicalism. Yet opposed to some of its secular pretensions were also the seeds of new Islamic revivalist movements. The early institutional manifestations of Shi'i Islamist politics are the focus of chapter five, which analyses reformed educational initiatives and Shi'i ecumenical activism. The dialectic of the conflict between the Arabist modernity project and its proto-Islamist sibling, I argue, created the conditions for the emergence of more discrete political subjectivities in Najaf and elsewhere as the twentieth century continued. Finally, chapter six explores how these Najafi political currents manifested themselves on the Iraqi national scene in the form the sect-centric and Euphrates-based Hizb al-Nahda, one of the first political parties created in Iraq committed to radical social and political reform. Taken together, this research aims to shed new light on a number of historiographical questions of national, regional and global import.

### *Why Najaf?*

Najaf is located ten kilometres east of the Euphrates and about 170 kilometres south of Baghdad. To its east is desert. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the city had a population of around twenty to thirty thousand.<sup>10</sup> It was physically compact, with the entire population living inside the city's four urban quarters, called *maḥala*. Each quarter borders the tomb of Imam 'Ali, the prophet Mohammad's cousin and son-in-law. 'Ali is considered the first Imam and legitimate successor to the Prophet Mohammad as leader of the Islamic *umma* by the Shi'a. His war against the Umayyads between 656 and 661 was the first *fitna* in the

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<sup>10</sup> All population estimates for Najaf in the pre-national period are unreliable. 'Abd al-Sitar Shanin al-Janabi, *Ta'rikh al-Najaf al-Ijtima'i* (Baghdad: Maktabat al-Dhakira, 2010), 177; Hasan Wayis al-Tal'afiri, *al-Najaf al-Ashraf fi al-Arshif al-'Uthmani, Dirasa Tahliliyya Watha'iqiyya (1869 - 1915)* (Beirut: al-Dar al-Arabiya li-l-Mawsu'at, 2016), 115.

Islamic community, leading to the emergence of the Shi'a as a discrete theological and jurisprudential tradition. Najaf developed around Imam 'Ali's grave, which is one of the most important religious sites for Shi'i Muslims. Along with Karbala, Kadhimiyya and Samarra, Najaf is part of the 'Atabat 'Aliyya, or the Sublime Thresholds, where the tombs of six Shi'i Imams are located. All these locations, but especially Najaf and Karbala, are Shi'i pilgrimage destinations. Wadi al-Salam, the preferred burial location for Shi'a globally and the biggest cemetery in the world today, is located just north of the old city of Najaf.

Najaf has been an important centre for Shi'i scholarship since the medieval period. Shaykh Tusi founded the Najafi *hawza* in the eleventh century, after being forced out of Baghdad with the demise of Shi'i Buyid Empire.<sup>11</sup> While Shi'i sources often consider this to mark the ascendancy of Najaf as a leading centre of religious learning, recent scholarship shows that Najaf played no such role until the late eighteenth century.<sup>12</sup> Along with most of Arab world, Najaf was incorporated into the Ottoman Empire in the early sixteenth century. For most of the next two centuries, the city found itself on the frontline during multiple Ottoman – Safavid conflicts.<sup>13</sup> While the Ottomans did not actively repress the Shi'i ulama in Najaf, they did not patronise them in the same way as their Safavid enemies. Qom flourished at the expense of the 'Atabat 'Aliyya.

The chaotic transition from Safavid to Qajar rule in Iran created opportunities for Najaf. Throughout the late eighteenth century, Iranian ulama migrated to the 'Atabat 'Aliyya fearing persecution at home.<sup>14</sup> The fall of the Safavids coincided with a major jurisprudential debate among the Shi'i ulama of the 'Atabat 'Aliyya, between the *uṣūlī* and *akhbārī* traditions. The

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<sup>11</sup> Moojan Momen, *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam: The History and Doctrines of Twelver Shi'ism* (London: Yale University Press, 1985), 82.

<sup>12</sup> Zackery M. Heern, 'One Thousand Years of Islamic Education in Najaf: Myth and History of the Shi'i Hawza', *Iranian Studies* 50, no. 3 (May 2017): 417.

<sup>13</sup> Tom Nieuwenhuis, *Politics and Society in Early Modern Iraq: Mamluk Pashas, Tribal Shayks and Local Rule between 1802 and 1831* (The Hague: MNIjhoff Publishers, 1982), 9.

<sup>14</sup> Laurence Louer, *Shiism and Politics in the Middle East* (London: C. Hurst & Co., 2012), 8.



eventual victory of the *uṣūlīs* over the more spiritually literalist *akhbārīs* had important implications for the role of the ulama in Shi'i society. *Uṣūlism* was a rationalist juristic tradition which endowed unprecedented interpretative capacities in the mujtahids.<sup>15</sup> This led eventually to the institution of the concept of *Marja' iyya*, whereby each Shi'i believer was expected to follow the ruling of a single living scholar, considered by an informal process of competition to be most knowledgeable, pious and just.<sup>16</sup>

The emergence of the concept of *Marja' iyya* enhanced both the religious-juristic and financial power of the 'Atabat 'Aliyya. Previously diffuse charitable donations were diverted to a select number of *Marja'*, most of whom lived in Najaf or Karbala.<sup>17</sup> From the mid-nineteenth century onwards, these were supplemented by a huge charitable donation bequeathed by the King of the Indian state of Oudh, known as the Oudh Bequest. The British India Office transferred the money to several powerful ulama families, who distributed them to mujtahids, students, minbar preachers and the poor.<sup>18</sup> Accordingly, the nineteenth century has been interpreted as a period of ascendancy for the shrine cities.<sup>19</sup> Such an ascendancy was helped along by largescale socio-economic changes in the rural areas of the mid- and lower-Euphrates. Mainly undertaken by the reformist Ottoman governor Midhat Pasha's irrigation projects, these resulted in the sedentarisation of the tribal population and their subsequent adoption of Shi'ism. This strengthened Najaf and Karbala's position as nodes of political and economic activity, pilgrimage destinations and commercial hubs.<sup>20</sup> These changes have led

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<sup>15</sup> Zackery M. Heern, *The Emergence of Modern Shi'ism: Islamic Reform in Iraq and Iran* (London: Oneworld, 2015), 1–22.

<sup>16</sup> Abbas Amanat, 'In Between the Madrasa and the Marketplace: The Designation of Clerical Leadership in Modern Shi'ism', in *Authority and Political Culture in Shi'ism*, ed. Said Amir Arjomand (New York: State University of New York Press, 1988), 100–101.

<sup>17</sup> Hamid 'Inayat, *Modern Islamic Political Thought* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982), 162.

<sup>18</sup> Meir Litvak, 'Money, Religion and Politics: The Oudh Bequest in Najaf and Karbala, 1850 - 1903', *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 33, no. 1 (2001): 1–21.

<sup>19</sup> Meir Litvak, *Shi'i Scholars of Nineteenth-Century Iraq: The Ulama of Najaf and Karbala* (Cambridge: University Press, 1998).

<sup>20</sup> For the incorporation of Iraq into the world market, see Samira Haj, *The Making of Iraq, 1900-1963: Capital, Power, and Ideology* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1997), 10; and on Ottoman settlement

Yitzhak Nakash to surmise that the late nineteenth and early twentieth century witnessed a process of mujtahid-led ‘Shi’i state formation’ in southern Iraq.<sup>21</sup>

The notion that Shi’ism in the ‘Atabat ‘Aliyya experienced a golden age in the nineteenth century has precipitated two overarching frameworks for analysing the city in the early twentieth century. The first is premised on a metanarrative of decline. Nakash and Pierre-Jean Luizard offer good examples of this. They frame the ‘effendi’ dominated Iraqi state as antithetical to the aspirations of the Shi’i religious community leaders. All of the institutions of the Shi’i religious establishment – its affluence and autonomy – were undermined by state integration. Najafis migrated to Baghdad in their thousands and modern infrastructure reduced the financial benefits of the pilgrimage.<sup>22</sup> Such a metanarrative was captured symbolically by the infamous expulsion of the three ‘defeated’ *Marja’* – Muhammad Mahdi al-Khalisi, Abu Hasan Isfahani and Muhammad Hussein Na’ini – in 1923, and their subsequent ‘retirement’ from politics.<sup>23</sup>

The decline paradigm offers a neat, tragic ending to the history of Shi’i religious flourishing in southern Iraq which conforms with symbolic Shi’i narratives of injustice, as well as the experience of violent state repression. However, its empirical accuracy is dubious, while it is difficult to draw any historical conclusion from a notion as imprecise as decline. How exactly can decline be assessed? When did it begin? And when, if ever, did it end? It is pertinent to remember in this regard, that arguably the most influential Ja’fari jurist remains in Najaf today, while Khorasani preached the ideas underlying the Islamic revolution from his own exile

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policy: Ceylan, *The Ottoman Origins of Modern Iraq*, 147–52; for the tribal conversions, see Litvak, *Shi’i Scholars of Nineteenth-Century Iraq*; Nakash, *The Shi’is of Iraq*, 27.

<sup>21</sup> Nakash, *The Shi’is of Iraq*, 4, 271.

<sup>22</sup> Nakash, 96, 173.

<sup>23</sup> Pierre-Jean Luizard, *La Formation de l’Irak Contemporain: Le Rôle Politique Des Ulémas Chiïtes à La Fin de La Domination Ottomane et Au Moment de La Construction de l’Etat Irakien* (Paris: Centre national de la recherche scientifique, 1991), 489–90.

in a Najafi mosque, not in front of Najafi exiles in Iran.<sup>24</sup> The question is not, therefore, one of decline, but the resilience of Najaf as a national and trans-national political and academic centre despite the actions of an often-hostile state.

While decline is a tempting but ultimately unsatisfactory paradigm, its opposite narrative of national awakening is equally problematic. Such a narrative characterises most local historical accounts published since the 1930s. These accounts follow the decline paradigm in mischaracterising the Ottoman legacy in Najaf, as well as the city's multi-culturalism. A case in point is Ja'far Mahbuba, who wrote the first local history of Najaf, and completely skirted over the wholesale administrative, political and social reforms enacted in the last decades of the Ottoman Empire.<sup>25</sup> Writing almost 80 years later, 'Abd al-Sitar al-Janabi argued for Najaf as the cultural and political centre of Iraqi Arab nationalism, arguing that 'Najaf was Arab in its nature, sentiment, customs and traditions, and Arabism spread widely in it.' He blamed the marginalisation of the city following national integration on colonial influence in successive Iraqi governments and the detrimental impact of 'foreign migration.'<sup>26</sup> Mahbuba's and al-Janabi's narratives reflect their limited access to sources, especially Ottoman archival ones. But it also evidences their efforts to frame the foundation of the Iraqi state as the inevitable product of the natural decline of illegitimate Ottoman rule.

Local history writing on Najaf began in the 1930s but has ballooned since 2003. This work is insurmountable in its often-meticulous attention to detail, a happy result of its writers' deep integration in the social, political and religious life of Najaf. Pioneered by the likes of Kamal Salman al-Juburi, al-Janabi and Muhammad Baqir al-Bahadili, it has opened up new

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<sup>24</sup> Chibli Mallat, *The Renewal of Islamic Law: Muhammad Baqer as-Sadr, Najaf and the Shi'i International*, Cambridge Middle East Library (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 27, 45. Mallat also argues for resurgence of Najaf from the 1940s to the 1970s as a centre of Shi'i scholarship.

<sup>25</sup> Ja'far Shaykh Baqir Al Mahbuba, *Madi al-Najaf wa-l-Hadiriha* (Beirut: Dar al-Adwa', 1986), 332–40.

<sup>26</sup> Al-Janabi, *Ta'rikh al-Najaf al-Ijtima'i*, 595, 594; for a similar approach, see Adi Hatim 'Abd al-Zahra al-Mufarriji, *al-Najaf al-Ashraf wa Harukat al-Tiyar al-Islahi, 1908 - 1932* (Beirut: Dar al-Qari' al-Arabi li-l-Tiba'a wa-l-Nashr, 2005), 19.

avenues of research which were previously closed off to historians by bringing previously unpublished memoirs, memories, and manuscripts, as well as archival sources into the public domain for the first time.<sup>27</sup> It has also witnessed the first efforts to shed light on the significant institutional and political legacies of the Ottoman Empire on the city.<sup>28</sup> Najafi intellectual life is an important theme in this new literature, and one lens through which to challenge the aforementioned decline and nationalist paradigms.

### *The Najafi Nahda: Print Culture and Associational Life*

Najaf experienced a *nahḍa* in the first decades of the twentieth century. By this I do not mean that it experienced a national revival after centuries of stagnation. I mean instead that its inhabitants began to curate and perform the Nahda by reforging themselves, their subjectivities and their identities into imperial, regional, national and global narratives of progress. The term *nahḍa* was ubiquitous in Najafi discourse from at least 1911. It represented intellectual and religious revival in the first Najafi Arabic journal, *al-Ilm*; anti-colonial struggle during the 1918 and 1920 rebellions against British administration; a civil society project of national inculcation in the interwar Najafi Arabist press; and the political demands of Najafis, the people of the Euphrates and the Iraq Shi'a when Najafi activists asserted themselves on the national sphere with Hizb al-Nahda in the late 1920s.

The use of the term by Najafis themselves does *not* justify its use as an analytical category. The concept of the Nahda carries with it complex contemporary and historiographical

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<sup>27</sup> Juburi's work, for example, has brought numerous firsthand accounts of the 1920s and 1930s into the public domain, often with very thorough annotation and analysis. See, for example: Sadr al-Islam al-Shaykh Muhammad Amin al-Khoei, *Mudhakirat Shahid 'Ayyan 'an Thawrat al-Najaf, 1918*, ed. Kamal Salman al-Juburi (Beirut: Dar al-Mu'arrikh al-Arabi, 2008); Muhammad Rida al-Shabibi, *Mudhakirat al-Shaykh Muhammad Rida al-Shabibi wa Rihlatuhu*, ed. Kamal Salman al-Juburi (Beirut: Dar al-Rafidayn lil-Tiba'a wa-l-Nashr wa-l-Tawzi', 2011); Kamal Salman al-Juburi, *al-Sayyid Muhammad Kadhim al-Yazdi, Siratuhu wa Adwa' 'ala Marja' iyyatuhu Wa Muwaqifuhu Wa Watha'iq al-Siyasa* (NA: Dhawi al-Qarbi, 2016), <http://alhassanain.org/arabic/?com=book&id=361&page=709>.

<sup>28</sup> Al-Tal'afiri, *al-Najaf al-Ashraf fi al-Arshif al-'Uthmani*.

baggage. By their nature, notions of progress and revival prompt difficult questions. What was being revived or awakened? What were the moral, ethical and historical implications of this? And where did the impetus come from? For many who took part in the Nahda and a large number of those who studied it, the answer to these questions can be found in the negotiation between traditional society and modernity. The modern world, conceived, delivered and matured in Europe, was transposed into the Middle East by a select group of intellectual elites. According to Albert Hourani, the intellectual labour of these men enabled them to respond positively to the juggernaut of Western scientific, intellectual and political developments. The principal political dilemma of the Arab intellectual was a meticulous weighing up between tradition and modernity.<sup>29</sup>

Hourani's thesis has become a historiographical punching bag, which says as much about its durability as its weaknesses. For many scholars, the Nahda – that is, much of the intellectual and political thought which foretold the emergence of nationalism, Islamic reform and other self-assertively or shyly modernist projects in the Arab world – can only be understood critically, as the epistemological rupture enacted by endogenous and exogenous processes of colonisation and capitalist expansion.<sup>30</sup> While scholars such as Stephen Sheehi are careful not to remove agency from Nahda thinkers, they argue that their intellectual endeavours produced 'the discursive terrain that would confirm Western "superiority".' The formula and epistemology of the Nahda, premised on the notion Arab stagnation (*al-inhiṭāt*) followed by revival through physical and mental exertion, served only to reinforce this notion.<sup>31</sup> Rather than a negotiation between tradition and modernity, this scholarship frames the Nahda as a project of submission to an exploitative 'colonial modernity.'

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<sup>29</sup> Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), vi–viii, 238.

<sup>30</sup> Reinhard Schulze, 'Mass Culture and Islamic Cultural Production in 19th Century Middle East', in *The History of the Book in the Middle East*, ed. Geoffrey Roper (London: Routledge, 2017), 193.

<sup>31</sup> Stephen Sheehi, *Foundations of Modern Arab Identity* (Gainesville: UPF, 2004), 6, 25.

The difference between these two approaches is not related to their respective assessments of historical conditions or causality, of what created the Nahda and how it unfolded, but an ethical assessment of modernity and the nature of colonialism. As Peter Hill has summarised: positive and negative metanarratives of the Nahda both emerged from the Nahda itself. The first is a ‘heroic story: the Nahda as the founding moment of Arab modernity and Arab nationalism.’ The second is a ‘tragic tale’ of capitulation to European ideas which emerged among Islamic thinkers in the late nineteenth century and found theoretical substance in the world of post-colonial scholars.<sup>32</sup> Yet both these metanarratives agree over what the Nahda essentially represented: the dissemination of forms of knowledge from the West to the Arab world which had radical implications for the latter.

The problem with these frameworks is their tendency to generalise both the European influences and the Arab receptors, usually reduced to the ‘same handful’ of ‘enlightened (i.e. Europeanised)’ *nahḍawis*, who often maintained direct or indirect ties to colonial institutions.<sup>33</sup> Reorientating Nahda studies away from this elitist bias enables us to think of the Nahda less as a uniform and universal phenomena, with a singular history beginning with the Beirut literary salons of the 1850s, but as heterogeneous efforts to make sense of new and old ideas, institutions, technologies and genres in the context of expanding and collapsing states and empires. Such neat processes of dissemination and order implied by both Hourani and his critics belie the messy channels and networks of intellectual exchange across languages and borders. Ideas travelled within an ‘emerging global public sphere’, people and texts moved with increasing regularity and speed. Elites, non-elites and subalterns appropriated new ideas,

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<sup>32</sup> Peter Hill, *Utopia and Civilisation in the Arab Nahda* (Cambridge: University Press, 2020), 3–4; Hanssen and Weiss make a similar observation: Jens Hanssen and Max Weiss, ‘Introduction: Language, Mind, Freedom and Time: The Modern Arab Intellectual Tradition in Four Words’, in *Arabic Thought beyond the Liberal Age: Towards an Intellectual History of the Nahda*, ed. Jens Hanssen and Max Weiss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 1.

<sup>33</sup> Zachary Lockman, ‘Exploring the Field: Lost Voices and Emerging Practices in Egypt, 1882 - 1914’, in *Histories of the Modern Middle East : New Directions*, ed. Israel Gershoni, Hakan Erdem, and Ursula Wokock (London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc, 2002), 137–38.

genres and institutions.<sup>34</sup> The products of this melange of influences displayed an ‘intellectual ambidextrousness’ which must, if anything, define the ‘elusive disciplinary creature’ that is ‘global intellectual history.’<sup>35</sup>

Making sense of this process involves looking beyond the realm of the history of ideas and the relationship between ‘modern’ and ‘traditional’ ways of thinking. It instead requires looking at the rapid and radical transformations of the Middle Eastern public sphere. This transformation was facilitated by technologies – ‘steam and print’ – which ‘intensified and accelerated interactions’ globally. It especially involved the proliferation of the latter through genres such as journalism; the expansion of state institutions following Ottoman reform, including modern schools and rudimentary representative institutions (even if under the rubric of the colonial state in the post-Ottoman period); transformations in the function of traditional institutions of associational life; and the subsequent emergence of new associational institutions in civil society.<sup>36</sup>

The application of the notion of the public sphere and its associated concept of civil society is not without its problems. Jurgen Habermas cautioned that his theory was historically particular to early modern and modern Europe.<sup>37</sup> His historical and sociological approach found the public sphere in a particular epoch. But it was the explication of an ideal liberal socio-political system as much it reflected actual human experience. His principal finding was that the onset of capitalist modernity saw the heavily hierarchical and striated structures of medieval

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<sup>34</sup> Johann Büssow, ‘Re-Imagining Islam in the Period of the First Modern Globalization: Muhammad ‘Abduh and His Theology of Unity’, in *A Global Middle East: Mobility, Materiality and Culture in the Modern Age, 1880 - 1940* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2015), 302.

<sup>35</sup> Andrew Arsan, ‘Under the Influence? Translations and Transgressions in Late Ottoman Imperial Thought’, *Modern Intellectual History* 10, no. 2 (August 2013): 376–77.

<sup>36</sup> James L. Gelvin and Nile Green, ‘Introduction: Global Muslims in the Age of Steam and Print’, in *Global Muslims in the Age of Steam and Print* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 1; Dyala Hamzah, ‘Introduction’, in *The Making of the Arab Intellectual: Empire, Public Sphere and the Colonial Coordinates of Selfhood*, ed. Dyala Hamzah (London: Routledge, 2013), 9.

<sup>37</sup> Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1993), xvii.

social and political life substituted by the dualism of the public and the private spheres. The former became an autonomous space for private individuals to form public opinion through the free and uninhibited exchange of views, which in turn shaped political authority and precluded autocracy.<sup>38</sup> The application of the concept of the public sphere outside Europe can be approached from either a normative or empirical perspective. The first analyses the public sphere by assessing its ‘political significance within a larger framework of continued democratisation’, while the latter sees it more as a heuristic device for unpicking the structures of associational, cultural and political life within any complex society enveloped by modernising change.<sup>39</sup>

This thesis takes the second approach. It acknowledges that the socio-economic and political development of Europe was different from the Ottoman, post-Ottoman colonial and post-colonial authoritarian experience of most Middle Eastern states. But, as Eric Davis rightly notes, the ‘theoretical underpinnings of Habermas’s concept would seem to possess a generality that transcends any specific geographical region.’<sup>40</sup> Literacy rates were low in the Middle East throughout the nineteenth century, but the rise of the Arabic press created new social relations that were both ‘cross confessional’ and ‘trans-regional.’ The circulation of ideas and texts was facilitated by a culture of collective reading.<sup>41</sup> The absence of a substantial mercantile or industrial bourgeoisie in the Ottoman Empire did not prohibit the formation of autonomous arenas of opinion formations. State functionaries forged by the Tanzimat reforms of the late

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<sup>38</sup> Jürgen Habermas, Sara Lennox, and Frank Lennox, ‘The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedia Article (1964)’, *New German Critique*, no. 3 (1974): 49.

<sup>39</sup> Lucy M Abbott, ‘The Conceptual Public Sphere and Its Problems: Habermas, Political Action and the Arab States’, *Journal of International Political Theory* 12, no. 3 (2016): 368.

<sup>40</sup> Eric Davis, ‘The Historical Genesis of the Public Sphere in Iraq, 1900 - 1963: Implications for Building Democracy in the Post-Ba’athist Era’, in *Publics, Politics and Participation: Locating the Public Sphere in the Middle East and North Africa*, ed. Seteney Shami (New York: Social Science Research Council, 2009), 383; Watenpaugh shares this assertion: Keith Watenpaugh, *Being Modern in the Middle East: Revolution, Nationalism, Colonialism and the Arab Middle Class* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 64.

<sup>41</sup> Marwa Elshakry, *Reading Darwin in Arabic, 1860-1950* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press., 2013), 22–23.



nineteenth century represented a formidable force of opinion in the Ottoman Empire, which was capable of checking the Sultan's or the government's autocracy.<sup>42</sup> After the 1908 constitutional revolution, a 'revolutionary public sphere' was born. This endowed Ottoman subjects with the institutional space to express themselves to each other and to their government as never before.<sup>43</sup> It did not lead to a 'democratic and inclusive political environment', as normative proponents the public sphere might criticise. Yet it is unclear whether such a normative model existed anywhere, especially in the early twentieth century. As several critics of Habermas point out, the bourgeoisie public was always exclusionary, based on divisions of gender, class and ethnicity.<sup>44</sup> The question is less about explaining why the Ottoman and Arab experience did not produce 'democracy', but mapping how these transformations took place, who participated and how they related – positively and negatively – to regimes of political power.

Efforts to map the transformations in the institutions of public life – what might be called 'the public sphere' – represent a key aspect of Iraqi historiography on politics and society in the twentieth century. Nationalist historians such as Muhammad Mahdi al-Basir were quick to frame the Iraqi Nahda as a resuscitation: when a dormant Abbasid poetic culture was brought back to life. But while al-Basir waxed lyrical about the 'innate preparedness in the soul of each Iraqi' to absorb this culture, he acknowledged that the Nahda was institutionally driven in the 'mosques and the study circles of the religious schools.' As much as it was the work of individuals, the Nahda was spearheaded by a string of families in Baghdad, Mosul and southern Iraq – usually merchants or scholars – 'whose houses were meeting places for the ulama, literati

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<sup>42</sup> Murat R Siviloglu, *The Emergence of Public Opinion: State and Society in the Late Ottoman Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 14–15.

<sup>43</sup> Michelle U. Campos, *Ottoman Brothers Muslims, Christians, and Jews in Early Twentieth-Century Palestine* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), 71, 81.

<sup>44</sup> Nancy Fraser, 'Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy', in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. Craig Calhoun (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1992), 115–16.

and poets.<sup>45</sup> Beginning in the 1930s, studies by the likes of ‘Abd al-Razzaq al-Hasani, Faruq Salih ‘Umar and Fa’iq Bati charted the emergence of the press, political societies and political parties in Iraq.<sup>46</sup> Since al-Sharqi’s journalistic musings on the Najafī ‘intellectual movement’, Najafi intellectuals have reflected on the structures and mentalities of the city’s public sphere.<sup>47</sup> Alongside the emergence of Najafi journalism and print genres, this scholarship pays particular attention to an institution which is poorly understood in scholarship in European languages: the Najafi *majālis*.<sup>48</sup>

The *majālis* and the Nahda are intimately linked in Najafi scholarship. Al-Bahadili denotes *majālis* as one of the most significant factors behind the ‘intellectual movement’ in the city. Other historians writing since the 1960s frame *majālis* as social ‘schools’ for ensuring that ‘thinking triumphed over rigidity and ‘ilm over ignorance.’<sup>49</sup> Muhammad Mahdi al-Asifi argues that the *majālis* embodied the spirit of independent and free thinking that has always been a ‘special feature’ of intellectual and religious life in Najaf.<sup>50</sup> Scholars frame the *majālis* as a dynamic institution, capable of fulfilling multiple political, intellectual and quasi-judicial roles. They point to the significance of the *majālis* for raising political consciousness, especially during the anti-colonial movement of the 1910s and 1920s.<sup>51</sup> According to Hamad

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<sup>45</sup> Muhammad Mahdi al-Basir, *Nahdat al-‘Iraq al-Adabiyya fi al-Qarn al-Tasi’ ‘Ashr* (Baghdad: Matba’at al-Ma’arif, 1946), 10–11.

<sup>46</sup> ‘Abd al-Razzaq al-Hasani, *Ta’rikh al-Sihafa al-‘Iraqiyya*, Vol. 1 (Najaf: Idarat Majallat al-I’tidal, 1935); Fa’iq Bati, *Sihafat al-‘Iraq, Ta’rikhiha wa-Kafah Ajyaliha* (Baghdad: Matba’at al-Adib al-Baghdadiyya, 1968); ‘Abd al-Razzaq al-Hasani, *Tarikh al-Ahzab al-Siyasiyya: Dirasa Tarikhiyya ‘an al-Ahzab al-Siyasiyya Allati Takawwanat fi-l-‘Iraq bayna al-‘Amayn 1918 - 1958* (Beirut: Dar al-Radidayn lil-Tiba’a wa-l-Nashr wa-l-Tawzi’, 2013); Faruq Salih al-Umar, *al-Ahzab al-Siyasiyya Fi-l-‘Iraq, 1921 - 1932* (Baghdad: Matba’at al-Irshad, 1978).

<sup>47</sup> *Al-Najaf*, 40, 8 May 1926, 12 – 16.

<sup>48</sup> This is not to say that European scholarship completely ignores the Najafi *majālis*. For cursory mention, see: Nakash, *The Shi’is of Iraq*, 246; Litvak, *Shi’i Scholars of Nineteenth-Century Iraq*, 29; Luizard, *La Formation de l’Irak Contemporain*, 355.

<sup>49</sup> Hayder al-Marjani, *al-Najaf al-Ashraf: Qadiman wa Hadithan* (Baghdad: Matba’at Dar al-Salam, 1988), 161.

<sup>50</sup> Muhammad Mahdi al-Asifi, *Madrast al-Najaf wa Tatawwur al-Haraka al-Islahiyya fiha* (Najaf: Matabi’ al-Nu’mān, 1963), 27–28.

<sup>51</sup> Nahida Hussein al-Asadi, *al-Najaf al-Ashraf fi al-‘Ahd al-‘Uthmani al-Akhir wa-l-Ihtilal al-Baritani wa-l-Intifadat al-Sha’biyya wa Aham al-Usra al-‘Ilmiyya al-Najafiyya wa Majalisihim (1831 - 1917)* (Beirut: al-Dar al-Arabiyya li-l-Mawsu’at, 2016), 229.

al-Qabiji, these *majālis* shaped the men who went on to become leaders of the major Iraqi political movements of the twentieth century, such as the communist party, the Ba'ath party, the Arab nationalist movements.<sup>52</sup> Al-Qabiji continues by framing the late nineteenth and early twentieth century as something of a golden age in the Najafi *majālis* scene, characterised by 'movement, activity and rivalry.' This was in stark contrast to his contemporary situation, when *majālis* became repetitive and less politically or intellectually significant.<sup>53</sup> Al-Qabiji does not provide much explanation for this shift, which likely reflects his own nostalgia more than anything concrete. Yet his observation conforms with an almost Habermasian temporal framing of the public sphere, as a moment in history pregnant with political and intellectual potential but ultimately unfulfilled by the development of cultural life and new media in the late twentieth century.

Two historical questions are thrown up by the historiographical focus on the *majālis*: first, what enabled them to fulfil this dynamic role in the early twentieth century? And second, how did their structures, networks and mentalities shape political and intellectual life in the post-Ottoman period? While the aforementioned works have acknowledged the importance of the *majālis*, they have not analysed them within the context of the shift from late-Ottoman to early-national state structures, nor attempted to assess how shifting regimes of power and new print genres shaped the role, remit and structure of public life in Najaf more broadly. It is precisely a snapshot these shifts which Sharara alluded to in the article which opened this introduction. Chapters one and three build on this research to map the development of the Najafi *majālis* and print culture throughout the 1910s and 1920s in relation to the shifting role of the state, and regional and geopolitical tensions.

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<sup>52</sup> al-Sayyid Hamad Issa al-Halwin al-Qabiji and al-Sayyid Adnan Issa al-Halwin al-Qabiji, *Hidarat al-Najaf al-Ashraf: Ta'rikh, 'Ilm, Adab wa Maktabat, Siyasa, Riyada, Ansab 'Asha'ir al-'Iraq* (Baghdad: Dar al-Narjas, 2012), 178.

<sup>53</sup> Al-Qabiji and al-Qabiji, 185.

The first implication of this research is that it frames the institutions of the *majālis* and the Najafī press, not as sites for the reception and discussion of ideas from Europe, but as part of global and regional public spheres, where religious, literary and political topics were debated and ‘consciousness’ (*al-wa’i*) raised among a new generation of Najafis. Second, the narrative recasts the story of the Nahda away from an abrupt confrontation with modernity and instead offers a history of evolutionary change, involving the shifting role of traditional institutions and the steady introduction of new forms of media. As one contemporary Najafī commented, the story of the Nahda was rapid but not revolutionary: it saw the ‘*majālis* gradually transformed from places established too assist the heavenly world . . . into clubs for the discussion of public matters pertaining to vital and contemporary topics.’<sup>54</sup> Thus the discussion of more formal models of associational life, including political parties, in chapter four, five and six, aims to show the institutional roots of these institutions in Najafī *majālis* culture.

Finally, this work implicitly challenges the tendency of scholarship in European languages on the political history of Shi’ism in the twentieth century to overemphasise the singular role of the *Marja’iyya* or the senior mujtahids as the principal drivers of public opinion. In Faleh ‘Abdul-Jabar’s terms, for example, the near absolute ‘juristic authority’ of the *Marja’* – ‘*Marja’ism*’ – consistently threatened the sovereignty of the state. This notion complements the decline paradigm, with Luizard portraying the years of war and revolution as a struggle for power between the mujtahids and colonial-backed elites.<sup>55</sup> The institution of the *Marja’iyya* is often considered more significant for driving public opinion than the press or any other institution of civil society.<sup>56</sup> While the role of the *Marja’iyya* and the clerical hierarchy beneath it cannot be diminished within *usūlī* Shi’ism, this thesis complicates

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<sup>54</sup> *Al-Najaf*, 34, 8 March 1926, 2

<sup>55</sup> Luizard, *La Formation de l’Irak Contemporain*, 305–471.

<sup>56</sup> Faleh ‘Abdul-Jabar, ‘Genesis and Development of Marja’ism Versus the State’, in *Ayatollahs, Sufis and Ideologues: State, Religion and Social Movements in Iraq*, ed. Faleh ‘Abdul-Jabar (London: Saqi, 2002), 63–64, 69.

historiographical assumptions about the near charismatic authority of the senior ulama by questioning how and where their power and influence manifested itself. It argues that the traditional narrative stems in part from the endurance of the ‘politics of notables’ paradigm for interpreting Arab politics in the late Ottoman period, as well as the assumption that public life in Islamic societies rarely exudes collaborative principles. A canon of colonial sources – which naturally exaggerate the influence of charismatic religious authority – vindicate this framework. The thesis buttresses the aforementioned scholarship in Arabic to illustrates how vertical lines of political and religious authority in Najaf were consistently circumvented by horizontal connections underpinned by associational life and print culture.

In conventional histories of the Arabic print revolution, Iraq is often assumed a sleepy backwater in comparison to Beirut and Cairo. The notion of Iraqi ‘technological and educational backwardness’ slots neatly into reductive interpretations of Iraqi society as riven by primordial ethnic and sectarian tensions.<sup>57</sup> A key aspect of the project of historical revisionism in Iraq focuses on intellectual culture. Pioneering in this regard, Orit Bashkin’s work re-evaluated Iraqi intellectual life by delving into its press and public sphere throughout the monarchical period. Her comprehensive scholarship highlights the endurance of a pluralist Iraqi print market which cut across ethnic and religious fissures, engendering discourses of democracy, reform and ideological debate.<sup>58</sup> While the Iraqi state consistently aimed to suppress these discourses through surveillance and co-option, criticism of the government was possible through most of the monarchical era.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Ami Ayalon, *The Press in the Arab Middle East: A History*, Studies in Middle Eastern History Ser (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 64.

<sup>58</sup> Orit Bashkin, *The Other Iraq: Pluralism and Culture in Hashemite Iraq* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 19, 84.

<sup>59</sup> Bashkin, 50, 88.

Bashkin's work has covered some aspects of Najafi intellectual life, analysing the intellectual production of al-Shahrastani and the newspaper *al-Hatif*.<sup>60</sup> Yet her main focus is Baghdad, which she frames as something of an intellectual and cultural melting pot. While this is not an inaccurate assessment, with Baghdad serving as the destination of choice for cadres of Najafi agents of the Nahda throughout the 1920s and 1930s, the particular experience of the Nahda in other contexts has only been partially incorporated into her work. A new research agenda is therefore underway to construct a history of intellectual culture in Iraq which recognises the experience of peripheral cities. Greene's work on the late nineteenth century focuses on the print experience of Mosul and Kirkuk to argue that Iraq's position on the 'geographical margins' of the Ottoman Empire endowed its Nahda experience with a unique linguistic diversity.<sup>61</sup> Jones, on the other hand, has analysed the political and social role of neo-classical poetry, with a particular focus on the role of the Najafi environment for nurturing a generation of radical poets, such as al-Jawahiri and Muhammad Salih Bahr al-'Ulum.<sup>62</sup>

While these accounts are slowly rebalancing the historiography away from the national centre, there is still need for an intellectual and cultural history of the Najafi Nahda across the period of transition from imperial to national domains, which incorporates and synthesises much of the material emerging in Arabic on the topic in the recent years. This thesis is an initial and still incomplete effort to that end.

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<sup>60</sup> Orit Bashkin, 'On Eastern Cultures: Transregionalism and Multilingualism in Iraq, 1910–38', in *Migrating Texts: Circulating Translations around the Ottoman Mediterranean* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019); Orit Bashkin, 'The Iraqi Afghanis and 'Abduhs: Debate over Reform among Shi'ite and Sunni 'Ulama' in Interwar Iraq', in *Guardians of the Faith in Modern Times: Ulama in the Middle East*, ed. Meir Hatina (Boston: BRILL, 2009), 141–69; Bashkin, *The Other Iraq*, 174–77.

<sup>61</sup> Annie Greene, 'The Pioneers of Print in the Ottoman Province of Mosul', *Journal of Contemporary Iraq & the Arab World* 14 (1 June 2020): 80.

<sup>62</sup> Kevin Jones, *The Dangers of Poetry: Culture, Politics, and Revolution in Iraq* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020), 39–45.

## *Al-Iṣlāḥ and the Shifting Meaning of Shi'ism*

In the modern period, many of the agents of the Najafi Nahda adopted the paradigm of *al-Iṣlāḥ* to legitimise and explain their social, religious and political programmes. The two terms – *nahḍa* and *al-Iṣlāḥ* – were often used interchangeably although the latter had more specifically religious connotations. This thesis holds that comprehensive social *al-iṣlāḥ* was one of the main aspirations of the agents of the Nahda. But what did *al-Iṣlāḥ* mean in the context of early twentieth century Najaf? And how did it shape and reflect evolving notions of political community and identity?

In the two main centres of Shi'i reformist thought in the Arab speaking world at the beginning of the twentieth century – the 'Atabat 'Aliyya and Jabal 'Amil – reform constituted engagement with a plethora of activities, including: social projects to combat poverty, ignorance and moral stagnation;<sup>63</sup> support for new forms of institutionalised education, including female education;<sup>64</sup> engaging with modern media, specifically journalism and print culture; debating and theorising new political currents and ideas; promoting intra and inter-religious ecumenical dialogue;<sup>65</sup> and reassessing the legal basis for particular aspects of Shi'i religious traditions. Two of the most high profile – and highly controversial – examples of the latter were al-Shahrastani's project to prohibit the transfer of corpses for burial around the shrines of the Imams and efforts by the 'Amili mujtahid, Muhsin al-Amin, to outlaw flagellations during the 'Ashura mourning ceremonies.<sup>66</sup> Although Najaf was central to these debates, the most comprehensive non-Arabic accounts of reform within a Shi'i milieu in the

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<sup>63</sup> Al-Mufarriji, *al-Najaf al-Ashraf*, 193.

<sup>64</sup> Sa'd 'Abd al-Wahid 'Abd al-Khadar, *Jam'iyyat Muntada al-Nashr wa Athruha al-Fikri wa-l-Siyasi 'ala al-Haraka al-Islamiyya fi al-'Iraq, 1935 - 1964* (Baghdad: Dar al-Madina al-Fadila, 2011); al-Mufarriji, *al-Najaf al-Ashraf*, 183; al-Janabi, *Ta'rikh al-Najaf al-Ijtima'i*, 490–94.

<sup>65</sup> Rainer Brunner, *Islamic Ecumenism in the 20th Century: The Azhar and Shiism between Rapprochement and Restraint* (Leiden: Brill, 2004).

<sup>66</sup> Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq*, 154–57, 193–97; Max Weiss, *In the Shadow of Sectarianism: Law, Shi'ism and the Making of Modern Lebanon* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2010), 61–91.

early twentieth century is Sabrina Mervin's work on Jabal 'Amil, which pays particular attention to al-Amin's activism and the illustrious journal *al-Irfan*.<sup>67</sup> Najaf only begins to take centre stage in the historiography again from the mid-twentieth century, with the intellectual ascendancy of Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr and Hizb al-Da'wa.<sup>68</sup>

Historians are divided over the scope and meaning of *al-iṣlāḥ* in Najaf. Adi Hatim al-Mufarriji offers a holistic interpretation which synthesises religious, political, social and economic agendas into a 'humanist' reformist trend.<sup>69</sup> His work slots neatly into Hill's positive metanarrative of the Arab Nahda, by arguing that this trend was nationalist, constitutional and committed to religious renewal. Its hallmark was 'moderation', a strategy for modernising society without sacrificing its Islamic ethos. The 'reformist trend', according to al-Mufarriji, was the combined efforts and ideology of a wide cross section of activists, essentially any '*alim*, poet or intellectual who engaged with modern means of communication, pedagogy or associational life.'<sup>70</sup> This trend stood in opposition to the 'conservative trend', the majority position in Najaf among the masses and the traditional ulama, which relied on stoking primordial sentiments, bribery and violence.<sup>71</sup> The split between the conservative and reformist movement was compounded by personal rivalries, as well as the paranoia of an older generation of ulama about the potential loss of their status. It also represented political quietism. The latter concern corresponded with the British colonial ambition to separate religion from politics and resulted in a close union between the conservatives and the colonial state.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Sabrina Mervin, *Un Réformisme Chiite: Ulémas et Lettrés Du Ġabal 'āmil (Actuel Liban-Sud) de La Fin de l'empire Ottoman à l'indépendance Du Liban* (Paris: Karthala ; CERMOC ; IFEAD, 2000), 109–60.

<sup>68</sup> Mallat, *The Renewal of Islamic Law*; Faleh 'Abdul-Jabar, *The Shiite Movement in Iraq* (London: Saqi, 2003); Ra'uf, *al-'Amal al-Islami Fi al-'Iraq*; Hanna Batatu, 'Iraq's Underground Shi'i Movements: Characteristics, Causes and Prospects', *Middle Eastern Studies* 35, no. 4 (1981): 578–94.

<sup>69</sup> Al-Mufarriji, *al-Najaf al-Ashraf*, 307.

<sup>70</sup> Al-Mufarriji, 66, 70, 294.

<sup>71</sup> Al-Mufarriji, 193, 203–4.

<sup>72</sup> Al-Mufarriji, 217–20.



Al-Mufarriji's holistic approach is useful in so far as it frames reform as a project incorporating both ulama and non-ulama figures, while paying much needed attention to the 'means of reform': its institutions and genres. Where his argument falls down is his attempt to synthesis these loose forms of engagement and exchange into a coherent reformist ideology, in opposition to an equally coherent conservative tradition. No such coherence existed outside of the historical self-portrayal of the so-called reformers themselves, who were less the legitimate custodians of an enlightened modernity than the producers of a 'modern discourse on tradition . . . in which both tradition and modernity as we know them are contemporaneously produced.'<sup>73</sup> We cannot therefore speak of '*the* reformist trend' in Najaf, but of several reformist agendas, emerging in union and opposition to each other at different times, with each afforded different levels of priority and hostility, based on an amalgamation of ideological, religious, professional and personal motivating factors. While a predilection to preserving traditional institutions was a tangible intellectual position, social fissures were just as likely to emerge between reformist agendas as they were to emerge between reform and an organised conservative opposition.

The second approach to Najafi reform frames it as a more limited effort to restore orthodoxy within the Islamic discursive tradition – that is, to 'preserve the original tenets of Islam' through assessing the sanctity of 'popular beliefs, traditions and customs that did not have a firm basis.' Al-Bahadili identifies the roots of this project in the 1910s with the reformist efforts of al-Shahrastani's journal *al-Ilm*, but he argues that it began in earnest in the interwar period with efforts to reform the scholarly *hawza*. *Hawza* reform was preferred by the reformers because they saw this as the 'key to reforming Islamic society' in general.<sup>74</sup> As such, he conceived reform as a constellation of pedagogical and publication projects geared towards

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<sup>73</sup> Weiss, *In the Shadow of Sectarianism*, 75.

<sup>74</sup> Muhammad Baqir Ahmad al-Bahadili, *al-Hayat al-Fikriyya fi al-Najaf al-Ashraf* (Baghdad: Ahqaf, 2004), 189–90.

envisioning new methods of teaching, funding and organising religious institutions.<sup>75</sup> While this scholarship accepts that *hawza* reform was influenced by other reformist projects in Najaf it does not lump them together into a coherent ‘trend.’ It recognises the role of such projects – and especially institutions such as Muntada al-Nashr – for inspiring new forms of Islamic political activism in the mid-twentieth century.<sup>76</sup>

Framing modern Islamic reform as a traditional Islamic endeavour misses the fact that so-called reform in the modern period was fundamentally different to the mechanisms of internal change extant in the Islamic tradition prior to the nineteenth century. Al-Bahadili’s thesis recognises that *hawza* reform in the 1930s and 1940s was a response to modern challenges, but maintains that it preserved the internal logic and basic tenets of a coherent Islamic *al-iṣlāḥ* tradition. Although modern Shi’i reformist thought can be linked the Neo-*usūlī* movement of the late eighteenth century, it cannot be seen as a consistent analytical category in Islamic jurisprudential development. The *usūlī* movement and other comparable reform initiatives were essentially juristic debates, intended to designate new methods and means of obtaining Islamic truths but rooted in the autonomous genres of *fiqh* and *usūl*.<sup>77</sup> Reform in the modern period escaped these genres to reflect new forms of media and political circumstances which upturned the conventional hierarchies and methodologies of attaining Islamic truths. Dyala Hamzah has shown how this occurred in the case the prominent Salafi reformer Rashid Rida. Rida’s ‘positive choice’ to work within the genre of journalism, argues Hamzah, represented an epistemic shift away from reform in a religious tradition sense and towards its conception as a subaltern political project, intimately bound up with his pan-Islamic political

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<sup>75</sup> Al-Bahadili, 189–230.

<sup>76</sup> Al-Bahadili, 204.

<sup>77</sup> Etan Kohlberg, ‘Aspects of Akhbari Thought in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries’, in *Eighteenth-Century Renewal and Reform in Islam*, ed. Nehemia Levtzion and John Obert Voll (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1987), 153.

agenda.<sup>78</sup> To illustrate this transition, Hamzah analyses Rida's unprecedented reinterpretation of the Islamic notion of 'public interest' (*maṣlaḥa*) from its relatively inconsequential *fiqhī* meaning to become the *raison d'être* of reform itself, thus facilitating a plethora of inferred 'Islamic' reformist obligations.<sup>79</sup> This thesis argues for a similar process of distortion in the positive choice of actors like al-Shahrastani, al-Muzaffar and al-Ghita to work outside of the traditional genres of institutions of the *hawza*.

A third historical approach to *al-iṣlāḥ* in Najaf and the wider Shi'i milieu seeks to trace the intellectual origins of Shi'i Islamist movements and the roots of modern Shi'i sectarian identities in early twentieth century reform initiatives. It links these to processes of radicalisation, politicisation and sectarianisation.<sup>80</sup> Elisheva Machlis has recently studied the thought and activism of several Arab Mujtahids in the early twentieth century, arguing that they participated in a defensive modernisation: efforts to maintain their status in the face of secularism by delving into politics, social issues and constitutional thought. Machlis's work has been invaluable for reasserting the position of Arab ulama within the history of modern Shi'i political thought.<sup>81</sup> Yet her narrative of radicalisation belies inconsistencies in the radicalisation paradigm. She arbitrarily uses the contentious notion of 'sectarianism' to denote both the outlook of Shi'i scholars before and after the confrontation with modernity. According to Machlis, the Shi'a of Najaf were an isolated and myopic community practicing 'exclusive sectarianism', who, in reaction to the onset of modernity, became part of an interconnected and global 'sectarian' community thanks to the political ingenuity of the mujtahids.<sup>82</sup> She presents an essentially top-down narrative confined to intellectual and political thought. Her approach

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<sup>78</sup> Dyala Hamzah, 'From 'ilm to Ṣiḥāfa or the Politics of the Public Interest (Maṣlaḥa)', in *The Making of the Arab Intellectual: Empire, Public Sphere and the Colonial Coordinates of Selfhood* (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2012), 103–5.

<sup>79</sup> Hamzah, 106.

<sup>80</sup> 'Inayat, *Modern Islamic Political Thought*, 162; Machlis, *Shi'i Sectarianism in the Middle East*; Weiss, *In the Shadow of Sectarianism*, 61–91.

<sup>81</sup> Machlis, *Shi'i Sectarianism in the Middle East*, 45.

<sup>82</sup> Machlis, 10.

locates modernising trends in Shi'ism in the ideas of a select group of scholars, while largely side-lining the institutional focus of the Arabic historiography. Moreover, there is a teleological implication in her narrative, that Shi'i reform possessed a kind of internal coherence throughout the early twentieth century, with its various ideas and mentalities gradually slotting together to engender the activist Shi'i political subjectivities which have defined Middle Eastern politics since the mid-twentieth century.

This thesis aims to complicate the assumption – common to all three approaches discussed – that reform in Najaf was a coherent project, ignited in the 1910s and developing logically thereafter into either the humanist national modernity of al-Mufarriji or the Islamic activism of Machlis. This is not to argue that reformist initiatives were inconsequential for engendering new political and religious identities. Far from it. The point is that reform projects themselves and their identitarian spawns reflected the political environments into which they were born and the seismic shift from the imperial world of the late-Ottoman period into the national environment of the post-First World War. Chapter two uses al-Shahrastani's *al-Ilm* to illustrate how his reformist agenda reflected the trans-regional and multilingual environment of late Ottoman Najaf.<sup>83</sup> Reform for him represented an expansive anti-colonial constitutional movement, premised on a bifurcation between East and West, where the East's advancement to civilisation would be achieved through an uninhibited public discourse within the newly liberated constitutional public sphere. His worldview was anything but myopic but reflected an ambiguous identity, only possible before the hegemony of the modern nation state. This was evocative of a global shift from the era of liberal hegemony to the idealism, radicalism and trans-nationalism of the first decades of the twentieth century – a shift that was, in the case of the Ottoman Empire, abruptly interrupted by the experience of war and colonialism.

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<sup>83</sup> Bashkin, 'On Eastern Cultures', 122.

This expansive extra-territoriality of al-Shahrastani's political subjectivity was incompatible with the requirements of national modernity and its predilection for efficiency, productivity and uniformity. The institutions established by the state to achieve these ends have often been noted as the precursors to modern legalistic religious identities, especially in contexts such as Lebanon or Iraq where personal status courts ossified sectarian differences.<sup>84</sup> While more research is needed on these for the Iraqi context, chapter four and five upturn the state-centric agenda of this scholarship to show how institutions of reform initiated from the bottom-up appropriated, complemented and competed with the Iraqi state modernity project. They analyse both a reformed nationalist community school, Madrasat al-Ghari, and the first and most successful reformed religious school in Najaf, Muntada al-Nashr, to show how the discursive requirements of national-state modernity reorientated the reformist agenda. This was partly reflected in the focus on education itself, which had only been a subsidiary issue for al-Shahrastani, but now became the principal reformist ambition.<sup>85</sup> It was also reflected in the reorientation of the ecumenical genre into a more limited focus on Shi'i apologetics and public refashioning, as opposed to the inter-religious discourse of late Ottoman pan-Islamism.

It is in recognising this shift and the institutions and genres it embodied that we can properly appreciate the factors leading to the reformulation of Shi'ism into a legitimate political community, and as the basis for a constellation of political Islamist projects thereafter. Reform did not mark the transition, as Machlis argues, from a myopic or quietist sectarianism into an assertive and activist sectarianism. Instead, the shifting agendas of reform marked the transition

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<sup>84</sup> Weiss, *In the Shadow of Sectarianism*, 2, 154.

<sup>85</sup> There were other calls for the reform of Shi'i education in the pre-war period. Muhsin al-Amin, for example, called for upgrading the study books and curriculum. But these were never of the same level or scope of the later reformers. See: al-Bahadili, *al-Haya al-Fikriyya*, 189; Antazar 'Abd al-Razzaq 'Abd al-Muhyi, *Mashari' al-Tajdid Fi al-Dirasa al-Hawzawiyya: Jami'at al-Najaf al-Diniyya Anmudhajan* (Beirut: Dar al-Rafidayn lil-Tiba'a wa-l-Nashr wa-l-Tawzi', 2017), 37.

from an ambiguous anti-colonial modernity project wedded to the trans-imperial world before 1918, on to the rigid, integrated world of nations and nationalism.

### *Nationalism, Shi'i Politics and Regionalism*

Nationalism in Iraq is still a relatively poorly understood phenomenon, dogged in the last twenty years by a pseudo-academic and media discourse alleging it inauthentic. If the standard for authentic nationalism were the absence of violence between a state's religious and ethnic groups, there would be very few authentic nations to choose from. It is pertinent to remember in this regard that, despite popular perception, Iraq is not that diverse a nation. In the interwar period it was almost 93 percent Muslim and 84 percent Arab. Just over 50 percent of the Muslims were Shi'i. The largest religious minorities were Jews and Christians, of whom there were approximately 87,000 and 79,000 respectively.<sup>86</sup> This was a homogeneity that was recognised and envied: in 1927, The Lebanese historian Muhammad Jamil Bek wrote that Syrians were 'envious of Iraq for being composed of a united *umma* in terms of religion and language.'<sup>87</sup> We should take from this remark, not proof that the Sunni-Shi'i divide is somehow more deeply felt than other divisions, but that all nations, irrespective of their ethnic and religious makeup, experience social fissures and violence.

The main achievement of the artificial state narrative is to rehash the qualms of the British and state elites who oversaw the quasi-colonial formation of Iraq. These men used the 'sectarian' as a rhetorical device to 'marginalise enemies, delegitimise political opposition [and] punish non-conformity.'<sup>88</sup> Sectarianism was – and remains – a form of colonial and nationalist knowledge, constructed as the antithesis to the 'national mythology of

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<sup>86</sup> Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq*, 13. *Al-Irfan*, 18/1, August 1929, 109 - 110.

<sup>87</sup> *Al-Irfan*, 18/1, August 1929, 113.

<sup>88</sup> Fanar Haddad, *Understanding 'Sectarianism': Sunni-Shi'i Relations in the Modern Arab World* (London: Hurst & Company, 2020), 17.

coexistence.’<sup>89</sup> While this thesis accepts the importance of religious identity – and especially ‘sect-centric’ Shi’i identity – for driving political behaviour and shaping nationalist discourses, it refutes the utility of the analytical concept of sectarianism.<sup>90</sup> It holds that denoting sect-centric political movements ‘sectarian’ – like the similarly vacuous notions of ‘liberal’ and ‘extremist’ – serves mainly to reproduce ‘polemical taxonomies that belong in the colonial archive’, without acknowledging the ‘modes of argumentation employed by historical actors themselves.’<sup>91</sup>

The colonial archive has a lot to answer for when it comes to assessing the meaning of political movements in interwar Iraq. It remains one of the main sources for the political history of this period.<sup>92</sup> The contents of the colonial archive are not entirely fictional, but they do have an agenda and a way of understanding the world which make recourse to essentialist and reductive assertions and conceptions of time. Perhaps the most enduring of these was the bifurcation between modern, constitutional and national politics, on the one hand, and pre-modern, primordial and sectarian politics, on the other. This colonial bifurcation has been reproduced by Iraqi nationalist historiography, which moralises Shi’i sect-centric politics as ‘dangerous’: the unfortunate result of ‘colonial designs’ intended to undermine Islamic ‘fraternity.’<sup>93</sup> In a slightly different vein, Nakash assumes that the process of national integration forced Shi’a to confront the question of whether their ‘loyalty to the Iraqi state’ could ‘override their sectarian allegiance’? He frames the radicalisation of Shi’i politics from

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<sup>89</sup> Ussama Makdisi, *The Culture of Sectarianism: Community, History, and Violence in Nineteenth-Century Ottoman Lebanon* (London: University of California Press, 2000), 166.

<sup>90</sup> Haddad, *Understanding ‘Sectarianism’*, 14, 17, 82.

<sup>91</sup> Hussein Omar, ‘Arabic Thought in the Liberal Cage’, in *Islam after Liberalism*, ed. Faisal Devji and Zaheer Kazmi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 31, 21.

<sup>92</sup> See, for example: Peter Sluglett, *Britain in Iraq: Contriving King and Country* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2007); Ghassan. R. Atiyah, *Iraq, 1908-1921: A Socio-Political Study* (Beirut: Arab Institute for Research and Publishing, 1973); Hanna Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq: A Study of Iraq’s Old Landed and Commercial Classes and of Its Communists, Ba’thists, and Free Officers* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978); Reidar Visser, *Basra, the Failed Gulf State: Separatism and Nationalism in Southern Iraq* (Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2005).

<sup>93</sup> ‘Abd al-Razzaq al-Hasani, *Ta’rikh al-Wizarat al-Iraqiyya*, Vol. 2 (Saida: Matba’at al-Irfan, 1953), 102–3.

the 1930s as evidence of the endurance of a pre-national Shi'i political identity hindering successful national integration.<sup>94</sup> This thesis contends that the conclusions of the colonial officials, nationalist historians and Nakash need to be revised. It shows that Shi'i politics was not a hangover from the pre-national period, but instead rendered possible by the peculiar institutional power dynamics of the colonial state and the experience of national integration.

While scholars are yet to offer a thorough reappraisal of Shi'i politics in the early years of the state, more recent analysis of politics in Iraq and the wider Arab world has refuted the notion that nationalism represents the deliverance of society from its primordial nadir. The aim of such scholarship is to show that nationalism is not only – or even mainly – an idea or ideology, adopted by state or non-state elites and slowly disseminated to the remainder of the population thereafter.<sup>95</sup> When efforts to affect such totalising state-sponsored nationalist projects have been attempted – by the Ba'athists, for example – they have not succeeded. Davis cautions that they cannot succeed, as long as they continue to deny 'the fundamental characteristic of Iraqi society, namely, its ethnic and cultural diversity.'<sup>96</sup> There may be elements of truth in this assertion. But I would argue that what has been more detrimental to the process of forging a sustainable Iraqi nationalism is the state's consistent efforts to ignore or repress the cultural, social and political demands – for rights, representation and equality – of the majority of the population, irrespective of their ethnic, religious or cultural identity.

Nationalism is more fruitfully conceived as political praxis, language, and 'forms of consciousness . . . that operate within their own universe of meaning and language of symbols and signs.'<sup>97</sup> More than a rigid set of ideas, it is 'an ethos rooted in the internalization of a

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<sup>94</sup> Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq*, 109, 120.

<sup>95</sup> For a history of Arab nationalism based on urban notables paradigm, see C. Ernest Dawn, *From Ottomanism to Arabism; Essays on the Origins of Arab Nationalism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1973).

<sup>96</sup> Eric Davis, *Memories of State: Politics, History and Collective Memory in Modern Iraq* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 26–27.

<sup>97</sup> Watenpaugh, *Being Modern in the Middle East*, 130.



social order', where certain abstract concepts such as 'population' and 'common interest' become 'lived experience.'<sup>98</sup> The origins of such an internalisation occurred, not as an intellectual response to the tyranny of Ottoman rule or the primordialism of sectarianism, but with the institutional transformations of late Ottoman reform. It was only after this process that nationalism became a pedagogical project, undertaken at all levels of society, and especially within civil society, for the inculcation of a new national culture. These assessments echo the work of the Iraqi sociologist, 'Ali al-Wardi. Instead of seeing the first decades of the twentieth century as marking the beginning of the growth of Iraqi Arab *nationalism*, he identified a universal 'political *consciousness* developing in Iraq', defined by engagement with novel political ideas and institutions, which cut across traditional apathies towards political authority.<sup>99</sup> Assessing how and where these political manifestations appear is more important than assessing which is genuinely nationalist and which is not. One of the central arguments of this thesis is that nationalism in Iraq was a locally produced phenomenon, a vernacular of colonial resistance formulated through traditional and novel forms of associational life – and new forms of print culture.

While nationalism in Iraq – like nationalism anywhere – is not inauthentic or incomplete, it is difficult to argue that it was not constructed in contestation.<sup>100</sup> This does not make it unusual within the bloody, disputed annals of nationalist imaginaries. As James McDougall has argued for Algeria, the 'nation', in so much as it 'exists meaningfully at all . . . exists in the contest over meaning.' Necessarily discordant, national identity is devised by actors working in 'particular historical conjectures with specific symbolic, linguistic and

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<sup>98</sup> James L. Gelvin, 'The "Politics of Notables" Forty Years After', *Middle East Studies Association Bulletin* 40, no. 1 (2006): 28.

<sup>99</sup> 'Ali al-Wardi, *Lamahat Ijtima'iyya Min Ta'rikh al-'Iraq al-Hadith*, Vol. 6 (Baghdad: Matba'a al-Ma'arif, 1976), 301, 313 (Italics my own).

<sup>100</sup> Sami Zubaida, 'The Fragments Imagine the Nation: The Case of Iraq', *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 34, no. 2 (2002): 205–15.

material resources present in the social world at a given moment in time.’<sup>101</sup> The contest over the meaning of nationalism in Iraq was facilitated in the monarchical period by a relatively free public sphere; a state that was not able or willing to determine nationalist ideology; and the pervasive social, economic and political inequalities which divided the state north from south, Sunni from Shi’i, towns from countryside and Baghdad from the rest.

One aspect of the national story which quickly became instrumental in the contested terrain of nationalist historiography was the Iraqi revolution of 1920. An oft repeated mantra about the revolution focuses on the ‘unprecedented’ level of unity it represented, especially between Sunnis and Shi’a.<sup>102</sup> Yet by the late 1920s, a counter narrative was already claiming ownership of the revolution for the Shi’a and the people of the Euphrates specifically.<sup>103</sup> In 1952 these found succinct expression with al-Mizhar Al Fir’awn’s monograph on the ‘clear truths’ of the revolution, focused exclusively on the Euphrates tribes.<sup>104</sup> Efforts to recentre the national narrative were continued by ‘Abdullah Fahad al-Nafisi in 1973 with *Dawr Al-Shi’a Fi-Tatawwur al-‘Iraq al-Siyasi al-Hadith*. This influential work argued that pan-Arab nationalism was unbeknown to the Shi’a of the south, whose loyalty to the mujtahids of Najaf and Karbala superseded their attachment to Baghdad.<sup>105</sup> Al-Nafisi’s book appeared shortly before the Ba’athist state began to rewrite the history of the revolution through a cultural campaign aimed at erasing entirely the role of the Shi’a and the south. The contest continues, with a recent book by Abbas Kadhimi reframing the revolution as a genuine nationalist

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<sup>101</sup> James McDougall, *History and the Culture of Nationalism in Algeria* (Cambridge: University Press, 2006), 9.

<sup>102</sup> Philip Willard Ireland, *Iraq: A Study in Political Development* (London: J. Cape, 1937), 246; Sluglett, *Britain in Iraq*, 222; ‘Abdullah Fahad al-Nafisi, *Dawr al-Shi’a fi Tatawwur al-‘Iraq al-Siyasi al-Hadith* (Beirut: Dar al-Nahar li-l-Nashr, 1973), 133; Nakash, *The Shi’is of Iraq*, 66.

<sup>103</sup> ‘Ali al-Sharqi, *Mawsu’at al-Shaykh ‘Ali al-Sharqi al-Nathriyya*, ed. Musa al-Karabasi (Baghdad: Matba’at al-‘Umal al-Markaziyya, 1988), 47–48. See also repeated reference to Iraqi independence being granted ‘upon the skulls of the Shi’i’. *Al-Irfan*, 22/3, July 1931, 351.

<sup>104</sup> Eli Amariloy, ‘History, Memory and Commemoration: The Iraqi Revolution of 1920 and the Process of Nation Building in Iraq’, *Middle Eastern Studies* 51, no. 1 (2 January 2015): 79.

<sup>105</sup> Al-Nafisi, *Dawr al-Shi’a fi-Tatawwur*, 10–12.

movement, but one that only took place in the mid-Euphrates – that is, south of Baghdad where the predominantly Shi'i tribes rebelled under the leadership of the religious authorities in Karbala and Najaf.<sup>106</sup>

These contested nationalist constructions have been analysed as a reflection of various social, cultural, economic and ideological cleavages. Nakash and Davis frame them as representing an amalgamation of sectarian and ideological factors. They contend that the Shi'a preferred an Iraqi and Islamic identity while the Sunnis preferred pan-Arabism.<sup>107</sup> The promotion of the latter was the means through which successive cadres of Iraqi despots aimed to shore up the political ascendancy of the 'Sunni Arab minority.'<sup>108</sup> Both such interpretations are open to the criticism of cultural essentialism. They both seem to assume the Shi'a existed as a monolithic group prior to the founding of the state, and that this underpins the contested field of nationalist discourse. Neither seeks to explain how such divergent imaginaries came into existence or question how the formation of the state re-constituted – perhaps even invented in political terms – Shi'i identity itself.

More recently, the argument that the Sunni-Shi'i divide defined nationalist constructions has been challenged by Bashkin who has shown how pan-Arabism and Iraqi territorial nationalism were common to Sunni and Shi'i intellectuals, and not even mutually exclusive.<sup>109</sup> Sara Pursley, on the other hand, focuses on the temporal, arguing that the main conflict during the Mandate years was between 'oppositional nationalist' who desired complete sovereignty immediately and 'official nationalists' who preferred a gradualist disengagement

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<sup>106</sup> Abbas K. Kadhim, *Reclaiming Iraq: The 1920 Revolution and the Founding of the Modern State* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012), 80.

<sup>107</sup> Yitzhak Nakash, *Reaching for Power: The Shi'a in the Modern Arab World* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2007), 82; Davis, *Memories of State*, 19.

<sup>108</sup> Davis, *Memories of State*, 12.

<sup>109</sup> Bashkin, *The Other Iraq*, 125; Orit Bashkin, 'Hybrid Nationalisms: Watani and Qawmi Visions of Iraq under 'Abd al-Karim Qasim, 1958 - 61', *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 43, no. 2 (2011): 293–312.

from British colonialism.<sup>110</sup> A final oft repeated fissure used to explain political conflict is the generational divide, between the last Ottoman generation and the first generation to come of age in the Iraqi state schools.<sup>111</sup> The figures discussed in this thesis rarely fit neatly into the generational paradigm because they were neither members of the Ottoman elite nor brought up entirely in the new schools of the Iraqi state. Their upbringing and education were defined by diversity, consisting of a hotchpotch of religious, community and – for the younger men – state education. Despite this, the Najafi men of the Nahda were united by certain shared experiences which distinguished them from the mostly Ottoman army officers and Baghdadi and Mosuli elites who monopolised power in the monarchical state. They were forged in the First World War, the years of revolution that followed (1918-1920) and the years of resistance thereafter (1920-c.1924) – all of which form the basis of chapter three.

The men of the Najafi Nahda overlaid this discrete experience of national-state formation with regional and sect-centric identity markers, as they developed a nationalist ideology in the late 1920s. It became the ideology of Shi'i politics in Iraq: that is, the politics of demanding rights for the Shi'i community and equal opportunities for Shi'is. The most significant manifestation of this was Hizb al-Nahda, a political party whose ideology was largely written by al-Sharqi. An important distinction should be made here between Shi'i politics conceived essentially as a politics intended to further the rights of an abstract collective, and what might be dubbed Shi'i nationalism or religious activism, based wholly on Shi'i solidarity, symbolism and religious truths. Juan Cole elides these into a single 'Shi'i politics' of 'finding ways to assert Shi'i interests in developing nation-states that had non-Shi'i elites at

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<sup>110</sup> Sara Pursley, *Familiar Futures: Time, Selfhood, and Sovereignty in Iraq* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018), 62–63.

<sup>111</sup> Peter Wien, 'Waiting for the Superman: A New Generation of Arab Nationalists in 1930s Iraq', in *The Making of the Arab Intellectual: Empire, Public Sphere and the Colonial Coordinates of Selfhood*, ed. Dyala Hamzah (New York: Routledge, 2013), 212; Michael Eppel, 'The Elites, the Effendiyya and the Growth of Nationalism and Pan-Arabism in Hashemite Iraq, 1921-1958', *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 30, no. 2 (1998): 44–45.

their helm.’<sup>112</sup> While there are of course important overlaps, this elision is unhelpful as it ultimately leads to the conclusion that all Shi’i-centric movements – whether nationalist, Islamist, violent, non-violent or some amalgamation of the four – share some common agenda by dint of being ‘Shi’i.’

As I show in chapter six, the Shi’i-ness of Shi’i politics was but one aspect of the overall nationalist programme of the Najafi men of the Nahda. It was a novel phenomenon, rendered possible by a number of structural, political and representational factors related to the quasi-colonial constitution of the Iraqi state. Key to understanding this movement is to appreciate how its self-representation was changeable depending on context, audience and political circumstances. Like all nationalist ideologies, it was neither monolithic nor particularly coherent. Yet what it did offer, and what historians to date have largely failed to acknowledge, was a strong regional articulation of Iraqi Arab nationalism based on the Euphrates. It was this ambiguously defined ‘landscape tradition’ that endowed the Najafi narrative with its ‘ferocious enchantment.’<sup>113</sup> And it was such a regional symbolism that evoked most potently the experience of nationalism in Najaf throughout the early twentieth century, incorporating many of the themes and institutions which had defined the Najafi Nahda since its inception in the post-revolutionary period.

That one of the most powerful political currents in Iraq throughout the interwar period was a regional and sect-centric Shi’i politics should not be seen as a teething problem of the modern state – the last gasps of primordialism in the face of a novel national modernity. Shi’i politics of this kind was a corollary of state integration and a wholly modern politics in itself. It reflected the course of the Najafi Nahda since its inception. Al-Sharqi’s writings for Hizb al-

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<sup>112</sup> Juan Ricardo Cole, *Sacred Space and Holy War: The Politics, Culture and History of Shi’ite Islam* (London: IBTauris, 2002), 173.

<sup>113</sup> Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (London: HarperCollins, 1995), 15.

Nahda show how the civic foundations of the Najafī associational life and print culture – specifically the *majālis* – were being mythologised into a facet of the nationalist imaginary: he used them as proof of the Arab-ness of the Euphrates and the Shi’a. All this speaks to the evolution in the dominant conception of legitimate political community in Najaf. The trans-regional anti-colonial agenda of the pre-war period was circumscribed by the experience of colonisation and state integration. It became a politics of asserting national rights on the basis of a single religious community and a single regional collective. State integration engendered many similar processes for the inhabitants of Najaf, as it forced them to adopt or invent a catalogue of more tightly delimited identities – whether they be national, religious or socio-economic. The central aim of this thesis is to understand how these circumscriptions were possible, how they manifested themselves in other cultural and political contexts and what – if anything – were their long-term implications.

## *Chapter One – Najafi Associational Life, Print Culture and the Late-Ottoman State*

This chapter analyses transformations in the principal means of oral and written communication and exchange in Najaf during the early twentieth century: namely, the city's *majālis* and print culture. It highlights the multifaceted and dynamic functions of these institutions and how their diverse influences reflected Najaf's peculiar physical and political position in the fast-changing world of Ottoman reform, European colonialism and global constitutionalism. While the trans-regional influences on Shi'i populations of the Ottoman Empire in the era before the nation-state have been recognised by a number of historians, relatively little work has been undertaken on the institutions and genres which Najafis used to negotiate these influences.<sup>1</sup> Scholarship in European languages has tended to focus disproportionately on the spiritual and political authority of the most senior religious scholars, without paying serious attention to the structure of the Najafi public sphere – that is, the places where Najafis gathered, socialised, discussed and argued, as well as the new forms of print culture they produced and consumed. This chapter argues that the nature of Ottoman rule and Najaf's unique trans-regional connections allowed the Najafi *majlis* to embody a dual political role in the early twentieth century, as a site for conferring patronage and quasi-judicial mediation, as well as the formation of public opinion. The latter was facilitated by a print cultural revolution. Such transformations engendered Najaf's gradual integration into emergent regional (Ottoman/Arab), local (Iraqi) and global (Shi'i/Islamic) public spheres.

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<sup>1</sup> Bashkin, 'On Eastern Cultures', 122; Cole, *Sacred Space and Holy War*, 1; Juan Cole, *The Roots of North Indian Shi'ism in Iran and Iraq: Religion and State in Awadh, 1722 - 1859* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988); Mervin, *Un Réformisme Chiite*, 141.

Politics in the Ottoman peripheries during the period of Ottoman reform is often analysed within the framework of the ‘politics of notables.’ This holds that, where the Ottoman state expanded but remained relatively weak, a class of urban notables acted as intermediaries between the state and the population. These notables usually derived their power from the control of agricultural land, commercial capital, religious learning or tribal leadership. Mattheison applies the paradigm to the Shi’i population of al-Ahsa province.<sup>2</sup> Litvak does the same with the ulama of the shrine cities themselves. He argues that the senior mujtahids were a ‘status group’ whose influence derived from their ‘religious knowledge’ and – by many accounts – huge charitable income.<sup>3</sup>

Recent scholarship has criticised the ‘politics of notables’ paradigm for its over-emphasis on patronage and clientage as factors determining political behaviour, as well as its implications for the study of nationalism.<sup>4</sup> While the latter critique will be addressed in chapter three, I want here to build on the initial critique by recentring the role of the *majālis* as an institution within the political process. *Majālis* and comparable institutions, such as the Damascene *Dawāwīn*, have rightly be recognised as locations for the provision and reception of patronage.<sup>5</sup> But while the Najafi *majālis* were sites where something resembling the politics of notables occurred, analysing them through this lens alone overlooks their capacity to engender the dissemination and discussion of ideas between and among equals.

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<sup>2</sup> Toby Matthiesen, *The Other Saudis: Shiism, Dissent and Sectarianism*, Cambridge Middle East Studies (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 29–30.

<sup>3</sup> Litvak, *Shi’i Scholars of Nineteenth-Century Iraq*, 10, 164; al-Asifi, *Madrasat al-Najaf*, 16.

<sup>4</sup> Gelvin, ‘The “Politics of Notables”’, 24–25. See Chapter Three, 147.

<sup>5</sup> Philip Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate: The Politics of Arab Nationalism, 1920 - 1945* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 294.



## *The Najafi Majālis*

*Majālis* (*majlis*, s.) maintain an indelible place in the history of Arab and Islamic cultural, intellectual and literary life, stretching back to at least tenth century Iraq. Literally denoting a place of sitting, *majālis* performed different functions depending on time and locality, but were consistently autonomous arenas of oral entertainment and exchange, where usually the upper and middle stratum of society gathered for literary stimulation and relaxation, to build connections, settle disputes and socialise the next generation. They were spaces where the two semantic notions of *adab* – a vague term denoting Arabic literary culture, on the one hand, and the rules governing proper conduct and morality, on the other – coalesced. Although the *majālis* of the classical Islamic period could be sites for the dissemination of manuscript texts, they were principally oral settings, where performance and comportment were learned.<sup>6</sup> This had begun to change by the seventeenth century in the Ottoman Empire, when the circulation and reception of books flourished across the *majālis* of the Arab world, prompting discussion and, sometimes, ‘empire-wide controversy.’<sup>7</sup>

The Najafi *majālis* can be tentatively broken down into two overarching typologies, although both overlapped in function and were likely often held in the same physical spaces. The first of these were the Shi’i institution of the popular Husayni *majlis*. According to Najafi sources, these first took place in the immediate aftermath of the martyrdom of Imam Husayn, when eulogy poetry was read in public to the grieving Shi’a of Karbala and Kufa.<sup>8</sup> Primarily performative and attended by all members of the city irrespective of class or social rank, they

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<sup>6</sup> Samer M. 'Ali, *Arabic Literary Salons in the Islamic Middle Ages: Poetry, Public Performance, and the Presentation of the Past*, Poetics of Orality and Literacy (Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010), 3, 35, 74.

<sup>7</sup> Helen Pfeifer, ‘Encounter after the Conquest: Scholarly Gatherings in 16th-Century Ottoman Damascus’, *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 47, no. 2 (2015): 228; Helen Pfeifer, *Empire of Salons: Conquest and Community in Early Modern Ottoman Lands* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022), 19, 168–69.

<sup>8</sup> Al-Shaykh Ahmed al-Wa’ili, *Tajarubi ma' al-Minbar* (Beirut: Dar al-Zuhra, 1998), 133–34; Muhammad Sadiq Muhammad al-Karbasi, *Mu'jam Khutaba al-Minbar al-Husayni, Vol. 1* (London: al-Markaz al-Husayni li-l-Dirasa, 1999), 41.

took place within the family *majlis*, or designated *husayniyya* minbars located within each urban quarter or run by particular professional guilds.<sup>9</sup> By the late nineteenth century, the Husayni *majlis* had become a defining aspect of Najafi public life, supporting a substantial class of preachers who moved from *majlis* to *majlis* each night reciting the Karbala tragedy, especially in the first ten days of Muharram. This was the busiest time of year for the preachers, whose role it was to stimulate collective mourning as well as entertain. Competition for work was fierce, as Najaf hosted more preachers than minbars while a select few talented or well-connected individuals monopolised the top jobs.

Although popular, ubiquitous and unregulated, the Husayni *majālis* were not always performative gatherings. Their informal nature, as well as the monetisation of the profession of the *khutabā*, meant that many minbars were filled by preachers lacking the necessary linguistic or religious knowledge. Such a reality led to discordant relations between the preachers and the ulama.<sup>10</sup> Yet because all members of Najafi society, and especially its cultural and social elite, attended or organised Husayni *majālis* during Muharram, it was not uncommon for the Husayni minbars to become sites of oral exchange and debate. Aspirational young preachers would attend the *majālis* of prominent ulama to learn their trade. The regular Friday *majlis* of the Mujtahid, Muhammad Husayn Kashif al-Ghita, for example, followed this pattern. After a young preacher moved the mujtahid to tears reciting a sermon on Imam Husayn's last contact with his son before the Karbala battle, al-Ghita immediately deconstructed the preacher's proofs and arguments.<sup>11</sup> Such was the capacity of the emotive and performative to morph into the critical and discursive.

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<sup>9</sup> Al-Wa'ili, *Tajarubi ma' al-Minbar*, 133–34, 48.

<sup>10</sup> Al-Wa'ili, 50.

<sup>11</sup> Al-Wa'ili, 137.

The second type of Najafi *majlis* was the discursive, elite *majlis*, usually located in the family homes of distinguished ulama, *udabā* or notables. Traditional Najafi houses were built for this purpose with an internal area (*al-dakhlānī*) for the family and an external area (*al-barānī*) for the *majlis*.<sup>12</sup> Far from homogenous institutions, these served a number of social, intellectual and political functions. From around 1800, they proliferated considerably, in tandem with the growth of Najaf as a Shi'i religious centre.<sup>13</sup> Yet some *majālis* had existed long before this date. It is difficult to assess when or how a particular *majlis* came into existence, given that the local sources rarely provide any firm dates for their establishment.

The most comprehensive local historical encyclopaedia of Najafi *majālis* does single out several as being 'old.' It dates these to as far back as the eighteenth century. The *majlis* of Al al-Sha'ban, for example, was extant since at least the Safavid period, while the family had lived in Najaf and served as one of the custodians of 'Ali's shrine since the Buyid Empire in the tenth century.<sup>14</sup> Some of those *majālis* not noted as being 'old' were sitting at least as early as the turn of the last century, so it seems likely that in the late-Ottoman period the number of *majālis* taking place in the city was well over 50. Most of these usually took place on a Thursday and Friday evening, but many appear to have operated an open-door policy throughout the day. It was common practice for Najafis to attend several *majālis* in the same evening.<sup>15</sup> During Ramadan and other religious holidays, most *majālis* were open every night and remained open very late.<sup>16</sup> Within some intellectual circles they would often move from house to house each week.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Al-Qabiji and al-Qabiji, *Hidarat al-Najaf al-Ashraf*, 182.

<sup>13</sup> Al-Asadi, *al-Najaf al-Ashraf fi al-'Ahd al-'Uthmani al-Akhir wa-l-Ihtilal al-Baritani*, 231.

<sup>14</sup> Al-Marjani, *al-Najaf al-Ashraf*, 118.

<sup>15</sup> Al-Bahadili, *al-Haya al-Fikriyya*, 90.

<sup>16</sup> Al-Asifi, *Madrasat al-Najaf*, 27.

<sup>17</sup> For an example of this, see al-Shaykh Agha Buzuruk al-Tihriani, *Tabaqat A'lam al-Shi'a: Nuqaba al-Bashr fi al-Qarn al-Rabi' 'Ashar*, Vol. 15 (Beirut: Dar Ihya al-Turath al-Arabi, 2009), 1175.

Despite the social and cultural importance of the Najafī *majālis*, they were not institutionalised but tied to the fortunes and prospects of their host. Much like the institution of the *Marja'iyā* itself, or the educational networks which characterised the city, a *majlis* was only as influential as the number of regular attendees or clients it could attract. Although the discussion in *majālis* could be boisterous and uninhibited by social hierarchies, they were also spaces where such hierarchies found expression. The seating plan would reflect the seniority of the attendees, while often it was the host who had the 'final say' on a matter or drove the discussion forward.<sup>18</sup>

Although almost all elite *majālis* began with a recitation (*khutba*) on the Karbala tragedy, their proceedings varied, depending on the interests and profession of the hosts and attendees. They can be tentatively broken down into four typologies, although there was of course overlap between them. The first, and most common, was the *majlis* of the *udabā*, or the literati. In Hayder al-Marjani's list of the *majālis* of Najaf, *adab* is a ubiquitous theme across the descriptions, indicating that most *majālis* were eclectic spaces for the demonstration of attendees' poetic and literary talents. Hosting poetry sessions, (*adabī*) literary and linguistic contests and competitions, exchanging witticisms, discussing scholarly curiosities: all were commonplace.<sup>19</sup> With the completion of the *khutba*, the host would serve coffee and tea. Improvised poetic exchanges would then frequently develop in response to the most mundane or serious of topics.<sup>20</sup> These adlibbed performances were protracted and occasionally produced or reflected social rivalries. A famous example of this occurred in the 1880s, when al-Sayyid Muhammad al-Qazwini used his *majlis* to recount a number of defamatory poems against his rival, who had fled Najaf after an outbreak of the plague.<sup>21</sup> The *majālis* served as incubators of

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<sup>18</sup> Al-Asifi, *Madrasat al-Najaf*, 27; al-Marjani, *al-Najaf al-Ashraf*, 111, 139.

<sup>19</sup> Al-Tihriani, *Tabaqat A'lam al-Shi'a*, Vol. 15, 1175.

<sup>20</sup> Al-Qabiji and al-Qabiji, *Hidarat al-Najaf al-Ashraf*, 195.

<sup>21</sup> Al-Asadi, *al-Najaf al-Ashraf fi al-'Ahd al-'Uthmani al-Akhir wa-l-Ihtilal al-Baritani*, 232–33.

Najafi poetic talent, where young men learnt to either emulate or challenge their elders as they witnessed the latter engaged in a meaningful social and cultural performance.

The *majālis* of the ulama often overlapped with the *majālis* of the *udabā* in the late-Ottoman period. As all scholarly elites received some form of religious training, the distinction between the literati and the religious scholars was rarely strong.<sup>22</sup> Rather than thinking of the ulama's *majālis* as a discrete institutional entity, it is better to think in terms of differences in theme and social network. While some *majālis* were almost exclusively *adabī* spaces for poetic escapism and entertainment, others took a more active interest in discussions relating to religious matters, especially any disagreements between the *Marja' iyya*.<sup>23</sup> They often became extensions of the teaching circles in the *hawza*, within a more socio-academic environment. According to al-Marjani and Muhammad Mahdi al-Asifi, *fiqh*, *uṣūl* and *'ilm* were some of the most commonly discussed issues.<sup>24</sup> Some of the most prominent *majālis* of the ulama were those of the families of Kashif al-Ghita, Bahr al-'Ulum, al-Jaza'iri, al-Jawahiri, al-Safi and Shaykh Radi.<sup>25</sup> While these were all hosted by eminent religious scholars in the early twentieth century, such as Muhammad Hussein Kashif al-Ghita and 'Abd al-Karim al-Jaza'iri (b. 1872), few were reserved exclusively for the discussion of religious matters, making them wholly interdisciplinary spaces.<sup>26</sup>

The third and fourth typologies of Najafi *majālis* were the trade *majlis* and the *majlis* of the heads of the clans who controlled each of the four urban quarters. The former was where wealthy Najafi merchant welcomed and entertained guests, who were also often merchants,

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<sup>22</sup> Al-Qabiji and al-Qabiji, *Hidarat al-Najaf al-Ashraf*, 187; al-Bahadili, *al-Haya al-Fikriyya*, 91.

<sup>23</sup> Al-Bahadili, *al-Haya al-Fikriyya*, 87–88.

<sup>24</sup> Al-Marjani, *al-Najaf al-Ashraf*, 101, 103, 105, 109, 110, 111, 114, 124, 125, 126, 129, 133, 134, 157, 174; al-Asifi, *Madrasat al-Najaf*, 28.

<sup>25</sup> Ja'far al-Khalili, *Hakadha Araftuhum*, Vol. 1 (Baghdad: Dar al-Ta'aruf, 1968), 315–16; al-Marjani, *al-Najaf al-Ashraf*, 101, 105–6.

<sup>26</sup> 'Ali al-Khaqani, *Shu'ara' al-Ghari*, Vol. 5 (Qom: Maktabat Ayat Allah al-Udhma al-Mar'asha al-Najafi, 1988), 510–11.

and discussed commercial transactions.<sup>27</sup> The *majlis* of the heads of the clans undertook many of the traditional functions of the conventional tribal *dīwān*, but they were also cultural spaces comparable to the *adabī majlis*. While the latter prioritised classical Arabic verse, the clan *majlis* hosted colloquial poetry and storytelling of real and fictitious events pertaining to the tribe and quarter, its customs, traditions and *ansāb*.<sup>28</sup> It was in these spaces that quarter loyalties were bolstered along with citywide historical myths about the defence of Najaf from the Wahabis in the early nineteenth century.

The *majālis* played an important role in the legal and political life of Najaf throughout the late-Ottoman period. They were sites where the community's notables sought to address and solve social problems. The mediatory role of the ulama worked both within the city and beyond its four walls, among the tribal population of the mid- and lower-Euphrates.<sup>29</sup> This reflected the relative weakness of the Ottoman state in the region, even after the onset of Tanzimat reforms. Internally, the ulama consistently sought to mediate between the *Zghurt* and *Shmurt*, the two urban clans who had run the city's urban quarters since the early nineteenth century and whose clashes periodically plunged Najaf into violent turmoil. The ulama had varying degrees of success in this. While they often resorted to requesting support from the Ottoman governor in Baghdad when the violence caused significant social disruption, they did successfully negotiate peace between the two groups after their last major conflict in 1905.<sup>30</sup>

At a more granular level, the *majālis* provided a number of legal services. The clan *majlis* acted as a 'small court' for settling disputes between members of the same tribe or

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<sup>27</sup> Al-Asadi, *al-Najaf al-Ashraf fi al-'Ahd al-'Uthmani al-Akhir wa-l-Ihtilal al-Baritani*, 235; al-Marjani, *al-Najaf al-Ashraf*, 127, 131, 142, 143, 144, 155.

<sup>28</sup> Al-Asadi, *al-Najaf al-Ashraf fi al-'Ahd al-'Uthmani al-Akhir wa-l-Ihtilal al-Baritani*, 234.

<sup>29</sup> An example of the latter is al-Jaza'iri's regular intercession on behalf of the Shaykh al-Khazal with the Ottoman and Iranian authorities. See al-Tihirani, *Tabaqat A'lam al-Shi'a*, Vol. 15, 176; and al-Khalili, *Hakadha Araftuhum*, Vol. 1, 373.

<sup>30</sup> Al-Tal'afiri, *al-Najaf al-Ashraf fi al-Arshif al-'Uthmani*, 138; Mahbuba, *Madi al-Najaf*, 337–39.

quarter, distributing blood money where necessary.<sup>31</sup> For matters which could not be settled within the family or the clan, the *majālis* of the ulama could be relied upon to dispense legal opinions or oversight. Although the Shi'i ulama were never incorporated into the Ottoman judicial system, by the early twentieth century, their *majlis*-based social mediation had undergone a process of quasi-institutionalisation. Within each quarter of Najaf, a *majlis al-shara'* was established to serve as something equivalent to a modern-day notary. These oversaw property and land transactions, final testaments and endowments, and usually employed a scribe who recorded the relevant details. They were held in the family *majālis* of prominent scholarly families.<sup>32</sup>

The second innovation of the early twentieth century was the institution of the *majālis al-iistiftā'* – literally, the *majlis* for seeking a fatwa. Al-Asifi notes that the first scholar to host a *majlis* of this type was the mujtahid and later *Marja'* Muhammad Husayn Na'ini (b. 1860). But according to Shaykh Agha al-Tehrani, Na'ini was initially a member of a *majlis al-futyā* which was held in the house of the *Marja'* Kadhim Khorasani sometime in the 1910s. In light of this, it seems likely that something like a *majlis al-iistiftā'* was initiated by Khorasani, probably to enable him to better respond to the increasing number of fatwa requests arriving in the city from across the Islamic world, precipitated by more efficient trans-national communications.<sup>33</sup> These *majālis* were designed to deal with difficult religious, social and economic issues. They functioned like deliberative courts, with the *Marja'* acting as judge, and were attended by senior mujtahids and students. After listening to the views of others, the

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<sup>31</sup> Al-Asadi, *al-Najaf al-Ashrafi al-'Ahd al-'Uthmani al-Akhir wa-l-Ihtilal al-Baritani*, 45.

<sup>32</sup> For the Buraq Quarter this was the family of al-Tarihi; for al-Amara, the family of Kashif al-Ghita; al-Mashraq, the family of Bahr al-Ulum; and al-Hawaysh, the family of Najaf. Al-Asadi, 44, 233.

<sup>33</sup> Al-Shaykh Agha Buzurk al-Tihri, *Tabaqat A'lam al-Shi'a: Nuqaba al-Bashr fi al-Qarn al-Rabi' 'Ashar*, Vol. 14 (Beirut: Dar Ihya al-Turath al-Arabi, 2009), 593–94.

*Marja'* would dispense a fatwa. Another question would then be presented, and more discussion would follow.<sup>34</sup>

The judicial institution of the *majālis* was semi-official and multifunctional in nature. It was a good example of what Hallaq terms the 'long standing tradition' in Islamic legal practice for community mediation and arbitration outside of formal Qadi-led court proceedings.<sup>35</sup> It seems unlikely that anything as mono-functional as a Shi'i court, or *majlis al-aḥkām*, existed in Najaf prior to the founding of the Iraqi state. Those secondary accounts referring to such courts are all based on British consular reports, which do not capture the social rootedness and informal nature of the process.<sup>36</sup> When the British mentioned in a report on Karbala in 1910 that there were several mujtahids who sat 'regularly in judgement and several who do so occasionally', they were very likely referring to something equivalent to the *majālis al-shara'*.<sup>37</sup>

The phenomenon of the *majlis al-iistiftā'* and the *majlis al-shara'* shows the institutionalised autonomy of the Najafi legal environment. But it also points to the deliberative and collaborative nature of the process. The *Marja'* had the final word in the *majālis al-iistiftā'* but only after hearing the opinions of others. His role was essentially mediatory and consultative, rather than dictatorial and determinative. Moreover, while the *Marja'* took precedent in the *majlis al-iistiftā'*, their *majālis* were never the most politically or culturally significant. With the exception of al-Ghita, who became a *Marja'* later in his life, the ulama families who hosted the most influential *majālis* were not *Marja'*.<sup>38</sup> This recognition illustrates that two interconnected but discrete sources of guidance and legitimation existed in Najaf: in

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<sup>34</sup> Al-Asifi, *Madrasat al-Najaf*, 34–35; al-Bahadili, *al-Haya al-Fikriyya*, 86.

<sup>35</sup> Wael B. Hallaq, *An Introduction to Islamic Law* (Cambridge: University Press, 2009), 57–59.

<sup>36</sup> Atiyyah, *Iraq, 1908-1921*, 49; Litvak, *Shi'i Scholars of Nineteenth-Century Iraq*, 151–52.

<sup>37</sup> Events in Turkish Iraq, July 1910, 27 September 1910, FO 371/1008/35086, TNA, 15.

<sup>38</sup> According to al-Marjani and al-Asadi. See: al-Marjani, *al-Najaf al-Ashraf*, 101–61; al-Asadi, *al-Najaf al-Ashraf fi al-'Ahd al-'Uthmani al-Akhir wa-l-Ihtilal al-Baritani*, 237–38.



the first, the *Marja'iyya*, a supreme religious authority, produced religious rulings in an effort to shape law, society and politics; and in the second, the *majālis*, legal, social and political problems were debated and opinions formed in an arena of public debate. Both took heed of each other's views.

The layered legal institutional framework of the Najafi *majālis* existed outside of the Ottoman judicial framework. The first Ottoman courts were opened in Najaf in 1876 and a Qadi and his staff was appointed in the city from then onwards.<sup>39</sup> While such courts were functional, the Ottoman state's refusal to recognise Jafari jurisprudence and insistence on operating in Turkish meant that Najafis often chose to circumvent the Ottoman system by continuing to seek resolution in the *majālis*.<sup>40</sup> The state was both powerless and largely uninterested in undermining this arrangement. By 1910 a British report noted that the Ottoman Authorities were still 'deliberating on the possibility' of preventing Shi'i ulama from administering justice. They estimated that as much as 80 percent of all lawsuits were dealt with outside of the Ottoman system, which was reserved only for serious criminal offences.<sup>41</sup>

The biggest losers from this peculiar legal arrangement were apparently the Ottoman judges. According to al-Khalili, with their work largely fulfilled by the *majālis*, and with it their ability to extract bribes, despondent judges would extract Najafi subjects from the street at random and extort cash from them on the basis that they were *neither* a debtor nor in debt.<sup>42</sup> Such a story no doubt exaggerates a more complicated legal reality, characterised by a fair amount of legal pluralism, where plaintiffs were often able to forum shop to secure the most desirable ruling.<sup>43</sup> Evidence from the Ottoman archive indicates that criminal cases were

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<sup>39</sup> Al-Tal'afiri, *al-Najaf al-Ashraf fi al-Arshif al-'Uthmani*, 199–200.

<sup>40</sup> Al-Asadi, *al-Najaf al-Ashraf fi al-'Ahd al-'Uthmani al-Akhir wa-l-Ihtilal al-Baritani*, 44.

<sup>41</sup> Events in Turkish Iraq, July 1910, 27 September 1910, FO 371/1008/35086, 15.

<sup>42</sup> Al-Khalili, *Hakadha Araftuhum*, Vol. 1, 317.

<sup>43</sup> This was quite common for the Ottoman Empire in the late nineteenth century, which hosted a plethora of legal regimes, including both secular and Sharia courts. Avi Rubin, *Ottoman Nizamiye Courts: Law and Modernity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2011), 61.

regularly finding their way into Ottoman courts.<sup>44</sup> Yet the endurance of the *majālis* as important legal institutions does illustrate the extent to which Najaf's incorporation into the modern state apparatus was an ambiguous and uneven affair, which saw the pre-state regulatory institutions of the city operating concomitantly with official courts, at least up until the demise of the Empire. In the absence of a strong state, the *majālis* constituted the realm of politics and the state, not necessarily as a generator of public opinion or a site of entertainment, but as an unofficial judicial institution. *Majālis* were therefore not so much political in an intellectual sense as they were forums for a style of politics. The radical political changes which beset the Ottoman Empire and, indeed, much of the world, in the first decade of the twentieth century led to further changes in their role.

### *The Politicisation of the Majālis in the Age of Ottoman Reform*

The Najafi *majālis* – like the *majālis* in other Arab-Islamic contexts – were defined by their independence from formal state patronage. Yet in the nineteenth century, Najafi society was beset by waves of economic, social and political change which shaped the role and remit of the *majālis* as political and cultural institutions. The Tanzimat, an Empire-wide administrative and legal reform programme instigated in 1839, was the first of these.<sup>45</sup> The impact of the Tanzimat on the 'Atabat 'Aliyya was violent and incremental. An Ottoman military expedition reoccupied both Karbala and Najaf in 1842 and 1850 respectively. The Ottoman state implemented a number of administrative reforms from 1869 onwards, beginning with Midhat Pasha's diligent governorship in Baghdad. These aimed at imposing a pyramid administrative structure over the Empire. Najaf became a *qaḍā*, an administrative unit attached

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<sup>44</sup> Al-Tal'afiri, *al-Najaf al-Ashraf fi al-Arshif al-'Uthmani*, 204–5.

<sup>45</sup> Nieuwenhuis, *Politics and Society in Early Modern Iraq*; al-Asadi, *al-Najaf al-Ashraf fi al-'Ahd al-'Uthmani al-Akhir wa-l-Ihtilal al-Baritani*, 32; Litvak, *Shi'i Scholars of Nineteenth-Century Iraq*; Mahbuba, *Madi al-Najaf*, 283; Ceylan, *The Ottoman Origins of Modern Iraq*, 53–54.

to the *liwā* of Karbala.<sup>46</sup> An Ottoman *qā'imaqām* and a cohort of officials were appointed from Baghdad, and formed a local executive body, the *majlis al-idāra*.<sup>47</sup> In 1875 a *majlis al-baladiyya* was established to oversee public works, market standards and local security.<sup>48</sup> All this meant that, by the end of the Empire in 1918, a sizeable number of state officials or local men in state employ were living in Najaf, while all Najafis were increasingly forced to engage with state institutions. On at least one occasion, for example, the inhabitants of the city complained to the Ottoman governor in Baghdad about corruption in the local elections for the *majlis al-baladiyya*.<sup>49</sup>

Najaf's growing entanglement with external state power in the late nineteenth century was not limited to the Ottoman sphere. The city's peculiar trans-regional and trans-imperial connections made it susceptible to political and cultural currents from elsewhere, even if Ottoman censors tried to prohibit the free circulation of news. At the intersection between the Ottoman and Iranian states and home to a large Persian population of scholars, Najaf was plugged into both Ottoman and Iranian political discourses. From around 1900, printed materials such as scientific and political journals began to arrive in the city, often hidden among the wears of merchants.<sup>50</sup> The city's status as a religious university and pilgrimage destination meant that people and ideas arrived from across the Shi'i world on a regular basis. One famous *majlis* established by a local clan leader, Kadhim Subbi – the *majlis al-dar'iyya* – was first and foremost a guest house for pilgrims.<sup>51</sup> Rich and poor visitors were offered accommodation and food, but they were also interrogated by locals. A culture developed of extracting information from students travelling to and from Iraq, pilgrims from Iran, Jabal 'Amil and south and central

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<sup>46</sup> Al-Asadi, *al-Najaf al-Ashraf fi al-'Ahd al-'Uthmani al-Akhir wa-l-Ihtilal al-Baritani*, 35.

<sup>47</sup> Al-Tal'afiri, *al-Najaf al-Ashraf fi al-Arshif al-'Uthmani*, 184–88, 195.

<sup>48</sup> Al-Tal'afiri, 226–29.

<sup>49</sup> Al-Tal'afiri, 230–31.

<sup>50</sup> Al-Juburi, *al-Sayyid Muhammad Kadhim al-Yazdi*, 719.

<sup>51</sup> Al-Marjani, *al-Najaf al-Ashraf*, 127.

Asia; and those carrying letters to and from the mujtahids. Another common, yet unreliable way to learn of foreign developments was to interrogate the *janāzīn*, whose job it was to transport corpses for burial around the shrine of ‘Ali. Their reportage could be so unreliable that nonsensical information earned the label ‘news of the *janāzīn*’ (*akhbār al-janāzān*). In light of this, al-Khalili’s comment that Najaf was ‘the city in Iraq most connected with the world outside, far and near’ is unlikely to be entirely inaccurate even before the onset of the revolutionary era.<sup>52</sup>

The second half of the 1910s marked the beginning of a global wave of constitutional revolutions which reached Iran and the Ottoman Empire in 1905 and 1908 respectively. The role of the Najafi mujtahids in the Iranian constitutional revolution has been well researched. Leading Mujtahids led by Khorasani and including the families of al-Jawahiri, Bahr al-‘Ulum and al-Jaza’iri joined the ranks of the constitutionalists and encouraged the Shah through private correspondence to ascent to the constitutional demands, providing religious legitimacy for the entire project. Many of these same mujtahids offered their blessing to the Ottoman constitutionalists three years later. Others – such as the family of Kashif al-Ghita – were less enthusiastic, joining Khorasani’s main rival Kadhīm Yazdī in opposing constitutional change.<sup>53</sup>

Important changes in the institutional arrangement of Najafi associational life corresponded with the twin constitutional revolutions. One of these, only possible after the promulgation of the Ottoman constitution in 1908, was the emergence of Najaf’s first political parties. Family *majālis* were often the foundation blocks for more formalised voluntary institutions, such as societies (*al-jam’iyyāt*) parties (*al-aḥzāb*) and the Najafi chamber of

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<sup>52</sup> Al-Khalili, *Hakadha Araftuhum*, Vol. 1, 370–71.

<sup>53</sup> For the constitutional revolutions, see: Mateo Mohammad Farzaneh, *The Iranian Constitutional Revolution and the Clerical Leadership of Khurasani* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2015); Janet Afary, *The Iranian Constitutional Revolution, 1906-1911: Grassroots Democracy, Social Democracy & the Origins of Feminism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); al-Asifi, *Madrasat al-Najaf*; ‘Ali al-Wardī, *Lamahat Ijtima’iyya min Ta’rikh al-‘Iraq al-Hadith*, Vol. 4 (Baghdad: Matba’a al-Ma’arif, 1974); al-Juburi, *al-Sayyid Muhammad Kadhīm al-Yazdī*, 721.

commerce, as the examples of the families of al-Muzaffar, Kamal al-Din and al-Hadari demonstrate.<sup>54</sup> These brought subsections of Najafi society together in ways which had been previously difficult and created an unprecedented institutional link between the city and the constitutional Ottoman state. The Najafi branch of the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) was founded by Muhammad Rida al-Shabibi, Said Kamal al-Din and al-Shaykh Ja'far Al Mani'. It united Najafi intellectuals into the same public sphere as the Turkish and non-Shi'i Ottoman bureaucrats stationed in the city. An Iranian party established in the city by a group of pro-constitutional figures, the Scientific Society (al-Haya' al-'Ilmiyya), shared a similar agenda to the Najafi CUP. The two parties subsequently joined forces in a united constitutional front.<sup>55</sup> Given that relations between the CUP and Najafi civil society deteriorated substantially in the years following the constitution, neither of these political parties remained extant for very long. Yet they were the first of many subsequent iterations of formal voluntary-based associational life in Najaf.

While the new political parties represented a novel form of associational activism, they did not eclipse the city's *majālis* scene. In the years surrounding both constitutional revolutions, the *majālis* of prominent ulama and *udabā* were transformed into political debating chambers. Everyone, it seemed, had to have an opinion on the constitution. Violent and impassioned debates consumed Najafi society, so much so that children would imitate their seniors by incorporating the often-coarse language into their games in the street.<sup>56</sup> The debates around the constitution were anything but civil. Yazdi and the anti-constitutionalists mobilised the urban clans, who regularly accompanied the *Marja'* in the street bearing arms and shouting his name. This created a hostile environment whereby the constitutionalists were often forced to meet in

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<sup>54</sup> Al-Marjani, *al-Najaf al-Ashraf*, 104, 114, 119. For the *majālis* of al-Muzaffar and Kamal al-Din, see Chapters Four and Five respectively, 167, 207–208.

<sup>55</sup> Muhammad 'Ali Kamal al-Din, *al-Najaf fi Ruba' Qarn min Sanat 1908* (Beirut: Dar al-Qari' al-Arabi li-l-Tiba'a wa-l-Nashr, 2005), 138–41.

<sup>56</sup> Al-Khalili, *Hakadha Araftuhum*, Vol. 1, 314.

secret, deep in the *sarādīb* – or basements – which connect the underworld of the Najafi urban sphere.<sup>57</sup> But while coercion, violence and intimidation were common, the new environment was political in a novel way, with more people than ever mobilised around abstract political concepts and ideological positions, even if these were sometimes overlaid with family allegiances. Although disparaging and dismissive of this phenomenon, British observers were equally capable of appreciating this change: in June 1910, they reported that a ‘curious fracas took place in Najaf among some Persians who formed themselves into a debating society to discuss the politics of their country.’ On the constitutional side, it noted that the debate was led by a person who represented Khorasani, while his opponent stood for Yazdi. ‘For one or two nights the debates were peaceably conducted; but they finally resulted in a disturbance, in which the disputants fought and spat in each other’s faces.’<sup>58</sup>

At the centre of these debates were the *majālis* of al-Jaza’iri and ‘Ali Bahr al-‘Ulum. A religious scholar and an accomplished poet, al-Jaza’iri had studied with both Khorasani and Yazdi. Bahr al-‘Ulum was from a prominent scholarly dynasty which had attained considerable influence during the mid-nineteenth century after one of ‘Ali’s uncles, ‘Ali Ibn Rida, was given sole responsibility for distributing the Oudh Bequest.<sup>59</sup> Both men amassed a loyal cohort of followers and were some of the first Najafis to join Khorasani in supporting the constitutions.<sup>60</sup>

With the onset of the revolutionary period, al-Jaza’iri’s *majlis* became a site for the consumption, discussion and distribution of news pertaining to events in Iran, the Ottoman Empire, Egypt and further afield. Every week, when the newspapers and journals arrived in Najaf, they would be circulated and discussed. The proceedings were overseen by ‘Abd al-Karim and his brother, Muhammad Jawad, and, although the former was entitled to the ‘final

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<sup>57</sup> Al-Juburi, *al-Sayyid Muhammad Kadhim al-Yazdi*, 721.

<sup>58</sup> Events in Turkish Iraq, June 1910, 30 August 1910, FO 371/1008/31666, TNA, 12

<sup>59</sup> Litvak, ‘Money, Religion, and Politics’, 11.

<sup>60</sup> Al-Tihirani, *Tabaqat A’lam al-Shi’a*, Vol. 15, 1175.

say' on most matters, the two men frequently disagreed.<sup>61</sup> The *majlis* soon developed a reputation as a space for political discussion where men would go, not only for entertainment or *adabī* performance, but to discuss and disseminate what they had privately read. One of the few fragments of al-Jaza'iri's poetry from this period that is known to exist pertained to the Iranian revolution and was likely performed in his *majlis*. The poem praised the coronation of Ahmed Shah, who came to the throne in 1909 after the deposition of his anti-constitutional father: 'They made for Iran consultative rule // after injustice ruled it individually // they deposed the Shah who opposed them // and made his son the Shah as their supporter // Oh the times of humanity are back // praise be to God for Shah Ahmed.'<sup>62</sup> The poem was both informative and rhetorical – it spread news to al-Jaza'iri's audience about developments in Iran while evoking joy at the restoration of the constitutional movement. The Bahr al-'Ulum *majlis* followed a similar pattern. Open from morning until night, the regular attendees of this 'public' *majlis*, including the up-and-coming poet and CUP activist al-Shabibi, partook in *adabī* competition, poetry contests as well as political discussion.<sup>63</sup>

These *majālis* were sites for the promotion of pro-constitutional activity, but they were also spaces where oppositional politics germinated. While many Najafī elites endorsed the Ottoman constitution, the spirit of optimism it initially engendered was short-lived. The post-revolutionary Ottoman government did not pursue a policy of Turkification.<sup>64</sup> But it did show a disregard for southern Iraq, best illustrated in plans to sell a concession for navigation of the Tigris to a British company in 1909.<sup>65</sup> Soon after, the Ottomans appointed a new governor in

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<sup>61</sup> Al-Khalili, *Hakadha Araftuhum*, Vol. 1, 378; al-Marjani, *al-Najaf al-Ashraf*, 124.

<sup>62</sup> Al-Khaqani, *Shu'ara' al-Ghari*, Vol. 5, 515.

<sup>63</sup> Al-Khalili, *Hakadha Araftuhum*, Vol. 1, 319–20.

<sup>64</sup> Hasan Kayali, *Arabs and Young Turks: Ottomanism, Arabism and Islamism in the Ottoman Empire, 1908-1918* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 113. Arab nationalist historiography suggests that the Young Turks did pursue Turkification policies. See Asma Barhan al-Din 'Abd al-Qadir, *Dawr al-Nawab al-'Arab fi Majlis al-Mab'uthan al-'Uthmani, 1908 - 1914* (Beirut: al-Dar al-Arabiya li-l-Mawsu'at, 2006), 269.

<sup>65</sup> Mahmoud Haddad, 'Iraq Before World War I: A Case of Anti-European Arab Ottomanism', in *The Origins of Arab Nationalism*, ed. Rashid Khalidi et al. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 120–50.

Baghdad, Nazim Pasha, who ruled with complete disregard for the civil liberties the constitution had enshrined.<sup>66</sup> These were both reasons for the development of the Ottoman Decentralisation Party, the main opposition in the Ottoman parliament from the Arab provinces. The Naqib of Basra, Sayyid Talib's branch of the party, Jam'iyyat al-Basra al-Islahiyya, garnered support across southern Iraq, with the idea of decentralisation ricocheting through the Najafi *majālis*.<sup>67</sup> Al-Jaza'iri was apparently in favour.<sup>68</sup> The outpouring of discontent with the CUP did not illustrate anti-Ottoman sentiment in Najaf. Instead, it shows how seriously the population responded to the constitutional movement and the political freedoms it engendered and how invested they were in the political life and public sphere of the Empire – on an imperial scale – during its last decades.

Both al-Jaza'iri's and Bahr al-'Ulum's *majālis* were very much part of this new imperial public sphere. Yet both also maintained their function as sites for mediation and socio-judicial regulation. Al-Jaza'iri's *majlis* was open day and night precisely for this reason, welcoming different cohorts of guests: sometimes students, eager to discuss *fiqh* and 'ilm, sometimes social and intellectual elites, and sometimes ordinary members of the public with some problem that needed addressing. All were ostensibly welcomed with laughs and smiles while al-Jaza'iri endeavoured to solve their problem.<sup>69</sup> Bahr al-'Ulum's *majlis* was frequently pregnant with fiery political and intellectual discussion. But whenever a person came to the *majlis* with a legal matter that needed solving, the attendees suspended their discussions and the 'public *majlis* was transformed into a private *majlis*', where the assembled intellectuals examined the particular concerns of the member of the public under the supervision of Bahr al-'Ulum.<sup>70</sup> In

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<sup>66</sup> Asiatic Turkey and Arabia, 26 September 1910, FO 371/1000/327, TNA, 1 – 7; Asiatic Turkey and Arabia, 10 October 1910, FO 371/1013/124, TNA, 1 – 2.

<sup>67</sup> Al-Khalili, *Hakadha Araftuhum*, Vol. 2, 371; al-Sharqi, *Mawsu'at*, 29.

<sup>68</sup> Al-Khalili, *Hakadha Araftuhum*, Vol. 1, 371.

<sup>69</sup> Al-Tihirani, *Tabaqat A'lam al-Shi'a*, Vol. 15, 1178.

<sup>70</sup> Al-Khalili, *Hakadha Araftuhum*, Vol. 1, 319–20.



this way, the *majlis* served as both a sphere of critical public debate, discussing political, social and literary matters, as well as a forum of dispute resolution and mediation, at almost precisely the same time.

The events of Bahr al-‘Ulum’s and al-Jaza’iri’s *majālis* are indicative of how two forms of politics were taking place in a single space in Najaf. The first was a variant of the politics of notables: the private *majlis* where individual disputes between members of the Najafi public, the government or the neighbouring tribal population were discussed and mediation sought. But when these matters had been attended to, and mediation achieved, the *majlis* again became public and resembled something more akin to the ‘autonomous and voluntary institutions and associations’ of civil society, plugged into an emerging imperial and trans-regional public sphere.<sup>71</sup> It is unclear whether this shift precipitated a change in those actually in attendance. The capacity of one institution in one city to sustain this diversity was indicative of the uneasy and irregular integration of the city into the purview of the modern Ottoman state. It also reflected Najaf’s unique location as a trans-imperial city within the trans-regional milieu of global Shi’ism. This had allowed Najafi elites to engage with the multiplicity of changes engulfing their world in the twilight years of the Ottoman state. For many, the opportunities afforded by the expansion of print culture during the post-revolutionary period provided fertile ground for new political and cultural activism.

### *Najafi Print Culture: Trans-Regional Printing in and from Najaf after 1908*

With the promulgation of the Ottoman constitution, print culture exploded in Iraq and the wider Arab world. Freedom of expression within the Ottoman Empire had been substantially curtailed since the suppression of the first Ottoman Constitution in 1876. Arab

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<sup>71</sup> Sami Zubaida, ‘Civil Society, Community and Democracy in the Middle East’, in *Civil Society: History and Possibilities*, ed. Sudipta Kaviraj et al. (Cambridge: University Press, 2001), 232.

press activity – first pioneered in mid-century Beirut – migrated abroad, especially to Egypt. Just as the first decade of the twentieth century facilitated the transformation of the Arab literary *majālis* into nascent organised political clubs, so too did it engender an Empire wide boom in media experimentation.<sup>72</sup> The faucet of the censor burst and a torrential current of new media publications appeared, until, to paraphrase Habermas, ‘every half-way eminent politician organised his club, every other his journal.’<sup>73</sup> In the three years following the constitutional revolution of 1908 and the loosening of the Ottoman Empire’s censorship regime, 37 newspapers were set up across Iraq. In Najaf alone, four journals and newspapers appeared.<sup>74</sup>

The logistics of printing in Najaf were complicated by a dearth of suitable presses. Only one printer was operational in the city prior to the First World War. Known as the Matba’at al-Najaf, it was established in 1909 by Jalal al-Din al-Husayni, the Iranian owner of the pro-constitutional newspaper, al-Habl al-Matin which was published in Kolkata. As an Ottoman provincial capital, a number of private lithograph presses and government publishers had existed in Baghdad since the nineteenth century and several more were opened at the beginning of the twentieth such as the Matba’at al-Shabindar and the Matba’at Dankur, which was Jewish run. The Baghdadi printing press with most links to Najaf was the Matba’at al-Adāb funded by a group of influential Shi’i literati and founded by Yusef Effendi Fransis al-Mosuli in 1909. It published some of the most significant works of literature, religious reformist and political thought to emerge in Iraq prior to the First World War, including one of Baghdad’s first and longest-lasting journals, *Lughat al-Arab*, as well as most copies of Hibat al-Din al-Shahrastani’s *al-Ilm*, the first Najafi Arabic-language journal and one of the first private

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<sup>72</sup> Ayalon, *The Press in the Arab Middle East*, 50, 62–63; Erol A. F. Baykal, *The Ottoman Press (1908-1923)* (Boston: BRILL, 2019), 43–44.

<sup>73</sup> Habermas, Lennox, and Lennox, ‘The Public Sphere’, 53.

<sup>74</sup> Bati, *Sahafat al-Iraq*, 15.

journals established in Iraq. The publisher also published independent works by al-Shahrastani, philosophical work by Jamil Sidqi al-Zahawi, and the first volume of a history of Islam penned by Sayyid Sadr al-Din al-Sadr.<sup>75</sup>

Assessing the influence of Najafī newspapers, journals, pamphlets and books during this period is difficult, as is the case with all print culture from the Arab, Ottoman or Persianate world; yet evidence exists that their capacity to reflect and inform public opinion was substantial. Scholarship indicates that in the late Ottoman period, a culture of collective reading in cafes and *majālis* was mitigating the slow growth of the press in the mid-nineteenth century, when low literacy rates had kept circulation numbers down.<sup>76</sup> As the example of Najaf illustrates, it was only necessary for one or two copies of an Egyptian journal to arrive in the city before a substantial number of *majālis* attendees had absorbed their contents. The relatively small monthly print run of approximately 1,500 copies for *al-Ilm* would have reached many more than 1,500 individuals.<sup>77</sup> That this was true can be seen in the concern of government authorities and the British consular officials about the destabilising influence of published material. When Khorasani’s criticism of the post-revolutionary Iranian government was published as a broadsheet in Najaf in 1910, it was apparently ‘widely distributed’ in Iraq, spurring British anxieties about its influence.<sup>78</sup> The public scandal that a journal or pamphlet could precipitate also indicates their extensive social reach. As the next chapter will illustrate in more detail, *al-Ilm*’s campaign to end the transfer of bodies for burial around the Shrines of

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<sup>75</sup> For details of printing presses operational in Iraq, and especially the production of Matba’at al-Adāb, see: *Lughat al-Arab*, 2/5, January, 1913, 307 – 309.

<sup>76</sup> Ayalon, *The Press in the Arab Middle East*, 143, 156; Baykal, *The Ottoman Press*, 190–91; Ilham Khuri-Makdisi, *The Eastern Mediterranean and the Making of Global Radicalism, 1860-1914* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 40.

<sup>77</sup> Isma’il Tah al-Jabiri, *Hibat al-Din al-Shahrastani: Manhajihi fi al-Islah wa-l-Tajdid wa Kitabat al-Ta’rikh* (Baghdad: Dar al-Shu’un al-Thaqafiya al-Ama, 2008), 51.

<sup>78</sup> Events in Turkish Iraq, July 1910, 27 September 1910, FO 371/1008/35086, TNA, 13.

the Imams in Najaf and Karbala was so well publicised it caused a major outcry among the population of Baghdad.<sup>79</sup>

It was precisely the lure of reaching a broad public which attracted Najafis to the opportunities thrown open by print. The generation of Najafi intellectuals to come of age in the wake of the constitutional revolutions were the first to consciously seek out means to publish their work, authoring volumes on politics, science, culture and religion. Influential ulama and intellectuals well versed in print passed on their interest and expertise to their students. Unlike their reformist idols such as Khorasani, who left no printed enunciation of his political position, the activist ulama who followed in his footsteps left a trail of printed works before they had even reached their late thirties.<sup>80</sup> The challenges associated with print production in Najaf were substantial: printing could be expensive, presses were often unavailable or unreliable, and the political environment was not always amenable. Overcoming these challenges involved filtering Najaf's print cultural through a number of regional nodes, primarily Saida and Baghdad.

A commitment to social and religious reform were synonymous with a predilection for print. It was a functional means to promote an assertively modernist agenda which could protect the Islamic world from European cultural and political subjugation. At the forefront of the Najafi print pioneers was al-Ghita, who published his first full length monograph, *al-Din wa-l-Islam aw al-Da'wa al-Islamiyya*, in 1911.<sup>81</sup> Published at a time when the constitutional enthusiasm of the early years of the revolution was being subsumed by the daily grind of CUP authoritarianism, *al-Din wa-l-Islam* was a resounding call for Islamic unity, framed as a direct response to what al-Ghita considered the existential threat of European materialist thought. He

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<sup>79</sup> Al-Khalili, *Hakadha Araftuhum*, Vol. 2, 203.

<sup>80</sup> Farzaneh, *The Iranian Constitutional Revolution*, 13.

<sup>81</sup> Translated title: *Religion and Islam or the Islamic Call*.

had been exposed to these ideas by reading the work of the Egyptian and Lebanese socialists Salama Moussa and Shibli Shumayyil, both of whom, al-Ghita concluded, had the potential to ‘tear [our religion] apart into tiny pieces.’<sup>82</sup> His ecumenical tract highlighted the importance of pursuing knowledge and research, and preached unity between the Abrahamic faiths.

The inspirational and material factors which led to *al-Din wa-l-Islam*’s eventual publication are indicative of the tight regional interconnectedness of the Arab print market. Al-Ghita would not have had the impetus to write his book if Mousa’s *Risalat al-Superman* and Shumayyil’s *Falsafat al-Nashwa’ wa-l-Irtiqa* had not been circulating freely in Najaf within months of their initial publication in 1910. Within two years al-Ghita had been able to publish two versions of his polemical response in both Baghdad and Jabal ‘Amil. The absence of a suitable press in Najaf meant al-Ghita published the first section of his book in Baghdad. Yet the Ottoman governor, Nazim Pasha – influenced by the Sunni ulama – was suspicious of the work. He confiscated all the copies of the first print run and sent them to the Shaykh al-Islam in Istanbul. The latter disapproved, banned the book and fined al-Ghita.<sup>83</sup> This forced al-Ghita to print the remainder of the book elsewhere. Given the human and religious links between the Shi’i community in Jabal ‘Amil and Najaf, as well as the fact al-Ghita was travelling in the Levant at the time, he chose to publish it with the al-Irfan publishing house in Saida, established by the entrepreneur and journalist Ahmed Arif al-Zayn.<sup>84</sup> This set off a regional print cultural preference for Najafis to publish in Jamal ‘Amil which lasted well into the national period.

One of al-Ghita’s students, al-Shahrastani, echoed al-Ghita’s Islamic civilisational concerns in a monograph titled *al-Bi’a wa-l-Islam* first published in 1910.<sup>85</sup> The book was intended to illustrate how Islamic principles were consonant with modern scientific advances

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<sup>82</sup> Muhammad Husayn Kashif al-Ghita, *al-Din wa-l-Islam aw al-Da’wa al-Islamiyya* (Saida: Matba’at al-Irfan, 1911), 23–24.

<sup>83</sup> Kashif al-Ghita, *’Uqud Hayati*, 91.

<sup>84</sup> Al-Tihirani, *Tabaqat A’lam al-Shi’a*, Vol. 14, 613.

<sup>85</sup> Translated title: *Astronomy and Islam*. Al-Jabiri, *Hibat al-Din al-Shahrastani*, 40–46.

in Astronomy. Western scientific breakthrough, al-Shahrastani's thesis concluded, had been foretold by Islamic revelations. The superior scholarly position of Islam in the pre-modern period was a fact that many western scholars themselves recognised, and modern science had been filtered through to Europe via Andalusia. The book contained detailed illustrations of the solar system and the physics of a lunar eclipse, all interspersed with Islamic proofs and rationales.<sup>86</sup>

Although written in Najaf and published in the Matba'a al-Adāb in Baghdad, *al-Bi'a wa-l-Islam*'s diverse sources were from the length and breadth of the Arab and Persianate worlds. Along with important Shi'i hadith collections, *akhbār* and *tafsīr*, such as *Kitab al-Kaḥfi*, *Nahj al-Balagha*, *Majma' al-Bayan*, *Tafsir al-Qumi*, *Bahar al-Anwar* and *Kitab al-Waḥī*, al-Shahrastani consulted Sunni sources, including *Kitab al-Tawhid* by the Hanbali scholar Muhammad Bin 'Abd al-Wahab, *al-Dar al-Manthur* by the Shafi'i scholar Jalal al-Din al-Sayuti, and *al-Shifa* by Ibn Sina. More contemporary references included various works of translation by Cornelius Van Dyke, an American missionary based in Beirut who al-Shahrastani described as 'Dutch of origins, American of birth and Beiruti of death'; work by the Lebanese Christian historian Mikhail Mishaqa; works by French astrologers translated into Arabic; Butrus al-Bustani's dictionary; the Italian Orientalists Carlo Nallino's lectures on Arab Astronomy in the Middle Ages; and 'two great tomes in modern astrology' published in Persian, called *The Gardens of the Stars*. Evidence of the accolades which western scholars had presented towards Islam were sourced from the 'Amili journal, *al-Irfan*.<sup>87</sup> All this provides a remarkable snapshot of the diverse titles in multiple languages which must have been circulating among the intellectual milieus of Najaf. While al-Shahrastani capitalised on the cultural and religious connections between Najaf and the Shi'i community Jabal 'Amil, his

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<sup>86</sup> Hibat al-Din al-Shahrastani, *al-Hay'a wa-l-Islam* (Baghdad: Matba'at al-Adab, 1965), 32–33.

<sup>87</sup> Al-Shahrastani, 33–38.

engagement with regional print culture transcended these religious bonds; most of the material consulted was not produced by Shi'is but Lebanese Christians or orientalists.

The opportunities thrown open by the 'Amili and Beirut print market were also economically enticing for a young generation of Najafi intellectuals seeking to revive a dwindling Arabic literary culture. According to 'Ali al-Sharqi, writing years later in his memoirs, print was recognised by the new generation as a way to install a 'productive component' (*al-taṣnī'*) into Najaf, which had hitherto survived by living off profits from the surrounding agricultural lands.<sup>88</sup> Al-Sharqi had been one of al-Shahrastani's and Khorasani's students, and was already showing a proclivity for writing and publishing in the first decade of the twentieth century, while in his late adolescence. One of his earliest poems, published in *al-Irfan*, was about the sinking of the Titanic.<sup>89</sup> Jones has commented on the 'ambivalent modernity' which characterised the literary output of al-Sharqi and his likeminded peers. This was one which took pride in Najaf's rich intellectual culture and the classical poetic form, but also courted modern themes and craved relocation away from the conservative religious environment of the *ḥawza*.<sup>90</sup> While such a characterisation evokes the self-framing of these quintessentially modern young men of the Nahda, it also belies the actual cosmopolitanism and trans-regionalism of their lived experiences in Najaf.

The prospect of transferring Najaf's rich manuscript collections into print was both morally enticing and a potentially profitable way to make a living for the young al-Sharqi and his peers, including his cousin 'Abd al-Aziz al-Jawahiri and al-Shabibi, incidentally another of al-Shahrastani's students.<sup>91</sup> None had the financial capital to undertake the work alone and so

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<sup>88</sup> 'Ali al-Sharqi, *al-Ahlam* (Baghdad: Sharikat al-taba' wa-l-nashr al-ahliyya, 1963), 100.

<sup>89</sup> Al-Jabiri, *Hibat al-Din al-Shahrastani*, 40–46; al-Tihirani, *Tabaqat A'lam al-Shi'a*, Vol. 16, 1368; Jones, *The Dangers of Poetry*, 44; al-Khalili, *Hakadha Araftuhum*, Vol. 2, 365–66.

<sup>90</sup> Jones, *The Dangers of Poetry*, 39.

<sup>91</sup> Muhammad Baqir Ahmad al-Bahadili, *al-Sayyid Hibat al-Din al-Shahrastani, Atharuhu al-Fikriyya wa Mawaqifuhu al-Siyasiyya* (Beirut: Delta, 2002), 49–50.

they established what may have been the first, albeit informal and short-lived, Najafi literary society, called the Sharikat Muqawuma al-Faqar (The Company for Resisting Poverty).<sup>92</sup> Al-Sharqi decided that the *dīwān* of Ibrahim al-Tabataba'i, the nineteenth century Najafi poet, was the most 'useful' work to collate because al-Tabataba'i was, according to al-Sharqi, 'one of the stallions of the poets of Iraq and one of the masters of *adab* and language', who, unlike many of his peers, had never allowed profit or greed to dictate his poetic production.<sup>93</sup> After purchasing the *dīwān* from his family and ordering the poems, they found out the book of around three hundred pages would cost 50 gold lira to print in Saida. This was enough to bankrupt them all, so they were forced to mortgage one of their properties as collateral to borrow the money. The risk did not pay off, as the *dīwān* was released just as the First World War broke out in Europe and the Iraqi book market became increasingly unstable, rendering the book worthless. If it were not for al-Sharqi's good fortune to find, purchase and re-sell a treasure trove of valuable Arabic manuscripts in the private collection of one of the poor custodians of the shrine of 'Ali, the house would surely have been lost.<sup>94</sup>

A less risky way to bring the classical Najafi canon into print was to secure the backing of a wealthy patron. Al-Sharqi's cousin al-Jawahiri used money from al-Haj 'Abd al-Muhsin Shalash, a merchant, entrepreneur and quintessential man of the Najafi *majālis*, to publish the first *dīwān* of Muhammad Said al-Habubi in Beirut in 1913. Funding the project enhanced Shalash's reputation as a philanthropist while publicising his local achievements: the title page of the book described him as 'one of the great merchants of Najaf' who had 'a big hand' in bringing the first railroad to the city.<sup>95</sup> Even with secure finances, however, the editors of the

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<sup>92</sup> Al-Sharqi, *al-Ahlam*, 98–100.

<sup>93</sup> Al-Sayyid Ibrahim al-Tabataba'i, *Diwan al-Tabataba'i* (Saida: Matba'at al-Irfan, 1914), 4; Jones, *The Dangers of Poetry*, 27.

<sup>94</sup> Al-Sharqi, *al-Ahlam*, 102.

<sup>95</sup> Al-Khalili, *Hakadha Araftuhum*, Vol. 1, 163; al-Sayyid Muhammad Said Habubi, *Diwan Habubi* (Beirut: Matba'at al-Ahliya, 1913), 1; Jones, *The Dangers of Poetry*, 28.



*dīwān* felt it necessary to remind their readers how difficult the compilation had been. What readers did not appreciate, the editorial introduction began, was ‘how much time we killed . . . before the spirit of these melodies moved in their mouths’, because ‘gathering a *dīwān* and ordering it as *the dīwān* was one of the most difficult jobs for the men of *adab*’ and had involved searching in libraries and private collections, far and wide, to source all the poetic remains of al-Habubi, some of which were still in rough handwritten form. Despite these challenges, the compilers were convinced ‘there was not a *bayt* or rhythm we did not find.’ They gifted the rights of publication to al-Habubi’s son, al-Sayyid ‘Ali, on the condition that he did not republish or change the work without consulting them.<sup>96</sup>

#### *The First Najafī Journal: al-Shahrastani’s al-Ilm*

In the wake of the constitutional revolutions, Najafis began to publish in journals and newspaper across the Middle East. According to local historians, this work was often written anonymously to avoid the scorn of the authorities. Al-Sharqi published in Baghdad, Najaf and Jabal ‘Amil, occasionally using the pseudonym *al-furātī*.<sup>97</sup> Al-Shabibi published poetry and articles in *al-Irfan*. One of these linked educational reform to the Ottoman constitutional movement, arguing that the ‘most despicable thing about despotism was that it engendered deficient education (*tarbiyya*).’<sup>98</sup> Sayyid Said Kamal al-Din, another student of al-Shahrastani, published articles in the Basra-based newspapers *al-Dustur* and *Sada al-Dustur*.<sup>99</sup>

Yet of all the print experimentations pioneered in late Ottoman Najaf, founding a journal was the most effective way to popularise a reformist message while creating a regular income stream. It also came with substantial personal risk. The first and only Arabic language

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<sup>96</sup> Habubi, *Diwan Habubi*, 5–6.

<sup>97</sup> Al-Tihirani, *Tabaqat A’lam al-Shi’a*, Vol. 16, 1368; al-Mufarriji, *al-Najaf al-Ashraf*, 200.

<sup>98</sup> *Al-Irfan*, October 1909, 1/10, 480.

<sup>99</sup> ‘Ali al-Khaqani, *Shu’ara’ al-Ghari*, Vol. 4 (Qom: Maktabat Ayat Allah al-Udhma al-Mar’asha al-Najafi, 1988), 146, 148–49.

journal to appear in late Ottoman Najaf was *al-Ilm*, a monthly ‘religious, philosophical, political, scientific and industrial’ journal, first released on 29 March 1910. Its founder, al-Shahrastani, wanted to use it as a platform to continue his public educational campaign pioneered in *al-Bi’a wa-l-Islam*. Journalism, he argued, was distinct from other written genres by being wholly public and possessing an immediate relevance to the era: unlike the book, for instance, it was exclusively concerned with ‘analysing modernity’ (*al-ḥadātha*) and that which is ‘youthful’ (*al-ṣubūwa*). Its power – to both reform and corrupt – was therefore substantial, and it was essential that individuals such as al-Shahrastani who understood the correct means of reform participate.

The decision to become a journalist, as Hamza has noted with regard to one of al-Shahrastani’s principal journalist influences, Rashid Rida, can be interpreted as a conscious decision to affect downward social mobility for a religious scholar.<sup>100</sup> Yet al-Shahrastani took pains to highlight the prestige of the occupation. He inserted himself into a global journalistic metanarrative, commenting that he was continuing the work of ‘great kings and ulama . . . who had fearlessly tackled the affairs of journalism, such as Sayyid Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, Muhammad ‘Abduh, Peter the Great, Theodore Roosevelt and Oscar King of Sweden.’ These diverse human influences reflected *al-Ilm*’s expansive thematic and geographical output.<sup>101</sup>

From the offset, al-Shahrastani’s mission was beset by financial and logistical difficulties. It is unclear where he sourced the initial investment to establish *al-Ilm* but the main financial mechanism to keep the journal open was yearly subscriptions. This was an unreliable income stream, especially considering the journal was often printed and dispatched to interested subscribers before subscriptions payments were received. As a means to facilitate the regular flow of subscriptions and to attract new ones, *al-Ilm* published detailed rules which

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<sup>100</sup> Hamzah, ‘From ‘ilm to Ṣiḥāfa’, 98.

<sup>101</sup> *Al-Ilm*, 1/1, March 1910, 3 – 10.

stipulated that payments needed to be made in advance, by cheque, or through a designated local contractor. Reductions were offered to those who purchased multiple copies each month, presumably in an attempt to attract booksellers to buy in bulk. Subscribers were also offered reduced advertising slots.<sup>102</sup> Although al-Shahrastani often thanked his paying subscribers, his regular complaints about those who were late paying belies a less harmonious reality. By the fourth issue of the journal, *al-Ilm* was already reminding readers who had received one or more copy to pay up or return what they had received.<sup>103</sup>

The logistics of printing and distribution also proved difficult for the fledgling journal. Problems with the printers occurred as early as April 1910, when the Matba'at al-Adāb was so behind schedule that al-Shahrastani was forced to publish the second and third issues together, apologising to subscribers for the lengthy delay.<sup>104</sup> Thereafter, al-Shahrastani flirted with other print houses, using the Matba'at al-Shabindar for the fourth and fifth issues. The last four copies of the first year were printed in Najaf's own print house, the Matba'at al-Habl al-Matin. For the second and final year it was back to the Matba'at al-Adāb. In terms of distribution, the international and inter-imperial postage regimes in which *al-Ilm* operated could be so unreliable that the journal was at one point forced to ask subscribers which numbers they had actually received and to return duplicate copies.<sup>105</sup>

These problems were compounded by the fact that *al-Ilm* was distributed to a genuinely global readership. A standard print run was exported to places as diverse as Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, Beirut, Saida, Tarabulus al-Sham, Cairo, Alexandria, Tunis, Algeria, Istanbul, Iran, India, Singapore, Japan, Italy, France, Canada, New York and Argentina.<sup>106</sup> When it was being printed in Najaf by the Iranian owned and Kolkata-based Matba'at al-Habl al-Matin, *al-Ilm*

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<sup>102</sup> *Al-Ilm*, 1/1, March 1910, 49.

<sup>103</sup> *Al-Ilm*, 1/4, June 1910; October 1910, 1/8.

<sup>104</sup> *Al-Ilm*, 1/2-3, May 1910.

<sup>105</sup> *Al-Ilm*, 1/11, February 1911.

<sup>106</sup> Al-Jabiri, *Hibat al-Din al-Shahrastani*, 51.

even advertised a set price in different currencies, depending on the country or continent where it was being sold: meci diye for the Ottoman Empire, qirans for Iran, rupees for India and francs for the rest of the world.<sup>107</sup>

Despite these difficulties, the journal persisted for two years and even managed to employ a small staff. Al-Shahrastani's strong belief in the salience of his message was no doubt one reason for this but the self-sacrificial mission also came with its advantages. While it is unlikely that any substantial advertising revenues were received by the journal, the most regularly promoted work – or, indeed, thing of any kind – was al-Shahrastani's own debut monograph *al-Bi'a wa-l-Islam* (1910). Publicising this research through reproducing snippets of its findings or other material using a similar methodology was *al-Ilm*'s principal achievements. Irrespective of how lucrative it proved in the short to medium term, *al-Ilm* substantially raised al-Shahrastani's profile, transforming him into perhaps the most famous man of the Nahda from the Najafi milieu.

As much as *al-Ilm* was able to spread al-Shahrastani's reputation and ideas to an audience which far exceeded the bounds of his immediate locality, it was also a reflection of a number of regional influences. While al-Shahrastani's monograph had fused Shi'i Hadith and *tafsīr* with mainly Lebanese and orientalist texts on modern and historical astrology, his journal was a celebration of the influence of Egyptian press culture in Najaf. Since the mid-nineteenth century, literary-scientific journals had been mass produced in Egypt, providing a 'public arena for political debate' and a site for producing the 'intellectual, political and social conditions for modernity.'<sup>108</sup> Rida's *al-Manar*, an Islamic reformist journal originating in the late nineteenth century, was al-Shahrastani's journalist influence for *al-Ilm*; his articles imbibed within a Shi'i

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<sup>107</sup> See, for example, *al-Ilm*, 1/9 – 11, December 1910 – February 1911.

<sup>108</sup> Stephen Sheehi, 'Arabic Literary-Scientific Journals: Precedence for Globalization and the Creation of Modernity', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 25, no. 2 (2005): 439.

idiom the prognosis and cure for the malaise of Islamic and Eastern society which Rida and his principal influence, ‘Abduh, had forwarded.<sup>109</sup> Through the pre-war period, al-Shahrastani also published in *al-Manar*, on topics including a refutation of Babism, a religious dialogue with some Protestant missionaries in Baghdad and the definition of revolution (*al-thawra*).<sup>110</sup> Other influences and reference points included *al-Hilal* and *al-Muqtataf*, both published in Egypt after their editors were forced to leave Beirut.<sup>111</sup> Articles, statistic and news was appropriated from all three journals for critique and praise, a practice which illustrates how Najaf was being subsumed into a wider Arab community of knowledge despite its geographical marginality and linguistic diversity.

Another Arabic journal which deserves mention and was certainly an influence for *al-Ilm* was the ‘Amili journal, *al-Irfan*, established by al-Zayn in Saida in 1909. *Al-Irfan* promoted a similarly Islamic and global agenda to *al-Ilm*, which morphed into a concerted Arabism in the interwar period. The journal’s documentation of the history and culture of Jabal ‘Amil contributed to the development of a distinctly Lebanese Shi’i identity with a strong sense of place revolving around the urban centres of Saida, Tyre and Nabatiyeh.<sup>112</sup> Although al-Shahrastani never wrote for *al-Irfan*, several Najafis published in the journal prior to the First World War. *Al-Ilm* supported *al-Irfan* when it became embroiled in a heated debate with *al-Manar* over an anti-Shi’i position published by Rida.<sup>113</sup> So too did the two journals serve as the platform for debates about Shi’i practices in particular, such as the issue of moving corpses to be buried around the shrines of the Imams. In this regard, they constituted the first component

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<sup>109</sup> For ‘Abduh and Rida, see Malcolm H. Kerr, *Islamic Reform: The Political and Legal Theories of Muḥammad ‘Abduh and Rashid Rida* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966).

<sup>110</sup> Al-Bahadili, *al-Sayyid Hibat al-Din al-Shahrastani*, 57–58. See: *al-Manar*, 15, July 1912, 547.

<sup>111</sup> For material lifted from *al-Manar* and *al-Muqtataf*, see, for example, *al-Ilm*, 1/1, March 1910, 5, 7, 12

<sup>112</sup> For *al-Irfan*, see Tamara Chalabi, *The Shi’is of Jabal ‘Amil and the New Lebanon: Community and Nation-State, 1918 - 1943* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 169; Mervin, *Un Réformisme Chiite*, 154.

<sup>113</sup> *Al-Ilm*, 1/10, January 1911, 473.

of an ecology of reformist Arab Shi'i print culture, reflecting issues of relevance to a distinct Arab Shi'i public and pivoted around Iraq and Jabal 'Amil.<sup>114</sup>

While Cairo, Beirut and Saida were important regional sources of information and inspiration for *al-Ilm*, its local and global scope should not be diminished. *Al-Ilm* was a journal from and of Iraq: the placename '*Qutr* of Iraq' was printed on the title page of each issue; it was usually printed in Baghdad and distributed most widely and most cheaply within Iraq. Although al-Shahrastani's writings were expansive and ambitious, a predilection to solving the problems of Iraq and shaping Iraqi public opinion was a consistent theme. As the following chapter will illustrate, the corpse traffic, which al-Shahrastani campaigned to end, was a Shi'i issue, but also an Iraqi one, because it was across the sands of eastern Iraq where most of the bodies were transported and the associated health risks most potent.<sup>115</sup> When Jamil al-Zahawi caused outcry by publishing a tract against the veiling of women, al-Shahrastani was obliged to get involved because al-Zahawi was from Baghdad and the ensuing outcry might have local implications for Iraq.<sup>116</sup>

What is pertinent about *al-Ilm's* specific local context, is that Najafi society in particular, and Iraqi society generally, were so diverse: a locality defined by its globality, multilingualism and its interconnectedness with Iran, the Indian subcontinent and the other nodes that constituted the networks of trans-regional Shi'ism. The linguistic diversity of the Najafi print market reflected its trans-imperial connections and the multi-lingual cultural sphere of Iraq in general, complicating conventional Nahda narratives of a universal Arab cultural

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<sup>114</sup> Nakash and others have argued for the emergence of an Arab Shi'i identity in the modern period. Others have noted the trans-nationalism of this phenomenon, pivoted between Lebanon and Iraq. Rola El-Husseini and Mara A. Leichtman, 'Arab Shi'ism and the Shi'a of Lebanon: New Approaches to Modern History, Contemporary Politics, and Religion', *Die Welt Des Islams* 59, no. 3–4 (11 September 2019): 254–55; Yitzhak Nakash, 'The Nature of Shi'ism in Iraq', in *Ayatollahs, Sufis and Ideologues: State, Religion and Social Movements in Iraq*, ed. Fālih 'Abd al-Jabbār (London: Saqi, 2002), 23.

<sup>115</sup> See *al-Ilm*, 2/2, July 1911, 50–51; 2/3, August 1911, 113–114.

<sup>116</sup> For details of these examples, see the following chapter.

renaissance.<sup>117</sup> Najaf's ethno-linguistic diversity was such that the Ottoman government of Baghdad in 1885 reported that the city contained more people who spoke Persian than Arabic.<sup>118</sup> *Al-Ilm*'s three fellow Najafi journals and newspapers established following the constitutional revolution, *al-Ghari*, *al-Najaf*, and *Darat al-Najaf*, were all published in Persian. Meanwhile *al-Ilm*'s primary political inspiration was the Persian language newspaper *Habl al-Matin*, which al-Shahrastani later described as the 'voice of the liberal minded (*al-ahrār*) in the Eastern and Islamic world.'<sup>119</sup> Despite differences in language, the Arabic and Persian journals and newspapers constituted a united reformist media trend which complemented, rather than competed with, each other.<sup>120</sup> Evidence of this is that all four were platforms to promote constitutional reform, framed Khorasani as an important inspiration and, for a brief period, shared the same Najafi publishing house. Although *al-Ilm* only published in Arabic, al-Shahrastani could and did work in Persian and may have had some knowledge of Urdu. He regularly reviewed, advertised and praised the quality of journalism in the Persian titles, while at the same time reviewing journals published in Iran and Turkish language publications from Iraq, Istanbul and elsewhere, as well as Hindu and Urdu titles from India.<sup>121</sup> All of this provides enlightening insight into the linguistic proficiency of the Najafi intellectual elite as well as the trans-regional scope of their news and media outlook.

That al-Shahrastani's first action on closing down *al-Ilm* in 1912 was to immediately travel to India, where he incidentally visited the Kolkata offices of the Iranian newspaper *Habl al-Mutin* and its owner Jalal al-Din al-Husayni, who had set up the very same print house in

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<sup>117</sup> See, for example, Tarrazi's work, which includes al-Shahrastani within a cohort of Arab print pioneers and Hourani's, which ignores Shi'i thinkers altogether. Philippe De Tarrazi, *Ta'rikh al-Sihafa al-Arabiyya* (Beirut: al-Matba'at al-Adabiyya, 1913); Hourani, *Arabic Thought*.

<sup>118</sup> Al-Tal'afiri, *al-Najaf al-Ashraf fi al-Arshif al-'Uthmani*, 112.

<sup>119</sup> Al-Juburi, *al-Sayyid Muhammad Kadhim al-Yazdi*, 719.

<sup>120</sup> For the constitutionalism of the Persian titles publishing Najaf, see Farzaneh, *The Iranian Constitutional Revolution*, 131–33.

<sup>121</sup> For reviews or mentions of non-Arabic journals, see *al-Ilm*, 1/7, July 1910, 275; 1/11, February 1911, 528. For questions from Persian or Indian subscribers, see *al-Ilm*, 1/7, July 1910, 263; 2/4, September 1911, 156.

Najaf where *al-Ilm* was for a time published, is a perfect illustration of the tangible global interconnectedness which underpinned Najafi print. The office block which housed the *Habl al-Matin* also published a Hindi and Bangali version of the same newspaper, sharing editors and writers and filtering constitutional ideas across languages and borders.<sup>122</sup>

The comfortable integration of diverse ethnic and linguistic identities within the burgeoning Iraqi public sphere of the late Ottoman period is reflected in an article al-Shahrastani published in the Baghdadi journal *Lughat al-Arab* on his family history. The article noted that al-Shahrastaniyya were a ‘great family in Iraq’ which had first moved from Iran in the eighteenth century. It was clearly an effort to prove to the journal’s largely Baghdadi readership that al-Shahrastani belonged within their cultural milieu, and so evidences al-Shahrastani’s desire to engage with readers outside of the wholly Shi’i milieu of Najaf. Yet it did this by highlighting – rather than diminishing – the trans-imperial nature of his lineage.<sup>123</sup>

Within these trans-imperial, regional and local scales, *al-Ilm*’s monolingual presentation deserves further explanation. The point should again be stressed that *al-Ilm* did not print any articles, fatwas or anything else in any language except Arabic, translating all the material from foreign languages before publication. Although this seems natural from the perspective of today’s media landscape, it need not have been the case in a city as diverse as Najaf at the turn of the last century. Indeed, it was not uncommon for journals elsewhere in the Ottoman Empire – especially in Iraq – to be published in both Ottoman and Arabic, or Arabic, Aramaic and French.<sup>124</sup> Like al-Shahrastani, most Iraqi intellectuals were proficient in two or three languages: writing in Arabic, reading in Turkish and reciting Persian poetry.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> Hibat al-Din al-Shahrastani, *Rihlat al-Shahrastani ila al-Hind*, ed. Jawad Kadhim al-Baydani (Dubai: Dar Madarek al-Nashr, 2012), 103.

<sup>123</sup> *Lughat al-Arab*, 15, September 1912, 112 -114.

<sup>124</sup> For example, the first journal introduced in northern Iraq by Dominican missionaries was at times published in Arabic, French and Aramaic, using the same translated title: *The Crown of Roses*. Greene, ‘The Pioneers of Print’, 57.

<sup>125</sup> Greene, 56–57, 61.



*Al-Ilm*'s monolingualism can partly be explained by the enduring fragmentation of Najafi society in general, which had seen Persian and Arab elements in the city operating in distinct yet separate spaces, whether they be in the madrasa, the *majālis* or the marketplace, throughout the nineteenth century.<sup>126</sup> Yet the constitutional enthusiasm pertaining to both Iran and the Ottoman Empire which gripped the city, as well as the union between the CUP and the Scientific Society, could feasibly have overcome these longstanding social fissures. Why did the new class of constitutionalists, engaging in novel print genres for the first time and clearly harbouring ambitious political and social projects pertaining to citizens of multiple Empires who spoke multiple languages, not establish a genuinely diverse multilingual platform to play out these debates?

The issue of choice – economic, political and religious – sits at the heart of this question. When *al-Ilm* was established, there were only Persian language publications available in Najaf, so a monolingual Arabic space responded to a gap in the local print market, while it also appealed to a broader contingent of Arab readers outside of the city, specifically in Baghdad and Jabal 'Amil. However, the journal was not meant for a solely Arab readership, whether inside or outside Najaf. A reflection of the Ottoman postage regime more than a marketing strategy – but nonetheless indicative of where the journal was being most commonly read – a subscription to *al-Ilm* cost 20 qursh for residents of Baghdad and Najaf, or anyone within the Ottoman Vilayet of Baghdad. Al-Shahrastani was keen to keep subscription costs low for the remainder of the Ottoman Empire and Iran, in order to 'spread *al-Ilm* across our Islamic *waṭan*.'<sup>127</sup> Thus, when the Ottomans reduced the cost of postage abroad by a fifth, he thanked the government for allowing him to distribute the journal in Iran and the Ottoman Empire for only 25 qursh. Elsewhere, a cost of 30 qursh was levied.<sup>128</sup> In terms of distribution alone,

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<sup>126</sup> Litvak, *Shi'i Scholars of Nineteenth-Century Iraq*, 33; Kamal al-Din, *al-Najaf fi Ruba' Qarn*, 61–63.

<sup>127</sup> *Al-Ilm*, 1/1, March 1910, 49.

<sup>128</sup> *Al-Ilm*, 1/7, July 1910, 287.

therefore, al-Shahrastani elided the Ottoman Empire with Iran into a single Islamic '*waṭan*.' His most loyal readership may well have been from Ottoman Iraq, but his target audience was any Muslim from either Iran or the Ottoman Empire, irrespective of linguistic identity.

It is by acknowledging the Islamic credentials of the *al-Ilm* that we can deduce the primary impetus for its linguistic preference. Arabic's status as the language of Islamic culture and society needs no explanation. Its utilisation as the language of a journal committed to Islamic revival and reform, and heavily influenced by Islamic modernist ideas emanating from Egypt, was the most appropriate vehicle for the Islamic constitutional and anti-colonial agenda because the power of the Islamic message could only be properly understood within the idioms and grammars of Arabic. The expansive, holistic, essentially limitless spiritual message of the journal was captured in its title, *al-Ilm*, 'knowledge', 'science', 'learning', 'perception.' As much as the journal reflected emerging Iraqi and Arab notions of territoriality, therefore, it had truly universal ambitions – because *al-Ilm*, as the prophetic quotes which adorned the front of every issue instructed, 'was an imposition on every male and female Muslim' and should be 'sought even if it is in China.' It is indicative of the differentiation in ambition that the Persian language journals and newspapers published in Najaf at the same time chose titles which evoked their immediate locality: *al-Najaf*, *Darat al-Najaf* and *al-Ghari*, which is another word for Najaf.

The role of this religious print cultural preference had profound and potentially unintentional political repercussions as the twentieth century wore on. For al-Shahrastani and his peers, only Arabic had the grammatical and semantic resonance to capture the global Islamic movement. Combined with the emergence of an interconnected trans-national Arabic reading public, this decision reflected a process of political consciousness formation on the part of the Arab citizens of the late Ottoman Empire in its very early stages. As others have pointed out, it was the ideas, styles and presentations of self-styled Islamic reformist thinkers and

journalists writing in Arabic, such as Rida, ‘Abduh, ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Kawakibi and al-Shahrastani, which provided a substantial portion of the print cultural foundations for the imagination of Arab political identity, blossoming eventually into the ideological Arab nationalism of the interwar period.<sup>129</sup> Yet the choice made by al-Shahrastani to write in Arabic had not been made with this ethno-linguistic political community in mind. Instead, the ideology of the new generation of Najafis, as was the case with many Ottoman Arabs, was tied to an ambitious and anti-national Islamic political community undergirded by a forceful cultural bifurcation between East and West.

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<sup>129</sup> Both Dawn and Hourani, for example, recognised the importance of Islamic thinkers and Muslim elites for furthering Arabism as a cultural and political movement, as opposed to focusing mainly on the work of Lebanese Christians, which had dominated early work on the *Nahda*. Dawn, *From Ottomanism to Arabism*, 84–85; Hourani, *Arabic Thought*.

## *Chapter Two – Constitutionalism and the Political Community*

The structural changes to the Middle Eastern and Najafi public sphere in the last years of the Ottoman Empire brought ripples of constitutional and reformist enthusiasm to the city. This chapter aims to shed light on the political futures and ideologies envisioned by the Najafi men of the Nahda who responded positively to these changes. It delves deeper into the pages of Hibat al-Din al-Shahrastani's *al-Ilm*, the influential yet short lived loudhailer of reform in Najaf, paying particular attention to its conception of political community and its priorities for political, religious and social reform. The trans-imperial and trans-regional structures of the public sphere into which Najaf was plugged legitimised political imaginaries based on expansive pan-Islamic and anti-national conceptions of political community.<sup>1</sup> These were explicated in *al-Ilm* alongside a coherent constitutional discourse, which saw constitutional freedoms as the institutional bedrock of rational and Islamic truths with the unique capacity to divest the Islamic East of harmful innovations (*bida'*), social injustice and an impending colonial catastrophe.

Al-Shahrastani linked the possibility of religious *al-iṣlāḥ* with the proper functioning of the constitutional public sphere. His intention was not *only*, as some have implied, simply to fuse Islam and modern science.<sup>2</sup> His firm belief in 'rights' and 'freedoms' as a means of reform, as well as his commitment to 'dialogue' through the press, broadcasting, societies and conferences has been recognised by Iraqi historians.<sup>3</sup> This reflected al-Shahrastani's adoption of the waning but still largely hegemonic liberal discourse of the early twentieth century. Yet

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<sup>1</sup> For another analysis of *al-Ilm* in this context, see Bashkin, 'On Eastern Cultures.'

<sup>2</sup> Luizard, *La Formation de l'Irak Contemporain*, 293–94.

<sup>3</sup> Al-Bahadili, *al-Sayyid Hibat al-Din al-Shahrastani*, 75–77; al-Jabiri, *Hibat al-Din al-Shahrastani*, 59.

it also shows how al-Shahrastani's reformist work represented a wholly novel way of searching, deriving and ascertaining knowledge in the Islamic intellectual and legal tradition. This was one which broke with the traditional genres and epistemologies of *fiqh* and *'ilm*. In their place he adopted journalism. He envisioned that this genre would facilitate a (relatively) uninhibited critical discourse, incorporating political and social programmes, media exchanges, investigative journalism and the utilisation of an ever-expanding corpus of proofs and evidence. Implicit in his approach was acknowledgement that the final audience and arbiter of truth was no longer the community of learned mujtahids, but the educated reading public themselves. As Hamzah has argued for one of al-Shahrastani's famous contemporaries, Rashid Rida, understanding *al-iṣlāḥ* in this way – as a process of politicisation and epistemic transformation via journalism – is preferable to the Islamic revivalist paradigm with its associated binaries between tradition/conservatism and reform/modernity.<sup>4</sup>

The chapter analyses two issues where al-Shahrastani used the constitutional public sphere to further his reform agenda: namely, the issue of women's rights and his proposed abolition of the corpse transfer. It aims to transcend much of the scholarship to date which has obsessed over the question of *why* the ulama supported the constitution.<sup>5</sup> Such analysis tends to assess their ideas against a fixed corpus of principles, derivative of normative constitutional arrangements common to an idealised modernity project originating in western Europe.<sup>6</sup> Even if we are to accept that constitutional ideas derive their intellectual lineage from Europe – which many Islamic constitutionalist would assertively deny – Talal Asad has rightly cautioned that

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<sup>4</sup> Hamzah, 'From 'ilm to Ṣiḥāfa', 91, 103–6.

<sup>5</sup> Hamid Algar, *Religion and State in Iran, 1785-1906 the Role of the Ulama in the Qajar Period* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 253–54; Nikki R. Keddie, 'The Roots of the Ulama's Power in Modern Iran', *Studia Islamica*, no. 29 (1969): 50; Afary, *The Iranian Constitutional Revolution*, 32; 'Abdul-Hadi Hairi, 'Why Did the 'Ulama Participate in the Persian Constitutional Revolution of 1905-1909?', *Die Welt Des Islams* 17, no. 1/4 (1976): 132–33, 154; Farzaneh, *The Iranian Constitutional Revolution*, 4–5.

<sup>6</sup> Hairi does this, for example, when he comments that Na'ini had not 'grasped the theory' of the constitutional separation of powers, or wrote 'against the spirit of democratic constitutionalism' by asserting that electors should put religion above nation. 'Abdul-Hadi Hairi, *Shi'ism and Constitutionalism in Iran: A Study of the Role Played by the Persian Residents of Iraq in Iranian Politics* (Leiden: Brill, 1977), 196, 203, 212, 220, 234.

the idea ‘cultural borrowing must lead to total homogeneity and a loss of authenticity is clearly absurd.’ Instead, the ‘acquisition of new forms of language from the modern West – whether by forcible imposition, insidious insertion, or voluntary borrowing – is part of what makes the possibility of action in non-Western societies.’<sup>7</sup> The question, then, is not *why* the ulama supported the constitution, but *what* some of them – and especially those committed to notions of Islamic reform – thought the ‘new forms of [constitutional] language’ could achieve.

### *The Political Community*

Al-Shahrastani was 26 years old when he opened *al-Ilm* in 1910. Eleven years later, at the age of 37 – after dodging the death penalty for his role in the Iraqi revolution of 1920 – he was appointed the First Minister of Education in Iraq.<sup>8</sup> It is hard to believe from this biography that he was ever destined to be anything other than an Iraqi-Arab statesman and that his ambition and sense of belonging had ever been towards a different kind of political community. Yet within the furore of the Ottoman and Iranian constitutional revolutions, political futures distinct from either the ‘despotism’ of the pre-revolutionary Ottoman and Iranian States or European colonial subjugation were hotly debated by Najaf’s newly liberated literati.

Al-Shahrastani and his class – the self assertively modernist ulama, poets and men of the *majālis* entrenched within traditional networks of consociation, political action and religious education – are often interpreted as important conduits for the development of nationalist consciousness.<sup>9</sup> All this taxonomising achieves is the pigeonholing of intellectuals to ideas and positions which were often only facets of more complex political identities, pertaining to more ambitious and expansive notions of political community than the nationalist

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<sup>7</sup> Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 10.

<sup>8</sup> Al-Alawi, *Hibat al-Din al-Shahrastani*, 14.

<sup>9</sup> ‘Abd al-Sitar Shanin al-Janabi, *Ta’rikh al-Najaf al-Siyasi* (Baghdad: Maktabat al-Dhakira, 2010), 27; al-Jabiri, *Hibat al-Din al-Shahrastani*, 11.

frame permits. As scholars of nationalism in the Arab world have repeatedly illustrated, neither Arab nor Turkish political nationalism was a ‘viable force’ anywhere in the Ottoman Empire until after the First World War.<sup>10</sup> The trans-imperial, regional and bilingual networks into which Najaf was plugged meant its political thought in the years preceding the First World War was characterised by an astounding degree of flexibility. This was an age when the spectre of a world divided into nation states was dim; the distinction between the domestic and the foreign ambiguous and malleable; and the global public sphere an extant phenomenon where Muslim intellectuals especially were active members.<sup>11</sup> Imperial frames – accepted as legitimate – refused geo-political fencing because their ‘space was dynamic’, facilitating ‘continental, inter-regional, transoceanic and ultimately planetary political visions.’<sup>12</sup>

It was the not-quite-planetary politics of pan-Easternism and pan-Islamism which united thinkers from those imperial domains at risk of direct European annexation or exploitation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Often interpreted as mere rhetorical bluster or utopianism, this notion of legitimate political action and community has only recently been appreciated for what it was: ‘a significant force in modern world history’ and a ‘realist policy option’, whose Muslim adherents used to imagine ‘a more inclusive notion of global civilisation and international order, believing they should encounter no religious, cultural, or racial obstacles to being as civilised as the Europeans.’<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Kayalı, *Arabs and Young Turks*, 12–13, 51.

<sup>11</sup> Dietrich Jung, *Orientalists, Islamists and the Global Public Sphere: A Genealogy of the Modern Essentialist Image of Islam* (London: Equinox Publishing Ltd, 2011), 234; Johann Büssow, ‘Re-Imagining Islam in the Period of the First Modern Globalization: Muhammad ‘Abduh and His Theology of Unity’, in *A Global Middle East: Mobility, Materiality and Culture in the Modern Age, 1880 - 1940* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2015), 302; Kateman, *Muhammad ‘Abduh and His Interlocutors*.

<sup>12</sup> David Armitage, *Foundations of Modern International Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 10, 24; see also James L. Gelvin and Nile Green, ‘Introduction: Global Muslims in the Age of Steam and Print’, in *Global Muslims in the Age of Steam and Print* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 1–6.

<sup>13</sup> Cemil Aydin, *The Politics of Anti-Westernism in Asia: Visions of World Order in Pan-Islamic and Pan-Asian Thought*, Columbia Studies in International and Global History (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 3–7.

In pre-war Najaf, the pan-Islamic discourse was ubiquitous, and stretched to the highest echelons of the clerical hierarchy. The pro-constitutionalist ulama led the call because Russian intervention in Iran directly threatened their project, but the pan-Islamic project united both the pro- and anti- constitutional factions. Both Kadhimi Khorasani and Kadhimi Yazdi released fatwas following the Italian invasion of Libya in 1911 calling for political unity between the ‘two great Islamic kingdoms’ of the Ottoman Empire and Iran. One talked explicitly of the five sects of Islam, evoking the controversial notion that the Ja’faris should be recognised as an official *madhhab* within a new Islamic consensus.<sup>14</sup> These proclamations should not be reduced to political posturing of products of Ottoman persuasion.<sup>15</sup> They reflected a hegemonic discourse within Najafi intellectual and religious circles, spilling out of Muhammad Husayn Kashif al-Ghita’s first monograph and the pages of *al-Ilm*. The sentiment was so widespread that a British diplomatic report in 1910 noted that ‘pan-Islamism seems to be the sole topic of conversation in Persian political circles in Karbala and Najaf at the present time.’<sup>16</sup>

Al-Shahrastani fleshed out and rationalised the schematic guidance of the leading mujtahids by explicating what the call to unity meant in practice. The Ottoman state, he contended in a public sermon in 1911 possessed two great forces: ‘the internal power of its citizens’ and the ‘external power of Muslims languishing under foreign rule in various countries . . . such as India, Afghanistan, Egypt, Morocco and Sudan.’<sup>17</sup> A few months later, addressing more than two thousand Arabs, Persians, Indians and Turks in a packed ‘Amran Mosque for Eid al-Ghadir, he explained how these forces should be mobilised. The colonial plan of the ‘Franks’, he explained, was to ‘steal your land, take your money, change your

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<sup>14</sup> *Al-Ilm*, 1/10, January 1911, 434; 2/5, October 1911, 210.

<sup>15</sup> Nakash, *The Shi’is of Iraq*, 58; Werner Ende, ‘Iraq in World War I: The Turks, the Germans and the Shi’ite Mujtahids’ Call for Jihad’, in *Proceedings of the Ninth Congress of the Union Europeenne Des Arabisants et Islamisants*, ed. Rudolph Peters (Leiden: Brill, 1981), 57–58.

<sup>16</sup> Summary of Events in Turkish Iraq during March 1910, 17 May 1910, FO 371/1008/17336, TNA, 10.

<sup>17</sup> *Al-Ilm*, 2/6, November 1911, 243 – 244.



morals, substitute your sharia and divide your homelands (*awṭān*).’ Resistance required the prevention of further trade concessions and, if necessary, participating or funding armed jihad.<sup>18</sup> In both speeches, al-Shahrastani undermined the notion of territoriality as a basis for political community. Homelands were legitimate and meaningful, as is evident from the use of the plural (*awṭān*) to denote the Eastern states, but they were not fundamentally political, not a means of organising the world. That required something altogether more expansive which drew on the rich resources of global Islam.

Although Islam was of fundamental importance to al-Shahrastani’s global political project, he rejected the notion that the principal geo-political divide was between Islam and Christianity. For him the world was divided East to West. The ‘divergence between East and West’, he declared, ‘in terms of nature, morality, disposition and religion, is more apparent than the sun in the first quarter of the afternoon.’<sup>19</sup> This perception was based on the notion that Western degeneracy – characterised by its moral decay and colonial crimes – was a result, not of its Christian-ness, but its tendency towards atheism and materialism.<sup>20</sup> In a form of pre-colonial and non-national thinking which paraphrases Chatterjee’s oft quoted theory about the spiritual qualities of anti-colonial nationalism, al-Shahrastani framed the entire non-Western world, including its most successful colonial power – Japan, as the exclusive possessors of a superior inner spirituality, which would endow them with unique capacity to envision and enact a prosperous global future.<sup>21</sup>

While the role of Islam was therefore to act as a unifying ideology for the peoples of the East and humanity at large, al-Shahrastani’s vision was ecumenical. As one of his intellectual biographers argues, his ambition to spread Islam did not ‘did not clash with his

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<sup>18</sup> *Al-Ilm*, 2/9, April 1912, 400.

<sup>19</sup> *Al-Ilm*, 2/2, July 1911, 27.

<sup>20</sup> As can be seen in a number of critiques of the materialism of Salaam Mousa and Shibli Shumayyil in *al-Ilm*. See *al-Ilm*, 2/2, July 1911, 83.

<sup>21</sup> Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 6.

humanist aspirations, built on the basis of (love and peace) between all of humanity.’ In his youth especially he had recognised the ‘compatibility of the religions and the unity of the sects of humanity under the flag of *tawḥīd al-khāliq* (the oneness of the creator) and the fraternity of the created.’<sup>22</sup> He rejected the idea that Islamic unity and imperial or pan-Eastern unity were mutually exclusive, with the former ‘dividing elements of the Empire [through] religious fanaticism.’ What a ‘veteran in Eastern politics understands’, he elaborated, ‘is that the East will not experience a renaissance except with a religious call and the only supreme religion in the East is the religion of Islam.’<sup>23</sup> Arabs and non-Arabs, Sunnis, Shi’a, Christian, Jews and Hindus could all be incorporated within this ‘global Islamic movement.’<sup>24</sup>

There is a sense in the cluttered and urgent op-eds of *al-Ilm* that the world was at a crossroads between two potential futures. The first was defined by the seemingly unstoppable juggernaut of European colonialism, with its violence, exploitation and moral decay. Pertinently, this was a model which the journal associated with the nation state model and its associated ideologies of patriotism (*waṭaniyya*) and fanaticism (*ta’aṣṣub*). Both were juxtaposed with humanism (*insāniyya*) and framed as the antithesis of ‘progress, success in science, and the providing of social and individual freedom.’ All who ‘considers the conditions of society’, wrote one contributor, ‘come to the conclusion that *waṭaniyya* has harmed human society in these last centuries.’<sup>25</sup> Another elaborated that it was the very same ideology which explained the ‘assault of the English on India and the Egyptians and the assault of the Russians on Persian.’<sup>26</sup>

The second future evoked in *al-Ilm* was an alternative to the colonial modernity of nations and nationalism. It was not idealised or regressive, in the sense of aspiring to reaffirm

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<sup>22</sup> Al-Jabiri, *Hibat al-Din al-Shahrastani*, 59, 61. Note that the second quote is ḥḏirectly from al-Shahrastani.

<sup>23</sup> *Al-Ilm*, 2/6, November 1911, 244.

<sup>24</sup> *Al-Ilm*, 2/6, November 1911, 246.

<sup>25</sup> *Al-Ilm*, 2/5, October 1911, 203 – 205.

<sup>26</sup> *Al-Ilm*, 1/6, August 1910, 250 – 251.

Islamic sovereignties over a pre-modern Islamicate world, nor was it proto-Islamist in its aspiration to create a global Islamic state. It was instead a pragmatic and realist political vision based on cooperation between different Eastern *awṭān* – whose ‘differences did not require unfriendliness or the destruction of rights’ – and which did not even overtly demand any restructuring of the existing systems of state sovereignty, be they national, colonial or imperial.<sup>27</sup> If Russia and England were less expansionist and radical, al-Shahrastani was sure there would be for both countries ‘in the East, a beautiful future.’<sup>28</sup> This was partly the manifestation of a negotiating strategy. One of the principal tenets of pan-Islamic ideology was the veiled threat to the colonial powers: unless you back down, your colonised subjects – and especially the Muslims among them – will rise up against you.

But there was also something substantial in this future vision. It was for an ecumenical and cooperative world order, framed as a subaltern response to the heady internationalism and pacifistic activism in European civil society which characterised the two decades before the outbreak of the First World War. The ‘peace movement’ of late nineteenth and early twentieth century stemmed from a belief that the technological and scientific advancements of humanity could undermine the competitive and militaristic nationalism of the mid-century.<sup>29</sup> These found their institutional articulation in the Hague Conferences, convened in 1899 and 1907 respectively, where delegates from most of the world’s sovereign states – including the Ottoman Empire – gathered to discuss international legal regimes and the rules of war. The achievements of these conferences are often dismissed in light of the calamitous period of international conflict that followed. But they nevertheless represented nascent visions for international cooperation and legal arbitration that would define twentieth century international

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<sup>27</sup> *Al-Ilm*, 1/6, August 1910, 250 – 251.

<sup>28</sup> *Al-Ilm*, 1/10, January 1911, 436 – 440.

<sup>29</sup> Barbara W. Tuchman, *The Proud Tower: A Portrait of the World before the War* (New York: Macmillan, 1966), 234.

relations.<sup>30</sup> They also precipitated positive and enthusiastic responses from intellectuals and journalists across Europe.<sup>31</sup>

A jurist by training, al-Shahrastani was sympathetic to the visions of the ‘international lawyers’ whose ideas underpinned the Hague Conferences. Yet he was aware that the lawyers’ belief in the ‘positive unfolding of history’ towards a world where arbitration replaced war as the primary medium of international relations did not extend beyond the ‘so-called civilised world’ of Europe and North America.<sup>32</sup> In a short article penned less than a month after the Italian invasion of Libya, tucked in between his journal’s robust refutation of nationalism and fatwas calling for Islamic unity, al-Shahrastani addressed the Hague Conferences directly. Their premise and theory – to ‘serve the greater good and revive the rights of the weak’ – were commendable. But they were hampered by a lack of representation. Not a single Muslim nation had attended, according to al-Shahrastani, despite the fact the Muslims were in the ‘most wretched and unstable of situations.’ As such, the ‘results of the conference only bestowed benefits on Europe and apportioned no fortune for the Easterner except degradation, humiliation, unrest and losses.’ The Libyan crisis affirmed for al-Shahrastani that the deliberations of peace conferences were only smoke screens to facilitate colonial intrigues.<sup>33</sup> By calling the conferences out for their hypocrisy and Euro-centrism, al-Shahrastani foretold the dreary interpretations of the Hague Conferences which have marked their historiography to date. Al-Shahrastani’s position fused the idealistic internationalist discourse of the peace movement with pan-Islamic and pan-Eastern politics, articulating a rejection of the nineteenth

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<sup>30</sup> Maartje Abbenhuis, ‘Introduction: Unbridled Promise? The Hague’s Peace Conferences and Their Legacies’, in *War, Peace and International Order? The Legacies of the Hague Conference of 1899 and 1907*, ed. Maartje Abbenhuis, Christopher Barber, and Annalise R. Higgins (New York: Routledge, 2017), FN 12.

<sup>31</sup> Tuchman, *The Proud Tower*, 230.

<sup>32</sup> William Mulligan, ‘Justifying International Action: International Law, The Hague and Diplomacy before 1914’, in *War, Peace and International Order? The Legacies of the Hague Conference of 1899 and 1907*, ed. Maartje Abbenhuis, Christopher Barber, and Annalise R. Higgins (New York: Routledge, 2017), See footnote 6.

<sup>33</sup> *Al-Ilm*, October 1911, 2/5, 207 – 208.

century era of competitive nationalism which would remain marginal in Europe until well after the First World War.

These future visions and the expansive extraterritoriality of al-Shahrastani's conception of political community were ubiquitous in Najaf, as they were in the wider pre-War Middle East. The intellectual mind behind Shi'i constitutionalism, Muhammad Husayn Na'ini, wrote against 'modern theories of nationalism and patriotism.'<sup>34</sup> Al-Shahrastani's former teacher, al-Ghita, expressed his thesis in *al-Din wa-l-Islam* within the rubric of the East-West divide, noting that the 'Western spirit had infiltrated the body of the East and the body of the Islamic World and had emptied it of each noble sympathy, spiritual feeling, moral virtue, luxuriant majesty and self-independence.' With an eye of 'mutual friendship and impartiality', he encouraged all 'the people of the religions and millets' to unite in confrontation with the West.<sup>35</sup> Unlike *al-Ilm*, he spoke positively about the imperative to 'serve one's *umma* and one's millet' and he deplored those who 'alleged that patriotic zeal (*al-ghayra al-waṭaniyya*) and nationalist '*aṣabiyya* harmed human society.'<sup>36</sup> Yet his use of such terms was intended as a response to global leftist radicalism, not a call for the legitimacy of nation-states. For him, a positive sense of community belonging was indistinguishable from adherence to an Islamic moral system, which was first a foremost about putting society – the *umma* – over and above the self (*al-naḥs*) and its greed (*al-shahwa*).<sup>37</sup> He made an implicit distinction between positive '*aṣabiyya* – presumably for Islam, the East and its various imperial polities – and negative '*aṣabiyya* – associated with schism, disagreement and something he hoped – 'God forbid – [he] had not precipitated' in writing the book.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Hairi, *Shi'ism and Constitutionalism in Iran*, 203.

<sup>35</sup> Kashif al-Ghita, *al-Din wa-l-Islam*, 4, 26.

<sup>36</sup> Kashif al-Ghita, 10, 12.

<sup>37</sup> Kashif al-Ghita, 14.

<sup>38</sup> Kashif al-Ghita, 27.

When al-Shahrastani farmed out the answer to the principal problematic of the Arab Nahda to his global readership, the responses echoed these sentiments. The question – ‘why did we fall and with what will we rise’ – encompassed the territorial ambiguity of the reform movement. The ‘we’ in the question denoted ‘our *awṭān*’, with the conspicuously ambiguous ‘our’ denoting either Muslim or Eastern peoples. Although the substance of the replies – one of which came from as far as the Arab diaspora in Canada – varied, most agreed that decline stemmed from a lack of education, the abandonment of religion and the fragmentation of the *umma*. *Awṭān* were not derided, but the invocation of Islamic unity and Eastern solidarity as a conduit for creating true civilisation and prosperity permeated each response.<sup>39</sup> Even ‘Ali al-Sharqi, who later tried to prove that he had been an all-out Arab nationalist before the First World War, adopted the supranational Eastern solidarity script in his first and only article for *al-Ilm*.<sup>40</sup> Titled the ‘The Barbarism of the West and the Glory of the East’, it referenced a number of Eastern civilisational precedents to challenge Western hegemony, commenting that all such places were the ‘cradle of civilisation and the abode of philosophy, bound together by the Mediterranean, the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean.’<sup>41</sup> Opinions about politics and identity shared between the writers and consumers of *al-Ilm*, just like the institutional and ideational networks that produced them, were far more expansive and ambitious than any methodological nationalist framework can accommodate.

### *The Meaning, Scope and Potential of the Constitutional Public Sphere*

The trans-imperial and pan-Islamic notions of political community which held sway in Najaf were complemented by a period of sustained constitutional enthusiasm. Support and

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<sup>39</sup> See *al-Ilm*, 1/2-3, May 1910, 131; 1/4, June 1910, 147; 1/5, July 1910, 236; 1/8, October 1910, 374; 1/11, February 1911, 504.

<sup>40</sup> For al-Sharqi’s Arabism see al-Khalili, *Hakadha Araftuhum*, Vol. 2, 58; al-Sharqi himself accepted that there were some bonds of Eastern and Islamic identity which tied the Arabs to the Turks. See al-Sharqi, *al-Ahlam*, 133.

<sup>41</sup> *Al-Ilm*, 2/9, April 1912, 398 – 399.

opposition for constitutional reform stemmed from divergent interpretations of what kind of political system would most benefit the *umma*. Khorasani, Mazandarani and Na'ini believed that constitutional ideas were all enshrined in the Sharia. In his comprehensive elaboration of an Islamic constitutional system, Na'ini compared despotism with a form of slavery. He argued that, as humans should be enslaved only to God, despotic rule was equivalent to polytheism.<sup>42</sup> The pro-constitutionalist ulama recognised the need to enshrine religious principles and checks and balances in the parliamentary process, favouring a moderate approach (*al-ʾitidāliyyīn*) to constitutional reform.<sup>43</sup> Their support was as much pragmatic as it was ideological: they saw some kind of constitutional system as expedient for eradicating unjust and tyrannical governance. The opponents of the constitution used similar arguments to the supporters, although they came to radically different conclusions.<sup>44</sup> Yazdi believed that the inevitable conflict that would develop between the *umma* and the ruler in a constitutional system would engender bloodshed.<sup>45</sup> Al-Ghita noted that he thought the overarching principles of the constitution were positive but thought that their practical application would lead to a 'worse despotism and a miserable dictatorship.' He thought the *umma* was more in need of 'true refinement' through an Islamic revival than constitutional law.<sup>46</sup> While the pro-constitutionalists accused Yazdi of falling prey to colonial intrigues, the opponents saw the constitution as a means for 'foreign fingers' to work their way into the Islamic world.<sup>47</sup>

The parity in the arguments of the supporters and opponents was mirrored in their responses to the practical implications of constitutional rule. It was not only those in favour

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<sup>42</sup> Hairi, *Shi'ism and Constitutionalism in Iran*, 153, 156–57, 168–69.

<sup>43</sup> See Events in Turkish Iraq, June 1910, 30 August 1910, FO 371/1008/31666, TNA, 11 – 12; Events in Turkish Iraq, July 1910, 27 September 1910, FO 371/1008/35086, TNA, 14. Khorasani actually refused to support 'a series of laws that completely undermined the authority of the ulama.' Afary, *The Iranian Constitutional Revolution*, 102.

<sup>44</sup> This can also be seen in a comparison of Na'ini and Shaykh Fazl Allah, the principal opponent of the constitution among the ulama in Iran. See Hairi, *Shi'ism and Constitutionalism in Iran*, 234.

<sup>45</sup> Al-Juburi, *al-Sayyid Muhammad Kadhīm al-Yazdi*, 168.

<sup>46</sup> Kashif al-Ghita, *'Uqud Hayati*, 83.

<sup>47</sup> Kashif al-Ghita, 83; al-Juburi, *al-Sayyid Muhammad Kadhīm al-Yazdi*, 720.

who took advantage of the new freedoms of expression and publication. When the Ottoman governor in Baghdad tried to cajole al-Ghita and Yazdi into releasing a statement in favour of the Ottoman constitution, they argued for their constitutional right to remain silent. ‘What is the freedom which you are upholding and calling for?’ al-Ghita provocatively asked: ‘the Ottoman state has become constitutional . . . it is not for you to pressure us into intervening in what we do not understand.’<sup>48</sup> When the constitutional ‘announcement of freedom’ led to the publication of books and pamphlets by the likes of Salama Moussa, Shibli Shumayyil and other protestant missionaries promoting either Christianity or materialism, al-Ghita’s response was not to double down on his opposition. He instead chose to appropriate the new freedoms himself, publishing *al-Din wa-l-Islam* and embarking on a media exchange with Lebanese Nahdawis such as Amin al-Rayhani, Jurji Zaydan and Anastas Marie al-Karmili.<sup>49</sup> Al-Ghita was on the other side of al-Shahrastani in the debates about the promulgation of the constitutions in practice. Yet in his willingness to enter the constitutional public sphere and in his overall objectives for doing so, he shared many of al-Shahrastani’s priorities.

The main difference between al-Ghita and al-Shahrastani was the latter’s belief in the liberatory potential of the public sphere itself. Al-Ghita appears to have seen publishing and writing as defensive acts aimed at mitigating the potential evils of the constitutional era. While he clearly enjoyed writing and publishing, he was nostalgic for a past when the Najafi *hawza* enjoyed the ‘purity’ and ‘serenity’ of its isolation from worldly developments.<sup>50</sup> Al-Shahrastani, on the other hand, saw the freedoms of the constitution as an absolute good which would engender a (relatively) uninhibited public debate in which, he believed, opinions and positions sanctified by Islamic rulings would reign supreme. Modern science, facilitated by free critical enquiry and dissemination of information across society, would prove the veracity

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<sup>48</sup> Kashif al-Ghita, *‘Uqud Hayati*, 89.

<sup>49</sup> Kashif al-Ghita, 89–90; Machlis, ‘A Shi’a Debate on Arabism’, 100.

<sup>50</sup> Kashif al-Ghita, *‘Uqud Hayati*, 82.



of the Islamic system. A condition of the functioning of the constitutional public sphere was therefore that the barriers prohibiting freedom of expression in the pre-constitutional period be dismantled. Key among these was the accusation of *takfīr*. In this regard, al-Shahrastani fleshed out considerably Na'ini's schematic interpretation of 'freedom of expression.' While the latter simply argued that it was synonymous with the Islamic obligations for writers and orators to enlighten the ignorant, al-Shahrastani saw it as a knowledge producing process in itself.<sup>51</sup>

Al-Shahrastani's conception of the meaning of constitutionalism derived its internal logic from the principal metanarrative of the Arab Nahda. It was predicated on the notion of decline (*al-inḥiṭāʾ*) followed by renaissance (*al-nahḍa*). Such a nomenclature of reform owed its coherence to a colonially prescribed conception of progress more than it was an accurate reflection of the historical arc of Arab intellectual thought.<sup>52</sup> *Al-Ilm* followed Na'ini's theory of constitutionalism by linking the era of despotism (*al-istibdād*) with the overall decline of the Islamic world.<sup>53</sup> This era had witnessed authoritarian political authority working in union with populist religious and political movements and, later, European colonialism to extinguish progressive and productive intellectual pursuits. This was an arrangement in which public opinion was either manipulated by despotic authority or shaped by whims and desires, or both. In the meantime, the ulama refrained from criticism and followed the public.<sup>54</sup> According to al-Shahrastani, this had been the norm for hundreds of years until the recent political renaissance.

In locating a former golden age of intellectual flourishing, al-Shahrastani did not follow the same line as his Sunni contemporaries from elsewhere in the Middle East by focusing on the Abbasids. Instead, he constructed a distinctly Shi'i metanarrative of intellectual

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<sup>51</sup> Hairi, *Shi'ism and Constitutionalism in Iran*, 219.

<sup>52</sup> Sheehi, *Foundations of Modern Arab Identity*, 25; 'Abdulrazzak Patel, *The Arab Nahdah: The Making of the Intellectual and Humanist Movement* (Edinburgh: University Press., 2013), 3.

<sup>53</sup> Hairi, *Shi'ism and Constitutionalism in Iran*, 173.

<sup>54</sup> *Al-Ilm*, 2/6, November 1911, 266.

development, starting with the Buyid period. The institutional and cultural arrangements of this era, he contended, had enabled the ‘divine ulama’ of the Shi’a to criticise, think and innovate freely, to such an extent that they had ‘waded deep into the branches of the religion and its *uṣūl*.’ Their ‘freedom of speech, thought and moral bravery’ far exceeded ‘later generations of thinkers’ as they diligently refuted ‘things from the religion which came to it from popular practices and made clear to the people what was incorrect *bida*’ or superstitions and what pertains to knowledge.’ Such figures included al-Shaykh al-Mufid and al-Sayyid al-Murtada.<sup>55</sup> In the recent period, the intellectual attributes of these thinkers had been resuscitated by Khorasani and, by implication, al-Shahrastani himself. Through constructing this genealogy, al-Shahrastani inserted himself as the natural and legitimate endpoint in a chain of reformers stretching back to the early flourishing of the Ja’fari *madhhab*.<sup>56</sup> The contemporary predicament was found in the fact that the reformers were a minority, which meant the post-revolutionary public sphere was dominated by secular thinkers. Al-Shahrastani lamented the fact that, since the revolution, so few ulama had embraced journalism.<sup>57</sup>

By linking the notions of freedom of expression and thought to the classical ulama and their efforts to expel innovations from the faith, al-Shahrastani framed the constitutional freedoms as a continuation of Islamic *fiqh* and philosophical thought, with the capacity to facilitate the resuscitation of a reformed Islamic orthodoxy, devoid of the social and political defects which had engendered decline. Contrary to what Sabrina Mervin suggests, this does not mean that he rejected ‘Western philosophical concepts’ while accepting scientific ‘discoveries’; but rather that his ideas can and should be seen as a Shi’i articulation of a globally hegemonic liberal discourse.<sup>58</sup> The absence of a punitive *takfīr* culture was one reason for the

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<sup>55</sup> *Al-Ilm*, 1/5, August 1910, 197; 2/6, November, 1911, 266. Second article has reference to ‘our golden age’ (*‘aṣrnā al-zāhir*)

<sup>56</sup> Rida did similarly in his journal *al-Manar*. See Hamzah, ‘From ‘ilm to Ṣiḥāfa’, 93.

<sup>57</sup> *Al-Ilm*, 2/2, July 1911, 61.

<sup>58</sup> Mervin, *Un Réformisme Chiite*, 200.

possibility of intellectual progress during the Buyid period and needed to be revived, as well as the capacity of the ulama to think independently and lead public opinion, rather than being led by it. Al-Shahrastani argued that the accusation of *takfīr* contradicted the prophetic and Quranic injunctions against accusing anyone of disbelief if they believed in the *shahāda*, or the oneness and unity of God. He framed the accusation of *takfīr* as one of the most damaging aspects of the ‘era of despotism’ (*‘aṣr al-istibdād*).<sup>59</sup> This necessarily meant that he had to account for the theoretical expansion of the limits of who belonged to the Islamic community. It was al-Shahrastani’s contention that, given the parity of Islamic principles with modern science, almost all rationalist thinkers leaving Christianity should naturally adopt Islam, ‘like a baby to its mother’s milk.’<sup>60</sup>

According to al-Shahrastani’s discourse, Islamic sources would serve as an *a priori* framework for interpreting the world, within a highly flexible nexus of empirical and scientific investigation. This is not to say that al-Shahrastani’s reasoning was limited, incomplete or incoherent. Such arguments, used to diminish the potential of reformist thought in the non-Western world, preclude the possibility of modernity outside of a hegemonic Western narrative of secularisation. Instead, understanding al-Shahrastani’s ideas about freedom of expression and thought requires accepting the possibility of distinct and alternative ‘ways of reasoning characteristic of given traditions.’<sup>61</sup> Such a way of reasoning is both ‘limited’ and ‘limiting’, in that there ‘are certain choices it will not allow’ and ‘certain things it will not criticise.’ Yet similar limitations, based on different criteria (the interests of the state; the interests of the bourgeoisie; the gender of the subject, for example) were equally limiting in the ostensibly liberal public sphere of nineteenth and early twentieth century Europe.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> *Al-Ilm*, 1/5, August 1910, 194 - 195.

<sup>60</sup> *Al-Ilm*, 1/1, March 1910, 16.

<sup>61</sup> Asad, *Genealogies of Religion*, 84.

<sup>62</sup> Asad, 97.

The limits and potential of the critical discourse proposed by al-Shahrastani's *al-Ilm* were put to the test when the journal became involved of a controversy emanating from Egypt concerning the Baghdadi intellectual, Sidqi al-Zahawi, over the perennially controversial issue of women's rights. Al-Zahawi was a poet, teacher, official and CUP activist who pursued a colourful career as a self-assertively modern 'public intellectual' in the late Ottoman world.<sup>63</sup> In August 1910, while he was employed as a teacher at the School of Law in Baghdad, he sent one of his most inflammatory and controversial articles, titled 'Woman, the defence of them – a reformist voice from Iraq', for publication in the Egyptian nationalist newspaper *al-Mu'ayyad*. The article, based on his personal experience, argued that male privilege was unjustified, partly because their physical strength was surpassed by animals while their intelligence was highly varied. He called for the removal of the veil, changes to inheritance laws, the abolition of polygamy, the scrapping of the three times *ṭalāq* ruling and the imposition of unilateral divorce for women.

For several decades, the Middle East – particularly Egypt – had been embroiled in a protracted debate about the role of women in society. The contents of this debate, and especially the pamphlet of the prominent Egyptian reformer, Qasim Amin, engendered scholarly discord and social strife. Amin was initially described as one of the first Egyptian feminists for his promotion of unveiling and a more public facing female role, although his reluctance to concede any political rights to women has since been used to diminish such a reputation.<sup>64</sup> Amin's arguments have been analysed within a broader critique of liberal feminism. His 'new women' was as much a product of an internalised colonial discourse associating veiling with

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<sup>63</sup> Dina Khoury, 'Looking for the Modern: A Biography of an Iraqi Modernist', in *Auto/Biography and the Construction of Identity and Community in the Middle East*, ed. Mary Ann Fay (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 113–14.

<sup>64</sup> Hourani, *Arabic Thought*, 166.

Islamic backwardness as it was the first step on the road to emancipation.<sup>65</sup> Class interests and anxieties about moral decay through Westernisation were significant factors driving opposition to his reforms.<sup>66</sup> As such, it is largely meaningless to denote Amin as liberal or feminist, or his opponents as Islamic traditionalists. Such categories were, more often than not, reflective of colonial taxonomies that do not reflect the argumentation of the participants themselves.<sup>67</sup> As we will see in the case of al-Shahrastani, it was not uncommon for highly ‘modern’ forms of arguments to be deployed to support ostensibly ‘traditionalist’ positions.

Al-Zahawi’s intervention was directly influenced by several of Amin’s ideas. Yet unlike Amin, al-Zahawi was more radical and did not even attempt to ground his argument within an Islamic framework. For example, he argued that the veil prevented men from trusting women because they could not be easily identified and advocated for unilateral female divorce without giving any Islamic rationale. Amin, on the other hand, had related the issue of the veil to the personal refinement of women and, with that, the development of the *umma*.<sup>68</sup> He had also been less provocative in calling for changes to divorce law, recognising that women did have recourse to divorce within Islamic law but preferring to leave the issue of reform to the discretion of the Qadi.<sup>69</sup> This, combined with the fact the article was circulated in Baghdad, which was less accustomed to the boisterous debates about gender roles common to the Egyptian public sphere, meant that al-Zahawi found himself at the centre of a cultural and political scandal. His house was attacked, and, at the behest of some of the Baghdadi ulama, the Wali of Baghdad dismissed him from his teaching job at the school of law.

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<sup>65</sup> Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1993), 166; Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, 231–35; Mona L Russell, *Creating the New Egyptian Woman: Consumerism, Education, and National Identity, 1863-1922* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 8.

<sup>66</sup> Juan Ricardo Cole, ‘Feminism, Class, and Islam in Turn-of-the-Century Egypt’, *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 13, no. 4 (1981): 391.

<sup>67</sup> Omar, ‘Arabic Thought in the Liberal Cage’, 31.

<sup>68</sup> Mahir Hasan Fahmi, *al-Zahawi* (Cairo: al-Mu’assasa al-Misriyya al-’amma lil-Ta’lif wa-l-Anbar wa-l-Nashr, 1965), 109–10.

<sup>69</sup> Fahmi, 111.

Press responses to al-Zahawi's articles abound in Egypt and Iraq.<sup>70</sup> Criticism was framed within a constitutional discourse and transcended the supposition that the offending article was contrary to the Sharia. In December 1910, *al-Manar*, whose editor Rida had been broadly supportive of Amin's proposals, accused al-Zahawi of apostasy (*al-ridda*). The accusation was caveated by the assertion that the journal respected 'freedom of thinking.' Al-Zahawi's article did not fit this category because it provided neither religious nor scientific proofs for its arguments. There was consequently consensus among the ulama that what al-Zahawi had written was wrong. Rida's journal went so far as to suggest that the article was offensive because the constitutional system was in place, not in spite of it. Because it 'demurred and mocked the religion of the government', which is the basis of the Ottoman constitution, its publication was unconstitutional. Al-Zahawi needed to be punished for publishing it because he was a teacher at the law school, but those pursuing arbitrary violence against him were in error. Conceived in this sense, constitutionalism and the rule of law did not imply protection for writers from state persecution. Instead, it meant applying universal high standards in public life. Had al-Zahawi's article been properly argued, with empirical or religious evidence, it would have been acceptable to Rida. As it was not, it was for the constitutional state – and not the maddening crowd – to discipline the offending author.<sup>71</sup>

The public outcry was so intense that al-Zahawi decided to wash his hands of the incident altogether, penning a letter to the governor of Baghdad, Nazim Pasha, denying that he has written the article in the first place. Although it later transpired that he almost certainly had written the piece, the editor of *al-Mu'ayyad* confirmed that the handwriting on the manuscript version of the article did not match al-Zahawi's, no doubt out of sympathy for the plight of his beleaguered friend.<sup>72</sup> Al-Zahawi's appeal emphasised the constitutional protections he thought

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<sup>70</sup> Fahmi, 113.

<sup>71</sup> *Al-Manar*, 13, December 1910, 341.

<sup>72</sup> Fahmi, *al-Zahawi*, 117–18. *Al-Manar*, 13, December 1910, 341.

should have been afforded him. How could it be, he wrote, that in Baghdad, ‘this city under the rule of the constitution and your protective justice’, one of the shaykhs of religion is permitted to ignite a ‘*fitna*’ against me for a ‘social article published with my signature in *al-Mu’ayyad* . . . irrespective of the fact of its being weak interrogative vagaries (*shubahāt istifhāmiyya*) which are of no consequence.’<sup>73</sup> A slightly edited version of the response was dispatched to *al-Ilm* in October 1910, in which al-Zahawi reframed his defence to reflect al-Shahrastani’s anti-*takfīr* discourse. He equated the extreme ones (*al-muta’aṣṣibūn*) who had declared *takfīr* against him with those ‘ignorant people’ who consider religion a fragile ‘vial’, when in fact it is ‘more anchored than mountains.’<sup>74</sup>

That al-Zahawi chose to send of copy of the letter to Najaf is illustrative of how a nascent Iraqi public sphere was emerging in the twilight days of the Ottoman Empire, pivoted around Baghdad and the cities of the Tigris and the Euphrates, as well as the regional scope of the print market. This was a Sunni Baghdadi poet and law professor from a Kurdish family aiming to clear his name in a Shi’i Holy city after publishing an offensive article in an Egyptian newspaper which had precipitated a moral panic across Iraq and Egypt.

The al-Zahawi affair created a predicament for al-Shahrastani. How did this affront to Islamic moral and *fiqhī* traditions fit in with his ideas about the free functioning of the constitutional public sphere? He could not sit idly by and allow al-Zahawi’s views to go unchallenged, but nor could he declare with good consciousness that they should be banned as reprehensible. The difficulty al-Shahrastani experienced in approaching these issues can partly be seen in the delay between the initial publication of al-Zahawi’s article and *al-Ilm*’s response. Al-Zahawi’s decision to purport not to have written the article made it easier for al-Shahrastani

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<sup>73</sup> Fahmi, 112.

<sup>74</sup> *Al-Ilm*, 1/9, December 1910, 417.

to weigh in without contradicting any of his principles. He was sympathetic to al-Zahawi's defence but, ultimately, this was not the most important element in the affair.

Al-Shahrastani declared al-Zahawi's original article heretical and noted that 'thousands of newspaper' and 'thousands of ulama' had responded to it with a 'thousand pieces of evidence showing the falsity of its contents.'<sup>75</sup> The intended result of all this had been to show the corruption of the article to the people and to illustrate that Islam afforded the best protection to the rights of women. The fact that al-Zahawi was now 'recognising the corruption of what the people related to him' and expressed his belief that the Sharia is the most righteous system for the condition of women only served to strengthen this result, for 'the veracity of the Sharia is stronger from the recognition of one who we alleged was against it.'<sup>76</sup> Al-Shahrastani then linked the issue to his previous writings on *takfīr*, arguing that the accusation of *takfīr* against a Muslim was 'more severe than condemning his actions and his morality.' According to *al-Ilm* there was no justification for declaring *takfīr* against al-Zahawi, and the absurdity of the allegation was buttressed by the doubt surrounding the identity of the author. The article concluded by urging al-Zahawi to put his talents in the service of Islam and to raise a complaint against the newspaper which had published something 'offensive to him and to the religion.'<sup>77</sup>

For all the commotion precipitated by the al-Zahawi affair, al-Shahrastani managed to use it as evidence of the proper functioning of the constitutional public sphere. Like the editor of *al-Manar*, he believed that what al-Zahawi had written was outside the limits of legitimate critical discourse. He explicitly expressed his desire that nothing of its sort be published again. But he was also quick to assert that the violent sanctions against al-Zahawi were equally unacceptable. The deluge of refutations of the offending article had been so intense that the

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<sup>75</sup> *Al-Ilm*, 1/9, December 1910, 417.

<sup>76</sup> *Al-Ilm*, 1/9, December 1910, 418.

<sup>77</sup> *Al-Ilm*, 1/9, December 1910, 419.



desired result – of reiterating to the public that Islamic rulings were the most rational and appropriate – had been achieved. All this was possible without resorting to the punitive and, according to al-Shahrastani, wholly un-Islamic notion of declaring *takfīr*. The freedoms of thought and expression afforded by the constitutional public sphere had therefore shown themselves robust and an Islamic truth revealed through a critical media exchange.

The reasons al-Shahrastani thought that al-Zahawi's article was unacceptable was not because he disagreed with it, but because he believed it transcended the bounds of acceptable criticism. Positions such as this, coming from Muslim thinkers, can sometimes be interpreted as evidence of an inauthentic liberalism. Islamic liberalism has variously been defined as a series of topical positions, with the issue of women's rights key among them.<sup>78</sup> The problem with this approach is that it elides liberal values with an imprecise amalgamation of Western principles on contemporary social and political issues without considering actual historical context. In other words, it assumes liberal principles of freedom of expression, rights and gender equality to be fixed and synonymous with linear narratives of secularisation and female emancipation. Then it questions the extent to which thinkers – usual non-Western – live up to these principles. Should al-Shahrastani's seemingly intransigent stance on women's rights debar him from categorisation as a liberal thinker? A brief look at the modes of argumentation he employed in his critical appraisal of al-Zahawi sheds important light on these questions.

In forwarding a critical refutation of the article, *al-Ilm* sought to show that it offended modern scientific ideas in equal measure to Islamic practices. Al-Shahrastani's intention was to highlight how modern science and Islamic *fiqh* represented a universal consensus. He commissioned an *'alim* from Karbala to compose a point-by-point refutation of al-Zahawi, stressing how the inequalities afforded to women in *fiqh* stemmed from their overly emotional

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<sup>78</sup> Omar, 'Arabic Thought in the Liberal Cage', 31.

temperament, weak sentiments and substandard intelligence.<sup>79</sup> Al-Shahrastani verified these arguments by digging out an old copy of *al-Muqtataf* from 1886 which contained a transcribed speech by the Lebanese Christian – and materialist – Shumayyil on the superior rationality of men over women. Drawing liberally from the speech, al-Shahrastani used it to vindicate the arguments against al-Zahawi. The result was an article in *al-Ilm* which mentioned a plethora of European anthropologists, psychologists and eugenicists, such as the French physician Pierre Paul Bocca and even Charles Darwin. The article contained extensive discussion of debunked pseudoscientific practices such as craniology.<sup>80</sup>

There were parallels here between al-Shahrastani's article and that of Amin's ten years earlier. Yet while Amin used European technological and scientific superiority over Egypt as evidence that elements of European gender norms – such as unveiling and the end of seclusion – were a prerequisite for national progress, al-Shahrastani used European scientific evidence to prove that European gender norms were inappropriate for Islam, in particular, and the East, in general.<sup>81</sup> Islam accordingly represented the practical realisation of a social system based on a universal scientific and rational consensus. This argument was 'metaphysical', as much as it was scientific or 'illiberal' because it represented al-Shahrastani's efforts to demonstrate that certain cultural practices were in accordance with 'man's [or women's] true nature and his [or her] inevitable tendencies.' It was about undermining the representation of Islamic women as repressed and a physical manifestation of Islam's inferior socio-cultural composition and illustrating that their role according to Islamic norms was superior to their experience in Western societies.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> *Al-Ilm*, 1/8, November 1910, 356 – 373; 1/9, December 1910, 394 – 415.

<sup>80</sup> *Al-Ilm*, 1/11, February 1911, 481 – 482, 486, 490,

<sup>81</sup> Cole, 'Feminism, Class and Islam', 395.

<sup>82</sup> Omar, 'Arabic Thought in the Liberal Cage', 31, 42.

Al-Shahrastani's utilisation of Shumayyil's article and the scientific (un)truisms it contained is enlightening in several respects. First, it illustrates the complicated and often unpredictable application of knowledge in the early twentieth century Middle Eastern public sphere. Here was the speech of a Lebanese Christian materialist – with whom al-Shahrastani would have agreed with on almost nothing – articulating a European scientific consensus in the late nineteenth century on the inferior intellectual and temperamental capacities of women, being used by an Iraqi Shi'i *'alim* to buttress his defence of Islamic patriarchal norms. As Elshakry has pointed out, *al-Muqtataf* was often a link in the chain between European and Arab scientific thought, but rarely the 'final link.'<sup>83</sup> Instead, it filtered material through to other journals and thinkers, nurturing their ideas and precipitating 'the possibility of action in non-Western societies.'

Al-Shahrastani's argumentation also illustrates the difficulties and dangers of assessing the liberal-ness of Islamic political thought. Al-Shahrastani's position on the topical issue of women's rights did not result from a tendency towards 'conservatism' – a literalist or exclusive reliance on Islamic scripture. Instead, it stemmed from a wide engagement with Islamic *fiqh* sources and European pseudoscientific ideas, intended to establish proofs for culturally constructed ideas about female intellectual and physical inferiority. Rather than an advocate of Islamic traditionalism or Islamic moralism in contradistinction to Western science and values, al-Shahrastani sought to locate himself – and, as such, should be located – within a waning global consensus of early twentieth century thinkers, committed to scientific methods of enquiry to buttress socio-cultural assumptions about race and gender. This was a consensus that was beginning to lose credibility (Alice Lee published research refuting the use of craniology to distinguish intelligence between different genders in 1902) but it nevertheless

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<sup>83</sup> Elshakry, *Reading Darwin in Arabic*, 5.

came while such ideas were the norm in European institutions.<sup>84</sup> All this attests to the global interconnectedness of the scientific rationale for misogyny, the empirical evidence for which could be called upon to suit any number of efforts to maintain gender difference and male privilege across cultural traditions.

The point here is not that al-Shahrastani should be seen as liberal because he drew from Western scientific ideas. One would be hard pressed to define much of the pseudoscientific literature he referenced as liberal. Instead, it is to stress that there was not anything fundamentally illiberal about his conception of legitimate public discourse when compared with its counterpart in Europe or elsewhere in the globe at the same time. In both contexts, the coordinates of truth were being revolutionised by a new and rapid exposure to scientific advancements which were challenging patriarchal social norms. In neither context did rational critical debate necessarily engender emancipatory outcomes, especially when issues of gender were concerned. What is most remarkable is how the ostensibly liberal principles of freedom of thought, expression and exchange within a constitutional public sphere protected by the rule of law, could incorporate, so easily and effortlessly, ‘patriarchal assumptions and institutions’, irrespective of historical or geographical context.<sup>85</sup>

### *Reforming Shi’i Tradition for the Modern Age*

Not long after the conclusion of the al-Zahawi affair, it was al-Shahrastani’s turn to cause a regional media scandal. Its catalyst was the Shi’i practice of moving dead bodies for burial around the shrines of the Imams. Al-Shahrastani’s decision to critique this practice, and – in effect – attempt to outlaw it, reflected his broader pan-Islamic and pan-Eastern political

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<sup>84</sup> Cynthia Russett, *Sexual Science: The Victorian Construction of Womanhood* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1991), 165–66.

<sup>85</sup> Marilyn Booth, ‘Liberal Thought and the “Problem” of Women’, in *Arabic Thought beyond the Liberal Age: Towards an Intellectual History of the Nahda*, ed. Max Weiss and Jens Hanssen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 189.

aspirations, as well as his efforts to use the constitutional public sphere to engender debate around the compatibility of Shi'i traditions with modernity. Modernity, argues Weis, brought with it the problematic of 'publicity' for Shi'i thinkers. It forced them to assess their religious practices against modern philosophical, scientific and political concepts. Weis's work focuses on the fierce debates around the self-flagellations during the Shi'i Muharram mourning ceremonies which broke out in the 1920s. He links these to shifting registers of identity among the Shi'i community of Jabal 'Amil. This section locates the origins of the 'problematic of publicity' in the pre-national period, within the constitutional public sphere.<sup>86</sup> Rendering the Shi'a an acceptable and respectable community within this pan-Islamic enterprise was of paramount importance to al-Shahrastani and his contemporaries, but there was no consensus over how – or if – Shi'i tradition needed to change. A lively, yet stunted, debate ensued, which ultimately led to al-Shahrastani's decision to abandon Najaf in 1912. As with the al-Zahawi affair, these debates were not a struggle between Islamic tradition and an enlightened liberal modernity, but a process through which orthodoxy and tradition themselves were invented within a dynamic modernity project.<sup>87</sup>

Burial around the shrines of the Imams was, and still is, considered the holiest of burials for Shi'i Muslims. It assists in the amelioration of sins because, according to Shi'i tradition, the prophet Abraham bought the land in Wadi Salam and Imam 'Ali subsequently declared it a part of heaven. Since well before the modern period, caravans of corpse carriers, *Jannāzīn*, snaked through the villages and towns of Iraq, Persia and further afield, laden with coffins destined for Najaf. On reaching the northern perimeter of the city they would be carried through the Tusi gate of Imam 'Ali's shrine, where they received funeral rites prior to burial. Beginning in the nineteenth century, concerns for public health and state territoriality precipitated

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<sup>86</sup> Weis, *In the Shadow of Sectarianism*, 62.

<sup>87</sup> Weis, 75.

Ottoman regulation of the practice: corpse caravans were restricted to designated entry points and only ‘dry bodies’ in sealed coffins were allowed in.<sup>88</sup> Whether or not these regulations improved sanitary conditions is unclear, but hygiene concerns continued to worry the Iraqi and British authorities throughout the Mandatory years, leading to additional public health measures.<sup>89</sup>

The public health concerns related to the practice did not only provoke the anxieties of state authorities. Its grim aesthetic, industrial scale and hygiene implications offended al-Shahrastani’s modernist inclinations. As a young and ambitious *‘alim* and journalist, he decided to launch a media campaign to outlaw the practice in July 1911. Titled ‘The Dead are Appealing for Help’, the campaign can be read as a work of *fiqh* disseminated in a newspaper. But its argumentation and journalistic form show that it transcended and, in some respects, corrupted the norms of the *fiqhī* genre into a new form of public focused political discourse. The overall intention of the ‘important research’ was to show that moving corpses, ‘such that it requires the desecration of the sanctity of the dead and endangers public health (*ṣaḥḥat al-‘umūm*) is a matter which is not permitted by either reason or revelation.’<sup>90</sup> Al-Shahrastani highlighted the social and political implications of the practice, which was a ‘scandal for the Shi’a and the Sharia.’ He directly appealed to the Shi’i public to desist: ‘until when, oh our people (*qawmnā*), will we commit the reprehensible’?<sup>91</sup>

Like so much of his intellectual production, al-Shahrastani’s argument aimed to show consensus between Western science and the Sharia. His language was scientific, precise and

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<sup>88</sup> Sabri Ates, ‘Bones of Contention: Corpse Traffic and Ottoman-Iranian Rivalry in Nineteenth-Century Iraq’, *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 30, no. 3 (n.d.): 513, 520–28; Nakash, *The Shi’is of Iraq*, 184–85, 197–201.

<sup>89</sup> See Administrative Report of the Hilla Division for the year 1919, CO 696/2, TNA, 15, 22, 26; Annual Administrative Report of Health Services for the year 1920, CO 696/3, TNA, 34 – 35; Report of the Inspector General of Health Services, 1924 – 1925, CO 696/5, TNA, 47 – 48.

<sup>90</sup> *Al-Ilm*, 2/2, July 1911, 51.

<sup>91</sup> *Al-Ilm*, 2/2, July 1911, 50 - 51.

technical: bodies exposed to the heat of the sun emitted carbon and sulphur, which were both harmful to humans, while diseases travelled alongside the corpse caravans. These scientific factors were supported by a *fiqhī* argument.

The *fiqhī* argument began by stipulating that there was a general Islamic injunction against the transfer of corpses ‘in the most severe terms.’ By using a Hadith in which Muhammad had expressly ordered his soldiers not to do ‘as the Jews do’ in bringing the bodies of dead soldiers back to Medina for burial, he premised his argument on an ecumenical Islamic consensus.<sup>92</sup> It was only during the era of Shaykh al-Mufid, a tenth century Ja’fari theologian, that a Hadith of dubious veracity was mentioned which may have permitted the practice of burial around the shrines of the Prophet’s family. According to al-Shahrastani, al-Mufid himself recognised the contradictions between this Hadith and the Islamic stipulation for speedy burial and had therefore refrained from directly endorsing the practice. Al-Shahrastani argued that the subsequent *fuqhā* followed his ambiguous line, offering a range of assessments of the practice from the acceptable (*al-istiḥbāb*), through to the discouraged (*al-makrūh*) and the forbidden (as a form of *bida’*).<sup>93</sup> Al-Shahrastani concluded that the classical jurists had identified five conditions for the transfer of bodies to be legitimate: the deceased’s desire to be transported; the proximity to the shrine; the need not to violate the sanctity of the body; transferring before burial; and the stipulation that the dead person was not killed by another.<sup>94</sup> None were being followed.

The presentation of al-Shahrastani’s argument contained a degree of creative obscuration, what Ahmad Dallal has rightly described in other contexts as the ‘creative appropriation’ of *fiqhī* discourses to serve a contemporary political or social agenda.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> *Al-Ilm*, 2/2, July 1911, 51 – 52.

<sup>93</sup> *Al-Ilm*, 2/2, July 1911, 52 – 53.

<sup>94</sup> *Al-Ilm*, 2/2, July 1911, 52.

<sup>95</sup> Ahmad Dallal, ‘Appropriating the Past: Twentieth-Century Reconstruction of Pre-Modern Islamic Thought’, *Islamic Law and Society* 7, no. 3 (2000): 345.

Certainly, there was some ambiguity in the manner in which the classical ulama had treated the issue of transferring bodies to the shrines. However, a near consensus reigned that transfer before burial was permissible (*mustahabb*). It was only concerning the altogether more controversial matter of transfer after burial where there was some ambiguity. Al-Shahrastani deliberately misrepresented the arguments of the classical ulama in an effort to show a lack of consensus. He noted that Muhammad Ibn Idris said it was ‘not permissible to move the dead, that this is *bida*’ in the Sharia of Islam, whether to a shrine or anywhere else.’ In fact, Ibn Idris had been far less equivocal, arguing that transfer before burial was permissible as long as it did not cause any harm to the body.<sup>96</sup> Al-Shahrastani’s interpretation of Tusi was similarly dubious. Tusi declared that it was ‘discouraged to move the dead from the place of their death except if they were moved to one of the shrines, for this is *mustahabb*.’<sup>97</sup> Al-Shahrastani ignored this clear endorsement in favour of his firm embargo on transfer after burial.<sup>98</sup> Yitzhak Nakash uses these discrepancies as evidence al-Shahrastani ‘broke ranks with the legal opinions’ of the classical scholars.<sup>99</sup> Yet by omitting details or mis-quoting several of their works, he did more than this. He was actively inventing a tradition of *fiqhī* discord which had never previously existed to verify his own independent assertion that the transfer was a form of *bida*’.

Questions flew in to *al-Ilm* soon after it published the initial article requesting clarity on a number of issues. Al-Shahrastani used these as a pretext to continue the campaign and show that he had broad public support. He exercised his own *ijtihād* freely by challenging the legal opinions of the classical ulama. To a question about how the practice could be *bida*’ when it was sanctified by ‘legal rationales’, al-Shahrastani argued that such rationales were based on discretionary rulings and a weak *akhbār*.<sup>100</sup> Regarding an *akhbār* about the transfer of the

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<sup>96</sup> Ibn Idris al-Hilli, *Kitab al-Sara’ir*, Vol. 1 (Mu’assasat al-Nashr al-Islamiya, 1990), 170.

<sup>97</sup> Al-Shaykh al-Tusi, *al-Nihaya fi Mujarrid al-Fiqh wa-l-Fatawa* (Beirut: Dar al-Kitab al-Arabi, 1980), 44.

<sup>98</sup> *Al-Ilm*, 2/2, July 1911, 53.

<sup>99</sup> Nakash, *The Shi’is of Iraq*, 195.

<sup>100</sup> *Al-Ilm*, 2/3, August 1911, 113 – 114.



Prophet Adam's bones to Najaf, al-Shahrastani commented that its 'strange nature from various perspectives prevents belief in it.'<sup>101</sup>

Al-Shahrastani's strategy was to undermine the notion of a legalist consensus and then shock his audience with accounts of serious ethical and religious violations. He sourced and published a compendium of stories recounting in grim and uninhibited detail the kinds of practices taking place. The macabre rollercoaster of eyewitness testimonies was caveated with a note that what he was publishing was shameful and hard to digest. The stories included: discarding bones in wells or nearby vacant houses to avoid the Ottoman border fee; the story of a man who accidentally set fire to a caravan of four hundred bodies on route to Najaf; the breaking of corpses knees to fit them inside ill-fitting coffins and the packing of multiple sets of bones in the same coffin; the violation of bodies by Ottoman medical inspectors; the stripping of flesh from fresh corpses to meet the standards required for entry; and the unfortunate story of a man who inadvertently ate parts of his friend's deceased son after the latter stripped and stored the son's flesh in his bag on route to Karbala.<sup>102</sup> All of the stories were footnoted with the details of the individual who had provided the information and care was taken to illustrate that most occupied positions of considerable scholarly repute.

Through using these public written testimonies as evidence, al-Shahrastani was both supplementing his *ijtihād* as well as transcending the *fiqhī* tradition. He was implying that legal opinions on the theoretical practice of transfer were of little consequence when so much evidence existed that the reality of the practice was detrimental to public health and the sanctity of the bodies. Implicit in this argument was also the notion that public opinion – or rather, the opinion of educated men who read *al-Ilm* – mattered and should be considered when assessing

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<sup>101</sup> *Al-Ilm*, 2/3, August 1911, 114.

<sup>102</sup> *Al-Ilm*, 2/3, August 1911, 115 – 121.

the acceptability of traditions. Al-Shahrastani also aimed to show that a consensus in favour of his proposed reforms existed in the community.

There was some basis in this belief. Although al-Shahrastani poised himself for criticism, the response within the clubs and *majālis* of Iraqi civil society was generally positive, especially from those al-Shahrastani dubbed as the ‘free-minded’ ulama (*al-aḥrār*).<sup>103</sup> Attitudes towards the reforms were sometimes shaped by the most bizarre incidents. One man recounted reading al-Shahrastani’s articles along with several men in a mosque. They initially disagreed on the matter. But when the mosque cleaner coincidentally stumbled across two dead bodies which had been transported for burial discarded in a nearby rubbish bin, their disagreement quickly dissipated.<sup>104</sup> There was broad cross-sectarian support for the reforms with the Baghdadi journal, *Lughat al-Arab*, praising them as ‘very useful . . . for the Imamiyya.’ It hoped they would ‘spread widely among them to eradicate this custom which harms many people and . . . is a conduit for a number of illnesses among the living.’<sup>105</sup> Positive reviews came from further afield, with the Aleppo-based *al-taqaddum* declaring support.<sup>106</sup>

The initially positive reaction prompted al-Shahrastani to scale up the campaign by publishing his proposals in a short pamphlet, which he hoped would reach a wider audience than *al-Ilm*. He dubbed the pamphlet as a ‘free (*ḥurra*), reformist, scholarly and *fiqhī* pamphlet’ on the ‘prohibition of moving bodies.’<sup>107</sup> Its front page was adorned with a prophetic quote on the importance of avoiding *bida*. The pamphlet had at least three print runs in 1911 alone, with later additions fleshed out with more responses, feedback and fatwas pertaining to the issue. The pamphlet had the desired effect but, unfortunately for al-Shahrastani, the public reaction was broadly negative. Insults and threats began to pour into his office and, like al-Zahawi

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<sup>103</sup> *Al-Ilm*, 2/3, August 1911, 112.

<sup>104</sup> Hibat al-Din al-Shahrastani, *Tahrim Naql al-Jana’iz* (Baghdad: Matba’at al-Shabindar, 1911), 29.

<sup>105</sup> *Lughat al-Arab*, 1/5, 1 November 1911, 197.

<sup>106</sup> Al-Shahrastani, *Tahrim Naql al-Jana’iz*, 35–36.

<sup>107</sup> Al-Shahrastani, 1.

before him, al-Shahrastani felt the existential wrath of the un-civil aspects of the constitutional public sphere swirling towards him.

Opposition to the proposed reforms was neither simple nor monocausal. Some historians are quick to denote the affair a simple confrontation between reform/modernisation and conservatism/tradition.<sup>108</sup> Yet this interpretation neglects the argumentation used by those who resisted al-Shahrastani's proposals and the primary reasons for the disagreement. Both religious and socio-economic factors motivated sections of Baghdadi society against al-Shahrastani, especially given that the corpse transfer was something of an industry in Iraq, employing the *Jannāzīn* themselves, tomb builders, shroud makers, grave diggers, and the ulama who presided over the perpetual stream of burial ceremonies.<sup>109</sup> But beyond this, there was also opposition from within the intellectual classes on whose support al-Shahrastani had initially thought he could rely.

The press criticism of al-Shahrastani did not aim to tarnish his reforms by appealing to Islamic tradition, but instead focused on the empirical aspects of his argument. The Shi'i community of Jabal 'Amil naturally took an interest in the developing controversy. *Al-Ilm*'s journalistic twin, *al-Irfan*, did not share al-Shahrastani's enthusiasm for a wide-reaching prohibition on the practice. Its editor dispatched a letter to al-Shahrastani advising that the reforms would win more public trust if they were supported by a 'fatwas from the eminent ulama.'<sup>110</sup> Its editorial team consumed the pamphlet with interest and complimented it for supporting its claims with 'rational and received proofs.' But the journal supported calls to prevent the practice only when it caused violation to the sanctity of the dead and harm to the living. As a way of giving al-Shahrastani the benefit of the doubt, they implied that this was

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<sup>108</sup> Al-Jabiri, *Hibat al-Din al-Shahrastani*, 62–63.

<sup>109</sup> Ates, 'Bones of Contention', 522; Mervin, *Un Réformisme Chiite*, 234.

<sup>110</sup> Al-Shahrastani, *Tahrim Naql al-Jana'iz*, 30.

actually what al-Shahrastani himself wanted and asserted that he had been misrepresented as having argued for an outright ban on the practice. One reason for the misrepresentation, argued *al-Irfan*, was due to the ‘ghastly stories’ included in the pamphlet which were bizarre and hard to substantiate. The journal specifically questioned the veracity of the story about the man who ate his friend’s son’s flesh on route to Karbala, pointing out that its source, a man called al-Shaykh Musa al-Nura, was an unreliable witness who was not even from Karbala.<sup>111</sup>

By intervening in the debate in this way, *al-Irfan* was not necessarily endorsing the status quo, but a reformed corpse transfer, which did not entail the heinous acts mentioned by al-Shahrastani nor bring degradation and harm to the Shi’i community. The journal’s editors did not refute any of al-Shahrastani’s legal arguments. Instead, they confined their critique to an assessment of the reliability of al-Shahrastani’s investigative journalism – his method and sources and the sensationalism of his eye-witness testimonies. They expressed strong condemnation of the ‘revolt of the public’ against their Najafi colleague and, much like al-Shahrastani during the al-Zahawi affair, argued that the truth would be revealed through a critical dialogue in the constitutional public sphere. Through publishing opinions against al-Shahrastani’s, they wanted to put ‘evidence by evidence’ and reveal the ‘frank truth.’<sup>112</sup>

Such condemnation of the violent outcry against al-Shahrastani was repeated in most other journalistic responses. The Baghdad-based newspaper, *al-Zuhur*, followed *al-Irfan* in suggesting that al-Shahrastani was in fact not in favour of an all-out ban on the practice. But it condemned the public outcry, summarising the issue in terms which evoked their belief in the dialectical nature of the public sphere: ‘after carrying out research, al-Shahrastani has concluded that the transfer of corpses is forbidden in the Sharia of Islam. He followed the correct *fiqhī* method which did not exceed what appears in the Quran, the Sunna and the fatwas

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<sup>111</sup> *Al-Irfan*, 3/22, October 1911, 914 – 915.

<sup>112</sup> *Al-Irfan*, 3/22, October 1911, 915.

of the old and new ulama. He believes that his opinion is correct without a doubt. One must not respond to the likes of him with anything other than correct *ayāt* or true Hadith until he agrees with you, or you agree with him.’<sup>113</sup>

*Al-Zuhur*, *al-Irfan* and al-Shahrastani maintained that these debates were all part of a *fiqhī* tradition. Yet the journalistic genre meant that conventional *fiqhī* discussions took on a new public focused dimension which prioritised social practice over and above the procedural rationality of Islamic legal theory. The extent to which this was the case can be gleaned in the assertion by both those in favour and opposed to the reforms that the most senior mujtahids supported their positions. Soon after al-Shahrastani’s pamphlet hit the book markets, fatwa requests flew to Khorasani, al-Mazandarani, al-Isfahani and Yazdi over the permissibility of moving bodies if it entailed the harmful practices discussed in al-Shahrastani’s polemic. In characteristically cautious terms, all of them refused to make firm statements on the transfer in general but did not endorse it in the circumstances described. Echoing his creative interpretation of the classical ulama, al-Shahrastani promptly declared that all of them supported his reforms.<sup>114</sup> Yet *al-Irfan* interpreted the fatwas differently. It noted that they did ‘not support the position of al-Shahrastani in its generality.’ The implication was that they only forbid transfer in exceptional circumstances, while al-Shahrastani could be interpreted as having called for an all-out ban.<sup>115</sup> As much as the legal rulings of the mujtahids were still authoritative, the deployment of the same fatwas to serve different positions shows how the journalistic genre was undermining conventional hierarchies of legal authority. Socio-legal questions were now being settled through critical public exchanges and the rulings of the

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<sup>113</sup> Al-Shahrastani, *Tahrim Naql al-Jana’iz*, 34.

<sup>114</sup> *Al-Ilm*, 2/6, November 1911, 262. Mervin agrees with this conclusion. Mervin, *Un Réformisme Chiite*, 235.

<sup>115</sup> *Al-Irfan*, 3/22, October 1911, 916.

mujtahids were one material among an increasingly wide evidentiary base ripe for deployment and assessment by an informed public.

The most substantial rebuttal of al-Shahrastani's reforms came from the 'Amili *'alim* 'Abd al-Husayn Sharaf al-Din al-Musawi. Al-Musawi, who garnered something of reputation as a reformer and *taqrīb* activist in the interwar period, had nothing positive to say about al-Shahrastani.<sup>116</sup> He accused him of prejudice and spreading 'false rumours' and mentioned the 'unimaginable veracity' of the stories reported in *al-Ilm*, which no one possessing 'a grip on reality' would believe. He dedicated most of the remainder of his articles to a meticulous evidence-based justification for the permissibility of moving the dead in Islam. His argument drew from *fiqh* as well as Islamic historical sources to illustrate that moving the dead had always been a common practice among Muslims and was even acceptable after burial.<sup>117</sup>

Al-Musawi aimed to dismantle al-Shahrastani's assertion that the Shi'a were unique in transporting bodies for burial by illustrating a pan-Islamic consensus. He drew from a remarkable wide range of *fiqhī* scholarship, including work by the eighteenth century Hanbali scholar Muhammad Ibn Ahmed Saffarini, the thirteenth century Andalusian, Shams al-Din al-Qurtubi, and two early modern Shi'i 'Amili scholars, Sayyid 'Abd Jawad al-'Amili and al-Muhaqqiq al-Karaki.<sup>118</sup> By way of contemporary ecumenical example, he mentioned how Muhammad 'Abduh had been transferred from Alexandra to Cairo for burial.<sup>119</sup> Al-Musawi sought to show that moving bodies after death was a practice common to all religions and even ordained by Western science. He knew of no other *umma* which outlawed the practice, so why would it be 'scandalous to the Shi'a'? Al-Musawi used evidence from *al-Muqtataf* to refute al-Shahrastani's public health concerns, citing an article about the transfer of the body of Robert

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<sup>116</sup> Brunner, *Islamic Ecumenism in the 20th Century*, 51–65.

<sup>117</sup> *Al-Irfan*, 3/22, October 1911, 897 – 902 and 3/24, 978 – 981.

<sup>118</sup> *Al-Irfan*, October 1911, 3/22, 897.

<sup>119</sup> *Al-Irfan*, 3/22, October 1911, 902.

Koch from Baden-Bade to Hamburg for cremation in 1910. Koch, a German physician and microbiologist specialising in infectious diseases, was a compelling example for al-Musawi's argument because he, more than anyone, would have shared al-Shahrastani's public health concerns had they been credible.<sup>120</sup>

While al-Musawi's argument was more firmly couched in Islamic proofs than al-Shahrastani's, it would be erroneous to read it as a traditionalist rebuttal of the latter's modernist position. For a start, it too diverged from the consensus of the classical Shi'i ulama by asserting that moving corpses was permissible even after burial.<sup>121</sup> Al-Musawi, like al-Shahrastani, was assessing the transfer against the requirements of his own conception of modernity. Al-Shahrastani found the practice wanting – a peculiarly Shi'i tradition which other peoples, Islamic or otherwise, did not endorse – and argued that the Shi'a needed to shelve it in order to become a modern community within the Eastern family of nations. Al-Musawi, on the other hand, saw it as uncontroversial and compatible with modern notions of public health and the ecumenical political aspirations to which both he and al-Shahrastani subscribed.

Al-Musawi's accusation that one of al-Shahrastani's motivations for proposing the reforms was his extreme inclination towards 'civilisation' (*al-tamaddun*) and his preference for taking the influence of the 'Westerners' over the 'correct example of the Muslims' (*sīrat al-muslimīn*), did not stem from a self-confident traditionalism, nor from an aversion to reform.<sup>122</sup> It was instead an statement of authenticity and a didactic tool to associate al-Shahrastani's argument with indiscriminate Westernisation. Such were the norms of the highly charged and contentious Islamic reformist discourse of the early twentieth century, where certain topical positions and philosophies were undermined on account of their ostensibly

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<sup>120</sup> *Al-Irfan*, 3/24, October 1911, 978.

<sup>121</sup> Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq*, 196.

<sup>122</sup> *Al-Irfan*, 3/22, October 1911, 902.

Western genealogies. An echo of al-Shahrastani's own assault on Mousa and Shumayyil's materialism or al-Zahawi's (quasi)feminism, the accusation often had little to do with actual Western influence nor an aversion to social, economic, scientific and political reforms originating in the Europe.<sup>123</sup> It was instead used to undermine the substantive aspects of an argument, to illustrate how a position was not formed from a substantial corpus of evidence, but instead received its internal logic from indiscriminate *taqlīd* towards Western social and cultural norms.

The final aspect of al-Musawi's argument that deserves analysis was his response to al-Shahrastani's primary evidentiary base: the assertion that gross misconduct was taking place in the day-to-day practice of the transfer. This, rather than any *fiqhī* or historical details, was essentially al-Shahrastani's main point. Although al-Musawi piled up a mountain of *fiqhī* and historical proofs to refute his Najafi colleague, it is not necessarily the case that al-Shahrastani would have disagreed with many of them. The substantial disagreement came in their respective assessments of what was actually happening on the ground. While al-Shahrastani believed that the social impact of the transfer was abhorrent and that this was enough to illustrate that any *fiqhī* ruling in favour did not apply, al-Musawi took a different view. Although he asserted that the occurrence of some malpractice did not require a ban in all circumstances, his main point was personal and experiential. When he had lived in Najaf, he had 'witnessed the coming of bodies from far places, with all respect and reverence preserved in a coffin . . . they were in good condition and accepted by a group of ulama who carried out the burial.' He had not viewed or heard in all this time of a single deformed body until al-Shahrastani's chilling testimony, which of course, he did not believe.<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> Al-Shahrastani had accused Mousa of being extreme in his *taqlīd* towards the West. See *al-Ilm*, 2/2, July 1911, 83.

<sup>124</sup> *Al-Irfan*, 3/24, October 1911, 984.



At the core of the disagreement, therefore, was not a substantive *fiqhī* issue, but experiential and testimonial factors brought into play by the very public genre of journalism. The crux of al-Musawi's argument, designed as it was to influence public opinion rather than determine an actual legal dispute, rested on his own personal experience of the social reality in Najaf. Al-Shahrastani's testimony, and that of his interlocutors, came to a different conclusion. What this shows is that new forms of argumentation were coming into play which broke with the *fiqhī* tradition of the past. This was *'ilm*, as a discrete and scholarly discipline, being substituted by *ṣiḥāfa*, a public focused genre in which social, political and experiential factors reigned supreme. As Hamzah has asserted for another context, this 'reconfiguration of the coordinates of truth, authority and reality' meant that the arbiters of knowledge were no longer confined to the cloistered chambers of the scholarly establishment, but the critical debates of the public sphere.<sup>125</sup>

With the baying mob of Baghdad berating him day after day with death threats and other forms of harassment, and a less than amenable response from his main Shi'i journalistic ally, al-Shahrastani must have felt pretty desperate in the early months of 1912. He defended himself using the universal language of freedom of expression, while dismissing the advice of his friends that he should have remained silent for his own safety. Had he not composed in one of the first issues of *al-Ilm* a disclaimer that he would write with a free pen, unbound by the ties of *taqlīd* or the fear of *takfīr* which characterised the era of *al-istibdād*? If the freedoms afforded by the constitution were for anything, was it not for this? He wrote that he would gladly 'die immediately in the course of sanctifying the religion...This is preferable for me than remaining alive when I see [the Muslims] in degradation, rigidity and ignorance, with these superstitions and *bida*' which engender the ridicule of the foreigners from all perspectives.'<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> Hamzah, 'From 'ilm to Ṣiḥāfa', 98.

<sup>126</sup> *Al-Ilm*, 2/5, October 1911, 222.

Yet, true to form, al-Shahrastani accepted his own fallibility and acknowledged that his purpose in initiating the campaign was not to impose a ruling on the public, but to engender debate: he encouraged his contemporaries to reveal their thinking on the matter and disagree with him publicly so that ‘the truth becomes clear to us and to them.’<sup>127</sup> While the hostility between al-Shahrastani and al-Musawi was palpable, a debate of that nature was exactly what al-Shahrastani had hoped for.

The uncivil response to his reforms made al-Shahrastani’s position in Najaf increasingly difficult. His bleak personal outlook was compounded by a number of setbacks at the local and imperial level. The constitutional regime had been all but erased in Iran by the Russian annexation of Tabriz. The heady years of optimism which followed the Young Turk revolution were dampened from late 1911 by the increasingly illiberal and intolerant governorship of Nazim Pasha in Baghdad. The Italian invasion of Libya in late 1911 made fears of European colonisation more acute, while the growing crisis in the Balkans increasingly diminished hopes that the Ottoman Empire would maintain its territorial integrity in the face of homegrown nationalist movements. Khorasani’s death in December 1911 meant that the mantle of the *Marja’ al-Taqlīd* passed to the anti-constitutional Yazdi. In a lengthy eulogy to Khorasani penned in some of the last issues of *al-Ilm*, al-Shahrastani summed up the bleak outlook of the whole constitutional movement, less than four years after the Ottoman revolution. Dismissing rumours that Khorasani had been poisoned by his opponents, al-Shahrastani concluded that he had been killed by the ‘great apprehensions which he had suffered during his life, especially after the Iranian and Ottoman revolutions . . . he was being killed by each letter he reads and drinking a little poison each day from listening to the beastly news about his Islamic *umma*.’<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> *Al-Ilm*, 2/5, October 1911, 226.

<sup>128</sup> *Al-Ilm*, 2/7, December 1911, 297.

If stress alone had been enough to finish off his principal mentor and inspiration, al-Shahrastani decided to relieve himself of the Najafi scene altogether. Embarking on a trans-continental journey down the Persian Gulf and on to India, he aspired to realise his pan-Islamic and pan-Eastern visions of unity through meeting with Muslim leaders across Asia. His account of his travels, written in manuscript and not intended for publication, betrayed a calm neutrality. He was eager to experience in real terms the contours of the political community he had spent the last three years imaging in his journal. In accordance with the long-established traditions of Arabic travel writing, he recorded the what, the who and the how many without passing too much judgment on the communities and customs of his hosts.<sup>129</sup> Yet there was one issue about which he betrayed a perceptible dose of astonishment. The spectacle of the open-air funeral pyres used by Hindus to cremate the dead near Varanasi unrooted al-Shahrastani's constitution: the sounds of 'exploding bones, stomachs and chests' deprived him of the 'taste of food for a whole day and night and meant that his dreams were filled with terror from the ghastly view.' Tears burst from his eyes, he confessed, when he saw a young child committed to the flames.<sup>130</sup> He noted the Hindu belief that burning the dead cleansed them of their sins. This made no sense to al-Shahrastani because it negated the incentive to be obedient to religion when alive. In matters of life and death, Islamic or otherwise, al-Shahrastani's pragmatism, as well as his peculiar fascination with the macabre, was enduring.

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<sup>129</sup> See, for example, al-Shahrastani, *Rihlat al-Shahrastani*, 87–88.

<sup>130</sup> Al-Shahrastani, 141.

## *Chapter Three – War, Revolution and Memory*

In September 1914, the imperial world order into which Najaf had comfortably slotted in the late Ottoman period was upturned. The extra-territorial political aspirations, projects and world views characteristic of the constitutional era were truncated by a new vocabulary of political thought and action. This chapter analyses the Najafi experience of ten tumultuous years, which saw the trans-imperial political thought of Hibat al-Din al-Shahrastani rendered unthinkable and a constitutional nationalist discourse put in its place. Some historians have interpreted Najafis and southern Iraqis as reluctant and largely agentless actors in the First World War.<sup>1</sup> Others see this period as the beginning of the decline of the previously autonomous Shi'i religious establishment.<sup>2</sup> Such interpretations sit in contradistinction to a substantial corpus of work which aims to rehabilitate the role of cities such as Najaf and the Shi'i population in general within the Iraqi national story.<sup>3</sup>

These narratives owe their genesis to the memories and memoirs of the men from Najaf and the Euphrates who observed or participated in the anti-colonial struggle itself, such as accounts by Muhammad 'Ali Kamal al-Din, Sayyid Said Kamal al-Din, al-Shahrastani, Muhammad Rida al-Shabibi and Muhammad Hussein Kashif al-Ghita. Their memoirs form the basis of the analysis in this chapter. But instead of using them only to rebalance the Iraqi national story or to track the spread of nationalist ideology, the chapter aims to make a broader argument about the nature of anti-colonial resistance in the Arab world by asking how and where nationalism manifested itself in Najaf and related to Ottoman and colonial power structures.

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<sup>1</sup> Eugene Rogan, *The Fall of the Ottomans: The Great War in the Middle East, 1914-1920* (London: Allen Lane, 2015), 218.

<sup>2</sup> Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq*, 4, 94–96.

<sup>3</sup> Al-Nafisi, *Dawr al-Shi'a fi-Tatawwur*; Kadhim, *Reclaiming Iraq*, 11; al-Janabi, *Ta'rikh al-Najaf al-Siyasi*, 22.

Throughout the period of war, revolution and resistance, nationalism emerged as a political practice and vernacular of colonial resistance in Najaf. It was neither a natural state or a conscious ideological choice, but ‘forms of consciousness’ (*al-waʿī* in al-Wardi’s parlance) and beliefs about sovereignty, independence and civic freedoms.<sup>4</sup> While it came to be attached to particular symbols, slogans and cultural and historical narratives, it was not – first and foremost – an ideology. The contested ideology of Iraqi Arab nationalism has its ideational roots in this period but only post-facto: by developing in dialectical motion with political practice – and especially violent practice – to define the historical experience of nationalism. The new practice and vernacular of nationalism was brought into existence by the logic of anti-colonial resistance, the shifting geo-political realities precipitated by the fall of the Ottoman Empire, as well as the international political environment of the post-First World War era. But it owed many of its structures and mentalities to the late Ottoman period. Its principal institutional setting was the *majālīs*, where Najafi elites re-formulated and re-articulated their anti-colonial programme into an anti-colonial nationalist one, where the new political demands were internalised, learnt and repeated, and where the politics of nationalist anti-colonial governance was institutionalised.

Such an observation naturally highlights political and institutional continuities between the late Ottoman and early nationalist period. But while this buttresses some of the arguments of historians of nationalism in the Arab world in the 1920s rooted in the ‘politics of notables’ paradigm, my argument is not that nationalism acted as a veil for the ‘business as usual’ of patronage politics.<sup>5</sup> Through mapping transformations in the nature and function of the *majālīs*

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<sup>4</sup> Watenpugh, *Being Modern in the Middle East*, 130; al-Wardi, *Lamahat Ijtimaʿiyya*, Vol. 6, 301.

<sup>5</sup> Philip S. Khoury, *Urban Notables and Arab Nationalism: The Politics of Damascus 1860–1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 67–74; Dawn, *From Ottomanism to Arabism*; Rashid Khalidi, ‘Ottomanism and Arabism in Syria Before 1914’, in *The Origins of Arab Nationalism*, ed. Rashid Khalidi et al. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 50–72; Albert Hourani, ‘Ottoman Reform and the Politics of Notables’, in *The Beginnings of Modernization in the Middle East: The Nineteenth Century*, ed. William Polk and Richard Chambers (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968).

during the Iraqi revolution of 1920, I argue that the ‘seeming continuity of patronage systems’ in this period masks profound and innovative political experimentations. Devised in the midst of the revolutionary struggle, these were undermined – not by the conservative predilections of the notables and ulama who devised them – but by the oppressive capacity of the colonial state.<sup>6</sup>

### *Najaf and the Ottomans in the First World War*

The *Qutr* of Iraq was dragged into the First World War following the Ottoman government’s decision to ally with Germany and Austria against the Triple Entente in November 1914. Within months of the outbreak of hostilities in Europe the Ottomans found themselves fighting on two fronts, in the Caucasus against Russia and southern Iraq against Britain. Determined to secure its strategic interests in the Persian Gulf and access to oil fields in Iran, British and Indian soldiers landed at Basra in November 1914. The city fell quickly and for the next year, the invading forces advanced up the Tigris, until they reached, but ultimately failed to capture, Baghdad. Stretched supply lines, a lack of reserves, and a hubristic underestimation of the capacity of the Ottoman army precipitated the complete failure of the initial phase of the campaign after the 1916 siege of Kut, where over 13,000 British and Indian soldiers surrendered to the Ottoman General, Halil Pasha.<sup>7</sup>

When news of the British invasion trickled up the Euphrates to Najaf, the city’s *majālis* were electrified with debate over how to respond. The views of some were tilted towards cautious restraint, or even some kind of accommodation with the British. The young neo-classical poet, ‘Ali al-Sharqi quietly left Najaf immediately after the outbreak of hostilities, hoping to sit out the war with family in the town of al-Shatra in Muntafiq.<sup>8</sup> Many inhabitants

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<sup>6</sup> Gelvin, ‘The “Politics of Notables”’, 24.

<sup>7</sup> Rogan, *The Fall of the Ottomans*, 267.

<sup>8</sup> Al-Sharqi, *al-Ahlam*, 127–28.

of the city and wider region had already taken out Iranian citizenship for the same reason.<sup>9</sup> Yet the majority of the ulama and notables favoured actively supporting the war effort. During a large public *majlis* at the al-Hindiya Mosque, ‘Abd al-Karim al-Jazairi, al-Shaykh Jawad al-Jawahiri and Muhammad Said al-Habubi presented their views. It was allegedly al-Habubi who raised the ‘first flag’ of jihad in the city, precipitating a consensus in favour of colonial resistance.<sup>10</sup>

The Najafi reaction to the onset of hostilities mirrored that of Arab subjects across the Empire. It did not reflect harmonious relations between southern Iraq and the CUP government. The authoritarianism of latter had alienated many of the Empire’s Arabs by 1914. Yet the Empire itself was not seen as illegitimate; on the contrary, Arabists saw the CUP triumvirate as posing an existential threat to the Empire, for their disrespect of the constitution and willingness to facilitate European commercial concessions.<sup>11</sup> The latter was dangerous, but not as dangerous as the direct colonialization that could follow the British invasion. According to al-Shahrastani, the need to protect the Shi’i holy places from the ‘inevitable decline’ that would follow ‘domination by the Kufars’ negated any hesitation about supporting the CUP’s war.<sup>12</sup>

The Najafi contribution to the anti-colonial jihad was a propaganda and military campaign. The ulama used their influence among the rural populations of the mid- and lower-Euphrates to recruit fighters. Leaflets and envoys darted from city to city, shaykh to shaykh.<sup>13</sup> Jihad was allegedly preached in every mosque in Iraq.<sup>14</sup> Al-Jaza’iri wrote to Shaykh Khazi’l of al-Muhammara – on whose behalf he had mediated with the Ottoman state previously –

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<sup>9</sup> Nakash, *Reaching for Power*, 86.

<sup>10</sup> Al-Sharqi, *al-Ahlam*, 129.

<sup>11</sup> Haddad, ‘Iraq Before World War I’, 120.

<sup>12</sup> Hibat al-Din al-Shahrastani, ‘Asrar al-Khayba min Fath al-Sha’iba, 1914 - 1915’, ed. Ala Husayn al-Rahimi, *Majalat al-Kuliyya al-Islamiyya al-Jam’iyya*, no. 3 (2008): 40–41. (See pages 12 -13 of PDF downloadable at Noor-Books.com)

<sup>13</sup> Al-Shahrastani corresponded with the ‘people of Basra, Kuwait, al-Zabir and al-Muhammara.’ Al-Shahrastani, 43. (15 PDF)

<sup>14</sup> Nakash, *The Shi’is of Iraq*, 60; al-Shahrastani, ‘Asrar al-Khayba min Fath al-Sha’iba’, 41.

urging him to join the fight.<sup>15</sup> Al-Shahrastani released a fatwa justifying jihad in support of a non-Islamic – i.e. German and Austrian – war effort.<sup>16</sup> He released written advice to Muslim soldiers and administrators in the British Army, urging them to defect.<sup>17</sup> Addressing his call to arms to both the Ottoman soldiers and the ‘Arab cavalry’, he framed the war as the political realisation of the extraterritorial and pan-Islamic political project he had promoted in *al-Ilm*:

The unifying bond between the peoples of Islam before the general war was primarily a religious bond . . . But today is not yesterday and the Islamic bond has become in every sense political and administrative in war and peace. The victorious army, that is you today, is not alone in the field like the polytheists. Rather, today you are supported and assisted . . . by three hundred million Muslims spread in the East and the West, with all of them fighting the Kufars economically or with their blood in the Caucasus, Iran, India, Afghanistan, Egypt, Sudan, Marrakesh, Tripoli, Algeria, Tunisia and elsewhere.<sup>18</sup>

While some ulama, such as Ahmed and Muhammad Hussein Kashif al-Ghita, remained in Najafi to spread the call, others headed south.<sup>19</sup> On route to the frontline along the Euphrates, al-Habubi mounted the minbar in all the villages and towns he passed, imploring locals to join his volunteer force. The power of his conviction moved al-Sharqi to tears when the two met at al-Shatra. The meeting convinced al-Sharqi to shelve his neutrality and help mobilise the tribes of al-Gharraf.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Al-Khalili, *Hakadha Araftuhum*, Vol. 1, 373 – 374.

<sup>16</sup> Werner Ende, ‘Iraq in World War I: The Turks, the Germans and the Shi’ite Mujtahids’ Call for Jihad’, in *Proceedings of the Ninth Congress of the Union Europeene Des Arabisants et Islamisants*, ed. Rudolph Peters (Leiden: Brill, 1981), 69.

<sup>17</sup> ‘Nasihah Hibat al-Din al-Shahrastani ila al-Muslimin min al-hunud fi al-jaysh al-inkilizi’, Doc No. 3 – 4 from ‘al-Sha’iba al-Akhira al-Musahhah ma’ al-Maraja’, Markaz al-Najaf al-Ashraf li-Ta’lif wa-l-Tawthiq wa-l-Nashr (MNATTN), 128 – 129.

<sup>18</sup> ‘Da’a al-Sayyid Hibat al-Din al-Shahrastani ila al-Muqatilin al-‘Uthmanin wa-l-Muhajirin al-Arab’, Doc No. 21 from ‘al-Sha’iba al-Akhira al-Musahhah ma’ al-Maraja’, MNATTN, 157.

<sup>19</sup> Kashif al-Ghita, *‘Uqud Hayati*, 102.

<sup>20</sup> Al-Nafisi, *Dawr al-Shi’a fi Tatawwur*, 86; al-Shabibi, *Mudhakirat al-Shaykh Muhammad*, 54; al-Sharqi, *al-Ahlam*, 131.



While the ulama's mobilisation drive was a great success, their confrontation with the invading troops was a catastrophe. 15,000 Arab volunteers and 4,600 regular Ottoman soldiers approached the outskirts of Basra in February 1915. The Ottoman commander decided to attack on 9 April, just west of the city in Sha'iba. After 72 hours of fighting in which both sides – but especially the Arab irregulars – suffered heavy casualties, the Arab and Ottoman Army retreated, the battle was lost, and all hope of liberating Basra extinguished.<sup>21</sup> Ottoman and British sources are quick to blame the failure on the Arab irregulars' lack of discipline and commitment.<sup>22</sup> Yet for al-Shahrastani, the Ottoman's were primarily at fault. His revisionism stressed the valour, bravery and sacrifice of the tribal contingent, paving the way for one of the first historical myths underpinning a new national identity.<sup>23</sup> Such a myth has been imagined in contestation. Al-Ghita framed the jihad movement in regional and sect-centric terms. He argued that all the 'impact and enthusiasm came from the southern provinces, rather than the north', while its leaders were the 'Shi'i and their ulama.'<sup>24</sup> Muhammad Rida al-Shabibi's narrative was more universal. He denoted Sha'iba 'one of the most important days of the war in Iraq – if not the greatest . . . in which the people of the country mobilised from the cities and rural areas without a single tribe or city declining the call.'<sup>25</sup>

In the aftermath of the battle, Najaf's support for the Ottoman war effort morphed into a two year 'period of disloyalty.'<sup>26</sup> Disillusionment and dissatisfaction precipitated this change. By the spring of 1915, the city had become a refuge for Arab deserters from the Ottoman Army. Meanwhile, the Ottoman *qā'imaqām* in the city displayed a tenacity for intrusive administration which displeased the population, already struggling to cope with a harsh regime

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<sup>21</sup> Rogan, *The Fall of the Ottomans*, 163–64; al-Shahrastani, 'Asrar al-Khayba min Fath al-Sha'iba', 13 – 16.

<sup>22</sup> A. T. Wilson, *Loyalties in Mesopotamia, 1914-1917* (London: Oxford University Press, 1930), 22–23; Rogan, *The Fall of the Ottomans*, 126; Charles Townshend, *When God Made Hell: The British Invasion of Mesopotamia and the Creation of Iraq, 1914-1921* (London: Faber, 2010), 90.

<sup>23</sup> Al-Shahrastani, 'Asrar al-Khayba min Fath al-Sha'iba', 45–46, 48, 50–51. (17 – 18, 20, 22 – 23 PDF)

<sup>24</sup> Kashif al-Ghita, 'Uqud Hayati, 102.

<sup>25</sup> Al-Shabibi, *Mudhakirat al-Shaykh Muhammad*, 73–74.

<sup>26</sup> Al-Wardi, *Lamahat Ijtima'iyya Vol. 4*, 187.

of state expropriation. The demoralising effect of the defeat at Sha'iba and the suicide of the Ottoman commander in southern Iraq compounded discontent.<sup>27</sup> In May, a group of deserters entered the city and initiated protests, which were joined by the influential townsmen and clans of the four quarters, *Zghurt* and *Shmurt*. When the Ottoman garrison in the city fired on the protestors, a three-day battle ensued, which ended in the surrender and eviction of the garrison. Administration for the city passed into the hands of the four leaders of the urban quarters and a number of other townsmen from influential clans, including Karim Ibn Said, Kadhim al-Subbi and 'Abbas 'Ali al-Ramahi.<sup>28</sup> They ordered the return to normalcy and the resumption of a taxation regime on goods travelling along the Euphrates.<sup>29</sup>

A symbolic Ottoman administration returned to Najaf following negotiations between the city's notables and an Ottoman delegation. But for the next two years, real authority was with the heads of the quarters, one of which – the Buraq Quarter – promulgated its own constitution.<sup>30</sup> For the men of the Nahda, this was not a moment to be celebrated. Muhammad Rida al-Shabibi remembered feeling a 'sense of desolation as the [Ottoman] flag which had flown above our heads for centuries was pulled down, irrespective of all the negative things it represented.' From that day on, he lamented, the 'government of Najaf became a dejected Bedouin (*a'rābiyya sawdāwiyya*) government . . . with each quarter head ruling despotically (*istabadd*), taking heed only of his family and gang.' Al-Shabibi compared this development unfavourably with the constitutional enthusiasm of the post-1908 period, framing 1915 as the end of a brief moment of cultural and political modernisation in Najaf.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Al-Shahrastani, 'Asrar al-Khayba min Fath al-Sha'iba', 56.

<sup>28</sup> For a list of the main leaders of Najaf during this period, see al-Shabibi, *Mudhakirat al-Shaykh Muhammad*, 76, 192–93.

<sup>29</sup> Al-Wardi, *Lamahat Ijtima'iyya Vol. 4*, 90; Atiyyah, *Iraq, 1908-1921*, 228; al-Nafisi, *Dawr al-Shi'a fi Tatawwur*, 91.

<sup>30</sup> Al-Wardi, *Lamahat Ijtima'iyya Vol. 4*, 191; Batatu, *The Old Social Classes*, 19.

<sup>31</sup> Al-Shabibi, *Mudhakirat al-Shaykh Muhammad*, 107–8.

The revolt set off a chain reaction in the middle Euphrates, with Karbala and Hilla following suit. Deserters flooded into all three cities and local leaders began clandestine correspondence with the British military authorities to the south.<sup>32</sup> Yet while the bonds which tied the ‘Atabat ‘Aliya to the Ottoman state had taken a serious blow, anti-colonial sentiments remained strong. Correspondence with the British authorities reflected pragmatism more than anything else. Testament to this was that, when the Ottoman’s defeated the British at Kut in 1916, the shrines cities rallied to support them.<sup>33</sup> A year later in March 1917, when the Ottoman administration was evacuated from the Euphrates and news of the fall of Baghdad reached Najaf, relations between the Ottomans and southern Iraq no longer mattered. A delegation composed mostly of those men who had run Najaf for the last two years travelled to Baghdad to discuss future plans with the newly victorious British authorities.<sup>34</sup>

### *The Years of Revolution*

The autonomy Najafis won from the Ottomans in 1915 did not last. While the British government quickly realised that direct rule in Iraq would be costly and ineffective, their policies on the ground throughout the late 1910s showed little evidence that they intended to cede sovereignty to the local population. The acting Civil Commission, Arnold T. Wilson, pushed ahead with a direct British administration, stubborn in his belief that a British protectorate over Iraq was what the population wanted and needed.<sup>35</sup> Direct British administration found its way to Najaf and Karbala despite recognition by British officials that military rule in the shrine cities would jeopardise their ability to win the support of the Shi’i population.<sup>36</sup> Colonial administration in Najaf was expropriative: it redirected some of the

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<sup>32</sup> Al-Wardi, *Lamahat Ijtima’iyya* Vol. 4, 192–96.

<sup>33</sup> Rogan, *The Fall of the Ottomans*, 236 - 237; al-Wardi, *Lamahat Ijtima’iyya* Vol. 4, 292.

<sup>34</sup> Atiyyah, *Iraq, 1908-1921*, 227; al-Shabibi, *Mudhakirat al-Shaykh Muhammad*, 229.

<sup>35</sup> Sluglett, *Britain in Iraq*, 11, 18, 27.

<sup>36</sup> Wilson noted that ‘serious riots at Najaf showed that it was no longer possible to leave the Middle Euphrates to its own devices’: Wilson, *Loyalties*, 268; al-Janabi, *Ta’rikh al-Najaf al-Siyasi*, 39–41.

city's grain supply to Baghdad and imposed a number of new taxes which fell disproportionately on the poor.<sup>37</sup>

The growing realisation that the British presence in Najaf was not benign or temporary prompted the formation of the city's first secret political organisation to resist colonial rule. In late 1917, the Jam'iyya al-Nahda al-Islamiyya was founded by several young men from the Najafi scholarly class: Sayyid Muhammad 'Ali Bahr al-Ulum was its leader, along with Shaykh Muhammad Jawad al-Jaza'iri, 'Abbas al-Khalili and al-Shaykh Muhammad 'Ali al-Damashqi.<sup>38</sup> The society was highly secretive but appears to have been well-connected within Najafi society. It also embarked on communications with Karbala and the surrounding areas. The society played some role in the Najafi rebellion against British rule in 1918, although it is unlikely that it organised the entire operation. This rebellion was instigated in March, when the market trader, al-Haj Najm al-Baqal, and a group of armed men assassinated the British Assistant Political Officer in Najaf, Captain Marshall.<sup>39</sup>

First-hand accounts of the revolt show that its main ring leaders were mostly the same townsmen who had led the revolt against the Ottomans in 1915.<sup>40</sup> When the British besieged Najaf soon after the assassination, the townsmen decided to resist. By all accounts their actions were not particularly popular with the general population. Al-Ghita denoted its leaders the 'ignorant ones.'<sup>41</sup> Water soon became scarce and the leader of the al-Huwaysh quarter refused to take up arms.<sup>42</sup> Even the secret society apparently conceded that the rebellion had come too early, with no realistic prospect of wider support.<sup>43</sup> The refusal of the *Marja'*, Kadhim Yazdi,

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<sup>37</sup> Atiyyah, *Iraq, 1908-1921*, 220, 228.

<sup>38</sup> Al-Khalili, *Hakadha Araftuhum*, Vol. 1, 372-73.

<sup>39</sup> Mahbuba, *Madi al-Najaf*, 345.

<sup>40</sup> Al-Shabibi, *Mudhakirat al-Shaykh Muhammad*, 262.

<sup>41</sup> Kashif al-Ghita, '*Uqud Hayati*', 106.

<sup>42</sup> Al-Khoei, *Mudhakirat Shahid 'Ayyan*, 91; al-Shabibi, *Mudhakirat al-Shaykh Muhammad*, 275; Kashif al-Ghita, '*Uqud Hayati*', 106.

<sup>43</sup> Mahbuba, *Madi al-Najaf*, 349.

to endorse the rebellion precluded the possibility of an uprising in the surrounding countryside. In any case, this would have been unlikely given that the tribes were not sufficiently dissatisfied with British rule at the time. Along with other ulama, Yazdi embarked on negotiations with the British, imploring them not to inflict collective punishment on the Najafī population.<sup>44</sup> The British ignored these representations and continued the siege for 40 days. They eventually stormed the city with the help of the al-Huwaysh leader and worked with his men to flush the rebels out of their final redoubt in ‘Ali’s shrine and the labyrinthine *sarādīb*.<sup>45</sup> Among those who were arrested or forced to flee were several members of the secret society. A wave of reprisals saw the execution of eleven men – including Baqal, Karim Said, Kadhīm al-Subbi and ‘Abbas ‘Ali al-Ramahi – and the imprisonment or exile of 105.<sup>46</sup>

The rebellion of 1918 extinguished any prospect of amenable relations between Najaf and the colonial authorities. It was the first anti-colonial political phenomenon in the city which occurred outside of an Ottoman framework. It was a divisive and poorly planned affair. Yet it united some of Najafis disparate classes, a product of both the secret meetings of the young intellectuals – those who wore the turban (*al-mu’ammamūn*) – and the conspiratorial whispers of the marketplace and clan *majālis*. The language of the rebellion was not primarily nationalist.<sup>47</sup> The fighters called for highly localised objectives – namely, the removal of the direct British administration in Najaf – while the ulama negotiators appealed to notions of universal human rights and the importance of protecting the Islamic holy places.<sup>48</sup> In correspondence dispatched from Najaf during the revolution, the secret society talked in terms of encouraging ‘rebellion throughout Iraq’ in the name of ‘honour and patriotism’, but made no reference to a sovereign political future and appealed primarily to Islamic, or even Ottoman,

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<sup>44</sup> Al-Khoei, *Mudhakirat Shahid ‘Ayyan*, 84.

<sup>45</sup> Kashif al-Ghita, *‘Uqūd Hayati*, 108–9.

<sup>46</sup> Atiyyah, *Iraq, 1908-1921*, 229–31.

<sup>47</sup> Al-Shabibi, *Mudhakirat al-Shaykh Muhammad*, 300.

<sup>48</sup> Al-Shabibi, 263.

referents. One captured document from the group was addressed to the ‘subjects of the Turkish government.’<sup>49</sup>

Yet the siege was a formative political experience for Najafis, folding itself into the folios of an emerging anti-colonial nationalist imaginary. The names of its martyrs are a recurrent and mandatory staple of Najafi local histories.<sup>50</sup> The lowly market trader, al-Haj Najm al-Baqal, has been immortalised as the quintessential ‘fearless hero.’<sup>51</sup> Yusef Rajib, a teenager at the time who witnessed al-Baqal working on his market stall on the day of the insurrection, marvelled at the latter’s unprecedented ‘bravery and extreme masculinity.’ According to Rajib and fellow nationalist historians, the Najafi revolution was the spark which ignited the ‘general Euphrates revolution’ of 1920.<sup>52</sup>

Over the next two years, nationalism matured and disseminated as a practice and discourse across Najafi society and the surrounding countryside. This process was aided by regional revolutionary developments, including Sharif Husayn’s British backed insurrection against the Ottoman Empire; the establishment of a de facto autonomous Arab Kingdom in Syria in 1919; and the Egyptian revolution of the same year. Such movements gained international legitimisation through President Woodrow Wilson’s fourteen points for post-war, post-imperial sovereignties, as well as British and French promises to facilitate self-determination in the territories they occupied.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> ‘Copy of translation of captured document’, 20 April 1918, File 2/936 ‘i’jjaq al-sayyid Muhammad ‘Ali Bahr al-‘Ulum’, MNATTN [NB. The original copy of this document is held at the Dar al-Kutub wa-l-Watha’iq in Baghdad].

<sup>50</sup> Kamal al-Din, *al-Najaf fi Ruba’ Qarn*, 232; Mahbuba, *Madi al-Najaf*, 349; al-Marjani, *al-Najaf al-Ashraf*, 32.

<sup>51</sup> Mahbuba, *Madi al-Najaf*, 345.

<sup>52</sup> *Al-I’tidal*, 5/4, March 1939, 213. Linking the Najafi rebellion with the Iraqi revolution is common in Iraqi historiography. See Kamal al-Din, *al-Najaf fi Ruba’ Qarn*, 188; al-Khalili, *Hakadha Araftuhum*, Vol. 1, 372; and ‘Ali al-Wardi, *Lamahat Ijtima’iyya min Ta’rikh al-‘Iraq al-Hadith*, Vol. 5, Part 1 (Baghdad: Matba’a al-Ma’arif, 1977), 304.

<sup>53</sup> Muhammad Mahdi al-Basir, *Ta’rikh al-Qadiya al-‘Iraqiyya* (Baghdad: Matba’at al-Fallah, 1924), 50–51.

In November 1918, a few months after the breaking of the siege, a copy of the newspaper *al-Arab* was circulated in Najaf which included details of British and French promises to confer self-determination on the Arab populations of the Ottoman Empire. This news was warmly received by the politically engaged elements of the Najafi *majālis* scene. By this time, according to Sayyid Said Kamal al-Din, the most attractive constitutional settlement to several Najafi notables was already for an independent democratic Iraqi-Arab state ruled by a son of Sharif Husayn.<sup>54</sup> In this they were no doubt influenced by the at that time still constituted independent Arab Kingdom in Syria.

The early advocates of this political idea were mostly the same poets and ulama who had experimented with new literary forms and debated the new political changes during the late Ottoman period. At the helm were Said Kamal al-Din (b. 1886), Sayyid Muhammad Rida al-Safi (b. 1881), Muhammad Rida al-Shabibi (b. 1889) and al-Jaza'iri.<sup>55</sup> These were supported by younger men, such as Muhammad 'Ali Kamal al-Din, Husayn Kamal al-Din, Ahmed al-Safi and Said Salih. The influence of the leading activists not only resulted from their experience as political activists or their familiarity with the 'technologies of the public sphere', but was also derived from their families' *majālis*, all of which 'possessed cultural capital and influence (*'ā'ilāt dhāt nufūdh adabī wa makāna muhima*).<sup>56</sup> The *majālis* of four prominent families – Kamal al-Din, al-Safi, al-Jaza'iri and al-Shabibi – all became the embryonic sites for the articulation of nationalist discourse, enabling it to germinate through and across each family's extended social and political networks.<sup>56</sup> As al-Khalili argues, they were spaces to 'prepare public opinion for the demands for independence.'<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Kamal Salman al-Juburi, *Safahat min Mudhakkirat al-Sayyid Said Kamal al-Din* (Baghdad: Matba'at al-'Ani, 1987), 11.

<sup>55</sup> Al-Juburi, 5.

<sup>56</sup> Al-Juburi, 11; al-Asadi, *al-Najaf al-Ashraf fi al-'Ahd al-'Uthmani al-Akhir wa-l-Ihtilal al-Baritani*, 239.

<sup>57</sup> Al-Khalili, *Hakadha Araftuhum*, Vol. 1, 378.

As the weeks and months went by, the Najafi contingent advocating complete independence came to describe itself as a party (*hizb*). Its activities were coordinated in two settings, each representative of a different element of the party's base. The first was a successive flow of meetings in the *majālis* of various ulama and notables, often with notables and tribal shaykhs from neighbouring al-Shamiyya and al-Mashkhab. It was in these meetings that an influential Sayyid from al-Mashkhab, 'Alwan al-Yasiria, was familiarised with the party's aspirations. He met Muhammad Rida al-Safi incidentally in a government building while both were in the midst of a land dispute with the British authorities. Al-Safi told 'Alwan about the existence of the Najafi *hizb* and invited him to a meeting. It took place the next day in Najaf with several leaders of the party, who each made the case for colonial resistance, stressing the importance of calling for complete independence in any upcoming referendum on the future of Iraq. These words left a strong impression on 'Alwan who had hitherto known nothing of the movement.<sup>58</sup>

The first meeting between the Najafi and Euphrates notables and Wilson took place in December 1918, when the latter tried to canvas the city's opinion about a future government. While British efforts to curate the meeting's guest list meant that several attendees voiced support for the continuation of British rule, 'Alwan and another Shaykh, 'Abd al-Wahid al-Haj al-Sikkar, both expressed their desire for independence under an Arab head of state.<sup>59</sup> During a *majlis* hosted by Jawad al-Jawahiri the following day, a debate raged between those who supported an Arab head of state and those who favoured something else.<sup>60</sup> While the former position prevailed, the novelty of such a political demand was encapsulated in Sikkar's forceful and evidently not-yet-common-sensical reminder that 'we are not Persian, Turkish or English,

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<sup>58</sup> Al-Juburi, *Safahat min Mudhakkirat al-Sayyid Said Kamal al-Din*, 12.

<sup>59</sup> Al-Janabi, *Ta'rikh al-Najaf al-Siyasi*, 61.

<sup>60</sup> Al-Juburi, *Safahat min Mudhakkirat al-Sayyid Said Kamal al-Din*, 16.



so we are not choosing a Persian, Turkish or English Amir. We are Arab and so we must choose as Arab Amir.’<sup>61</sup>

The environment of the *majlis* was equally if not more significant for the emergence and dissemination of anti-colonial nationalist discourse as the support of the *Marja’ al-Taqlid*. While the latter provided important legitimation, he rarely led public opinion. Clear evidence of this can be found in the rather ambiguous position of Yazdi. While Yazdi can be better denoted a political quietist than a colonial sympathizer, he was certainly reluctant to endorse the activities of the nationalist movement in 1919.<sup>62</sup> When the Najafi party informed him of their decision to endorse an Arab sovereign of an independent Iraqi Arab state in December 1918, he refused to either support or contradict them.<sup>63</sup> Yet his disinclination towards the politics of nationalism was cause enough for some anti-colonial shaykhs to revoke their *taqlid* towards him in favour of Ha’iri al-Shirazi, the Karbala based *Marja’* amenable to the aspirations of colonial resistance. According to Said Kamal al-Din, this shift was well under way before Yazdi died in 1919.<sup>64</sup>

The second setting of party activity was one that is more often associated with nascent nationalist movements. It was represented by a book shop run by ‘Abd al-Hamid al-Zahidi, located in a corner of ‘Ali’s shrine, and a clandestine location in the School of Mulla Kadhimi in al-Huwaysh district. It was through these locations that journals and newspapers from Syria and Egypt were imported and circulated in Najaf, imparting a universal lexicon and set of historical and contemporary reference points for the emerging nationalist discourse.<sup>65</sup> Another

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<sup>61</sup> Al-Janabi, *Ta’rikh al-Najaf al-Siyasi*, 61.

<sup>62</sup> Kashif al-Ghita, *‘Uqud Hayati*, 115.

<sup>63</sup> Al-Janabi, *Ta’rikh al-Najaf al-Siyasi*, 62.

<sup>64</sup> Al-Juburi, *Safahat min Mudhakkirat al-Sayyid Said Kamal al-Din*, 21. Al-Mufarriji and Luizard support this interpretation: al-Mufarriji, *al-Najaf al-Ashraf*, 269; Luizard, *La Formation de l’Irak Contemporain*, 355.

<sup>65</sup> Muhammad ‘Ali Kamal al-Din, *Mudhakkirat al-Sayyid Muhammad ‘Ali Kamal al-Din min Rijal al-Thawra al-Iraqiyya 1920* (Baghdad: Matba’at al-‘Ani, 1986), 25–27.

symbolic import from Syria was the flag of the Arab revolution, which was hung on the walls of the party's office.<sup>66</sup>

These two settings loosely corresponded with generational and class divisions within Najafi society. The *majālis* were sites where nationalism was articulated among a more established elite, whose political influence derived from their social status in the pre-war period. The clan *majālis* were particularly important for this process, as these had the capacity to raise political consciousness (*al-wa'ī*) among extended networks of family and kin outside of the ranks of the *udabā* and ulama.<sup>67</sup> The most prominent figures within the party framed themselves as a 'high committee.' Led by al-Jaza'iri, this including Muhammad Rida al-Shabibi, Said Kamal al-Din and Muhammad Rida al-Safi. Meanwhile, it was a growing cadre of young men born just before or after the turn of the century that frequented the secret meetings in the book shop or schools and discussed the political ideas circulating in foreign journals and newspapers. Said Kamal al-Din acted as something of a pivot between the two.<sup>68</sup>

In the early stages, the Najafi party was completely independent of nationalist groups operating elsewhere in Iraq. All its objectives were instead focused on realising independence by 'forming a Euphrates group in the mid-Euphrates under the leadership of Najaf.'<sup>69</sup> However, by the second half of 1919 lines of communication had been established between Najaf and the two nationalist societies in Baghdad, the Haras al-Istiqlal and the Ahd Group. The party also instigated connections further afield, dispatching Muhammad Rida al-Shabibi to Hijaz and then Damascus, laden with petitions from the leaders of the mid-Euphrates.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Kamal Salman al-Juburi, *al-Najaf al-Ashraf wa-l-Thawrat al-'Iraqiyya al-Kubra*, 1920 (Beirut: Dar al-Qari' al-Arabi li-l-Tiba'a wa-l-Nashr, 2005), 23.

<sup>67</sup> Al-Bahadili, *al-Haya al-Fikriyya*, 95. For those *majālis* which played the most significant role in the anti-colonial struggle, see al-Marjani, *al-Najaf al-Ashraf*, 101, 120, 124, 129, 138, 139, 140, 145, 174.

<sup>68</sup> Al-Juburi, *Safahat min Mudhakkirat al-Sayyid Said Kamal al-Din*, 19–20.

<sup>69</sup> Al-Juburi, 20.

<sup>70</sup> Al-Wardi, *Lamahat Ijtima'iyya*, Vol. 5, Part 1, 122–24.

By the beginning of 1920, any optimism the Najafis may have harboured about the prospects of a change in British colonial policy was fast evaporating. French pressure on Faysal to cede sovereignty in Syria was slowly developing into a military confrontation, while Wilson showed no sign of diverting from his policy of direct rule. Fears that the status quo would prevail indefinitely were compounded by the decision of the San Remo peace conference of April 1920 to allocate Syria and Iraq as French and British Mandates respectively. Tribal leaders from the Euphrates, many of whom were growing dissatisfied with new and excessive forms of taxation imposed by the occupation authorities, held meetings with ulama and nationalist activists in Karbala. The new *Marja' al-Taqlid*, al-Sharazi, refused to endorse an armed confrontation but offered tacit approval to protest the government.<sup>71</sup>

In Najaf, the secrecy of the anti-colonial party to date was side-lined by efforts to form representative institutions and use them to impress upon the British the desire of the Iraqi population for independence. This move was influenced by similar efforts in Baghdad and Karbala, as well as a statement of encouragement from al-Sharazi.<sup>72</sup> Meetings were convened in early June and elections carried out among the ulama and notables of Najaf and al-Shamiyya. The elected representatives were almost all the same men of the *majālis* who had provided impetus to the nascent nationalist movement since 1918. They included al-Jawahiri, al-Shaykh al-Jaza'iri, al-Yasiri, al-Shaykh 'Abd al-Rida Al al-Shaykh Radi, al-Sayyid Nur al al-Sayyid 'Aziz, and Hajj 'Abd al-Muhsin Shalash.<sup>73</sup> All these men were in their 40s and 50s in 1920. Three – al-Jawahiri,<sup>74</sup> al-Jazairi, al-Shaykh Rida<sup>75</sup> – were remembered by Ja'far al-Khalili as having hosted some of the most influential *majālis* in Najaf.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> 'Abd al-Razzaq al-Hasani, *al-Thawra al-'Iraqiyya al-Kubra* (Saida: Matba'at al-Irfan, 1952), 97.

<sup>72</sup> Al-Hasani, 98.

<sup>73</sup> Kamal al-Din, *Mudhakkirat*, 39.

<sup>74</sup> Al-Shaykh Agha Buzuruk al-Tihriani, *Tabaqat A'lam al-Shi'a: Nuqaba al-Bashr fi al-Qarn al-Rabi' 'Ashar*, Vol. 13 (Beirut: Dar Ihya al-Turath al-Arabi, 2009), 335.

<sup>75</sup> Al-Tihriani, *Tabaqat A'lam al-Shi'a*, Vol. 15, 1124.

<sup>76</sup> Al-Khalili, 315 – 316

Following the elections, the candidates announced their demands on the following terms:

We the people (*'umūm ahālī*) of Najaf al-Ashraf, its ulama, its notables, its *ayān* and the representatives of public opinion . . . have mandated some of our ulama, notables and leaders . . . to represent us truly and legally in front of the government of occupation in Iraq and in front of the justice of the democratic and free states, which have based their principles on the liberation of the peoples. We have authorised them to defend the rights of the *umma* and further the demands for the independence of the Iraqi lands, with its natural borders, free from any foreign intervention, under a national Arab state headed by a Muslim Arab King and ruled by a national legislative council (*majlis tashrī'ī waṭanī*).<sup>77</sup>

The language was directed towards both the British authorities and the international community. It evoked the international rights-based discourse synonymous with anti-colonial politics in the post-First-World-War era. What is more, the representatives of the people did not justify their position on the basis of scholarly, religious, economic or familial status, which was from where their power principally stemmed. Instead, they asserted that their 'truth' and 'legality' to stand in front of the government was on the grounds that they represented an actually existing and broad-based 'public opinion.' Writing some months later during the revolution, one member of the Najafi Nationalist Party confirmed this self-presentation by describing the delegation as the first 'representative council' (*majlis al-nuwāb*) in the city.<sup>78</sup>

The representatives delivered their demands to the government of occupation on 11 June amid crowds of protestors. As well as complete independence, they called for freedom of the press and of association.<sup>79</sup> The British response to the demands was to tactically delay,

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<sup>77</sup> Al-Hasani, *al-Thawra al-'Iraqiyya al-Kubra*, 98–99.

<sup>78</sup> *Al-Furat*, 1, August 5 1920, 2.

<sup>79</sup> Kamal al-Din, *Mudhakkirat*, 47; al-Hasani, *al-Thawra al-'Iraqiyya al-Kubra*, 99–100.

cancelling a meeting planned between the delegates and the government of occupation on 13 June. This move signalled the onset of a concerted effort by the British to extinguish the nascent anti-colonial movement by ignoring the representations of the people and resorting to violence. News of the cancellations spread to Karbala, Hilla and al-Shamiyya, precipitating protests. Arrests and exiles followed. Al-Shirazi's son, Muhammad Rida, was dispatched to Hengem. More protests erupted.<sup>80</sup> It was at this point that the Najafi party began to print and distribute leaflets in the mid-Euphrates. The Husayni *majālis* also began to take on a political role, with *khuṭabā* preaching revolution.<sup>81</sup> One preacher, Muhammad 'Ali al-Ya'qubi, called for: 'a *nahḍa* reverberating through our time // renew it as you revived its memory // Iraq will not be free or victorious // by the formation of a state without a *nahḍa*.'<sup>82</sup> So many anti-colonial voices were either exiled in Hengam or on route there by late June it is surprising that any revolution took place at all. Yet the expulsions had extinguished any remaining desire for compromise. In Najaf, the delegates met and agreed on the inevitability of revolution. Tribal leaders in al-Shamiyya refused to even meet with the British authorities, fearing exile.<sup>83</sup> They convened conferences and all but committed to a rising. By this point, al-Shirazi had released a fatwa permitting the use of 'defensive force' on the grounds that 'demanding rights was an obligation for all Iraqis.'<sup>84</sup>

The spark of the revolution came on 30 June when the British arrested al-Shaykh Sha'lan Abu al-Chon of Ramitha for not paying his debts to the government. Unwilling to share the fate of the Karbala deportees, he orchestrated his own rescue. The local tribes quickly surrounded British troops. Railroad and telecommunication lines were severed. By 13 July,

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<sup>80</sup> Al-Hasani, *al-Thawra al-'Iraqiyya al-Kubra*, 103–4.

<sup>81</sup> Al-Juburi, *al-Najaf al-Ashraf wa-l-Thawrat al-'Iraqiyya*, 76.

<sup>82</sup> 'Ali 'Abd al-Matlab Humud 'Ali Khan al-Madani, *al-Ta'rikh al-Ijtima'i al-Hadith wa-l-Mu'asir Madinat al-Najaf al-Ashraf, 1914 - 1932* (Najaf: NA, NA), 178 [NB available in Maktabat al-Haydariyya].

<sup>83</sup> Kamal al-Din, *Mudhakkirat*, 55–59.

<sup>84</sup> Al-Juburi, *al-Najaf al-Ashraf wa-l-Thawrat al-'Iraqiyya*, 92.

fighting had broken out in Abu Skhair, near Najaf, and by 22 July the entire Middle Euphrates was in the hands of the revolutionaries.<sup>85</sup> Najaf and Karbala were natural political centres of the revolution. Volunteers from both cities joined the troops in the battlefield. By early August, fighting had spread north and south along the Euphrates, as well as in Diyala, east of Baghdad. But in all these areas, momentum was lacking. After initially making significant gains and throwing the army of occupation into complete chaos, the British manage to regain control throughout October and November. Karbala surrendered on 13 October and Najaf and Kufa followed four days later.<sup>86</sup>

Governance in the territories liberated during the revolution differed from place to place but, in Najaf and Karbala, was more sophisticated and expansive than any autonomous attempts at statecraft which preceded it. Najafi local government was the responsibility of two institutions: a city legislature, denoted either al-Majlis al-Baladi or al-Majlis al-Tashri'i and an executive body, denoted al-Majlis al-Tanfidhi or Hay'at al-Quwa al-Tanfidhiyya. Both these *majālis* appear to have their roots in late Ottoman administrative institutions. The executive arm resembled the Ottoman Majlis al-Idara.<sup>87</sup> The legislature, on the other hand, was a resuscitated and democratised version of the Najafi Majlis al-Baladiyya. It was responsible for tax collection, public order and public health. Its first action was the establishment of a 'national guard.'<sup>88</sup> Members were elected according to a system devised by the ulama and *ayān*. It is unclear who was entitled to vote but Muhammad 'Ali Kamal al-Din's recollections indicate that the franchise was likely expansive: ballot boxes were installed in the market of each city quarter on 25 August and the votes were counted the following day.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Kadhim, *Reclaiming Iraq*, 71–76.

<sup>86</sup> Al-Nafisi, *Dawr al-Shi'a fi Tatawwur*, 163.

<sup>87</sup> Al-Tal'afiri, *al-Najaf al-Ashraf fi al-Arshif al-'Uthmani*, 184–87. See Chapter One, 58–59.

<sup>88</sup> Al-Juburi, *al-Najaf al-Ashraf wa-l-Thawrat al-'Iraqiyya*, 122.

<sup>89</sup> Kamal al-Din, *Mudhakkirat*, 87.

Iraqi and Najafi sources disagree about the name, size and membership of both these institutions and the structure of the government in general. Muhammad ‘Ali Kamal al-Din, who probably sourced the details from his uncle, Said Kamal al-Din, noted that the city legislature (what he calls al-Majlis al-Tashri’i) was formed of eight members, with two representing each quarter.<sup>90</sup> Al-Hasani, who does not cite any sources, agrees with half of Kamal al-Din’s names, but offers four alternative members of what he calls al-Majlis al-Baladi.<sup>91</sup> Meanwhile, Mahbuba cites only four names for the legislature (which he calls al-Majlis al-Baladi), without specifying quarter affiliation.<sup>92</sup> There is further disagreement about the composition of the executive. Kamal al-Din and Mahbuba present it as being composed of the four quarter heads, while al-Hasani mentions eight members. Finally, al-Hasani and al-Mahbuba mention two additional institutions missing from Kamal al-Din’s account altogether. The first of these was the Majlis al-Idara (Administrative Council), composed of three members and presumably responsible for local administration on a citywide level. It included al-Jaza’iri as leader, Shalash as financial inspector and al-Sayyid Mahdi Salman as head of the executive arm. The second institution was the High Scholarly Body (Haya’ al-‘Ilmiyya al-‘Aliyā), which was led by the *Marja’* and also included al-Jaza’iri and al-Jawahiri along with a number of other ulama and *ayān* (15 according to al-Hasani and eight according to Mahbuba).<sup>93</sup> While most subsequent historical accounts are based on Kamal al-Din’s testimony, al-Juburi’s work also acknowledges the High Scholarly Body.<sup>94</sup>

These substantial historiographical disagreements preclude an accurate rendering of the layers of governance instituted in Najaf during the revolution. They reflect the brevity and

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<sup>90</sup> Kamal al-Din, 87.

<sup>91</sup> Al-Hasani, *al-Thawra al-Iraqiyya al-Kubra*, 205. Al-Hasani and Kamal al-Din agree on the following: Said Kamal al-Din represented al-Huwaysh; Sayyid ‘Alwan Khorasan represented al-Amara; Mahmud Jawad Abu ‘Ajina represented al-Burak; and ‘Abbas Shimsa represented al-Mashrak.

<sup>92</sup> Mahbuba, *Madi al-Najaf*, 365.

<sup>93</sup> Al-Hasani, *al-Thawra al-Iraqiyya al-Kubra*, 206; Mahbuba, *Madi al-Najaf*, 366.

<sup>94</sup> Al-Janabi, *Ta’rikh al-Najaf al-Siyasi*, 83; al-Juburi, *al-Najaf al-Ashraf wa-l-Thawrat al-Iraqiyya*, 121–23.

dynamism of the revolutionary moment as well as the biases of the authors themselves.<sup>95</sup> But whatever the true nature of the administration, the competing accounts demonstrate that the Najafi community was making genuine efforts to implement representative governance with a division between legislative and executive responsibilities. Al-Wardi's comments that during the revolution Najaf 'ruled itself by itself via tribal means (*al-ṭarīq al- 'ashā'iriyya*)' does not appear to survive scrutiny in light of the multi-layered nature of the government instituted, however imperfectly.<sup>96</sup> Rather than retreat into its four quarters, as had been the case after the revolutions in 1915 and 1918 respectively, this experiment saw the quarter heads and clan leaders ceding their absolute sovereignty for representation within a citywide *majlis* under the rubric of citywide – and also regionally focused – administrative and judicial institutions. The High Scholarly Body not only released guidance for the legislature and executive in a manner reminiscent of a high court, but also concerned itself with affairs of the revolution in the mid-Euphrates as a whole.<sup>97</sup> In this regard, it represented efforts to further institutionalise the previously discussed *majālis al-iistiṭā'*, under the remit of the Najafi *Marja'* al-Shaykh al-Sharia al-Isfahani.

Similar local and extra-local statecraft took place in Karbala. There, a High War Council was established alongside a National Council (*Majlis al-Milli*). The former was equivalent of the Najafi High Scholarly Body. It included al-Shahrastani and provided guidance to both the National Council and the surrounding areas occupied by the revolutionaries.<sup>98</sup> Following the death of al-Shirazi on 13 August, both of these *majālis* were dissolved and replaced by another body, called the High Leadership of the Revolution. It appointed al-Sayyid Muhsin Abu Tabikh as 'Mutasarrif' of Karbala, although some have interpreted his position as

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<sup>95</sup> It seems likely, for example, that Kurdi Abu Kalil and Husayn Zahir, who al-Hasani puts on the City Council, were quarter heads by this point and may have only served on the Executive Body.

<sup>96</sup> Al-Wardi, *Lamahat Ijtima'iyya*, Vol. 5, Part 1, 306–7.

<sup>97</sup> Al-Hasani, *al-Thawra al-'Iraqiyya al-Kubra*, 206.

<sup>98</sup> Al-Hasani, 207.



tantamount to leader of the entire liberated territories.<sup>99</sup> This is born out somewhat by his inauguration ceremony, which included the ceremonious raising of the Arab flag in Iraq on 6 October 1920. Abu Tabikh delivered a speech praising the efforts of the revolutionaries and encouraging people to ‘respect the Ottoman laws which he would temporarily implement.’ The Najafi intelligentsia looked on in awe at this momentous occasion, declaring their ‘strong hope that Najaf and the remaining Euphrates lands would witness the likes of this day in the near future.’<sup>100</sup>

The experiences of both Najaf and Karbala highlight the ambiguous nature of political, legal and institutional change during the revolutionary period. The symbolism of colonial resistance had undergone a substantial shift, away from Ottoman and Islamic referents and towards Iraqi and Arab ones. Yet Tabikh and the Najafi revolutionaries were indebted to Ottoman institutional structures and laws. As much as the revolution was a new political project, it also represented a commitment to restoring a legal regime in the mid-Euphrates which had not be properly enforced since 1915. The innovation of the revolution was the fusion of the administrative structures of the late Ottoman era with the structures and personal of the ‘traditional’ *majālis* scene. In line with the logic of the anti-colonial moment, these *majālis* – previously sites of mediation and political and literary discussion – were ‘reinforced, deepened and . . . literally transformed’ into ‘revolutionary tribunals and political and military committees.’<sup>101</sup> In other words, they were institutionalised in a way they never had been before. A mixture of circumstance and ideology explains this change. The imperative to defeat the enemy meant that rationalised and centralised administration was more expedient than quarter-based competition. On the other hand, these institutions reflected the influence of constitutional

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<sup>99</sup> Kadhim interprets this as the first Iraqi government. Kadhim, *Reclaiming Iraq*, 89; al-Hasani, *al-Thawra al-'Iraqiyya al-Kubra*, 208.

<sup>100</sup> *Al-Istiqlal*, 6, 10 October 1920, 1.

<sup>101</sup> Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (London: Penguin Classics, 2001), 114.

ideas and international discourses circulating in the city since the beginning of the twentieth century.

The importance of recognising this change does not necessarily lie in its cause, but in what it tells us about elite politics. Political leadership in Najaf and Karbala during the revolution is a good example of how the same men with power and influence in the late Ottoman period maintained their influence into the early national period and were the principal practitioners and articulators of nationalism. Senior mujtahids, merchants, quarter heads, tribal shaykhs as well as a class of self-proclaimed nationalists and reformers rallied together to administer Najaf and the revolution. On the one hand, this melange of interests created problems. According to Muhammad ‘Ali Kamal al-Din, the city legislature was incapable of agreeing on anything by early September 1920, which led to the resignation of its ‘free-minded’ (*al-aḥrār*) members. It allegedly disintegrated as a functioning body thereafter.<sup>102</sup> On the other hand, the continuity in leadership illustrates the capacity of the traditional elites from the late Ottoman era to adapt – however imperfectly – to new political environments and new political language.

There are parallels here with the popular committees James Gelvin has analysed in Syria, which emerged in 1919 and 1920 to support Faysal’s government against French annexation. Such committees included a similarly diverse cross section of Syrian society and were dominated by men well versed in the urban politics of the late Ottoman period. Yet these ulama, merchants and tribal shaykhs ‘asserted the prerogatives of representative bodies on all levels’ by serving on the committees and managing the affairs of public offices during a time of crisis.<sup>103</sup> In doing this, they transformed the nature and meaning of urban politics. While the

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<sup>102</sup> Kamal al-Din, *Mudhakkirat*, 91–93.

<sup>103</sup> James Gelvin, *Divided Loyalties: Nationalism and Mass Politics in Syria at the Close of Empire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 104.

‘popular committees frequently took advantage of localised networks of patrons and clients, they also subverted these networks by organising on an extra-local scale.’ The traditional functions of the notability ‘now became responsibilities . . . clients became members of “the nation”, and the delivery of services became inextricably entwined with an ideology that was informed by popular symbols and popular notions of equity.’<sup>104</sup>

Gelvin’s observation buttresses two important points. The first is that the continuity argument, implicit in many historical explanations of post-Ottoman Arab patronage politics, obscures substantial ideological and institutional shifts. It somewhat cynically assumes that such shifts – embodied by the anti-colonial revolutionary governments of Syria and Iraq in 1920 – are nothing more than shrouds for the ‘business as usual’ of patronage and clientage. In this schema, the nationalism of the urban notables is incapable of ‘revolutionary content’ and was adopted to ‘restore a balance of power between government and society’ upset by the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire.<sup>105</sup> As the revolutionary potential of the ‘business of usual’ of *majālis* politics in Najaf highlights, such a conclusion is not credible.

The second related point stemming from Gelvin’s observation is about the development of Arab, Syrian and Iraqi nationalism. These did not emerge into the world as coherent ideologies, which some urban notables invented in the late Ottoman period to further their career prospects.<sup>106</sup> Nor were they the political imaginations of a new class of late Ottoman urban professionals and men of print.<sup>107</sup> Nationalism is rarely a conscious ‘choice’ to ‘subordinate the complex and multiple ways in which human beings define and refine themselves . . . to a single option.’<sup>108</sup> Instead, it was an ethos that developed through political

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<sup>104</sup> Gelvin, 137.

<sup>105</sup> Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate*, 6; Gelvin offers a critique of this paradigm in Gelvin, ‘The “Politics of Notables”’, 24.

<sup>106</sup> Dawn, *From Ottomanism to Arabism*; Khoury, *Urban Notables and Arab Nationalism*, 67.

<sup>107</sup> Khalidi, ‘Ottomanism and Arabism.’

<sup>108</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 8.

praxis in the context of the violence of the colonial encounter. Its institutional, legal and ideological manifestations owed more to a lived political experience than they did to a package of cultural and historical narratives pertaining to a discrete ethno-linguistic identity. Such lived political experiences included late Ottoman administrative reforms, the Islamic trans-imperial and anti-colonial thought of the early twentieth century, constitutional notions of rights and civic freedoms, and the new global language of self-determination dominant in the post-war world. These political, institutional and legal ideas were overlaid with Arab-Iraqi symbolism, constructed in contradistinction to the colonial power; and the whole elaborate package was filtered through Najafi civil society through newspapers, journals, markets and – crucially – *majālis*, becoming the sole means which Najafis from all classes and interest groups used to articulate their political aspirations for independence.

The revolution, in turn, served as both a moment of national sacrifice and unity, as well as the founding myth of the Iraqi nation. This was a contested memory, which has led to a deluge of historiographical and cultural revisionism and counter revisionism.<sup>109</sup> While the importance of these for shaping national and sect-centric articulations of Arab nationalism are clear, it is pertinent to remember here that even within Najaf, the reaction to the revolution was contested. Al-Ghita, for example, saw in its unfolding the ‘fingers of the men of Baghdad working behind the scenes’ to cajole al-Shirazi and the ‘naïve tribesmen’ into action.<sup>110</sup> This view was relatively unusual among Najafis and likely stemmed from al-Ghita’s persistent loyalty to the quietist and somewhat pacifistic Yazdi. Yet it does reflect how the memory and principles of the revolution were far from universal.

The one thing these contested memories prove is the important place of the revolution in the Iraqi national psyche. As al-Wardi notes, it was the ‘first event in the history of Iraq in

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<sup>109</sup> See Introduction, 42–43; and Chapter Six, 272.

<sup>110</sup> Kashif al-Ghita, *’Uqūd Hayati*, 119.

which Iraqis from different groups and classes participated together, with the turban standing side by side with the tarbush, the *kashida* by the side of the ‘*iqāl*’ . . . and all of them shouting, “Long live the nation!”<sup>111</sup> A very real reflection of the autonomous unifying potential of this phenomenon can be found by a second look at al-Ghita’s testimony. Despite his reservations about the revolution, he too acknowledged that ‘from the moment the revolution broke out and war blazed between the tribes of the mid-Euphrates and the British soldiers, *we* participated in the national issue, and *we* worked for it.’<sup>112</sup> It is unclear exactly who the ‘we’ refers to in this passage: is it him alone, the ulama, or indeed, the whole Iraqi nation? Whichever it was, al-Ghita was acknowledging that nationalist praxis and discourse came to him through the unfolding of events, irrespective of his pre-existing political persuasion. For the brief period of sovereignty the revolution conferred upon the people of the liberated towns and cities of the Euphrates, it also provided a fertile opportunity for experimentation in anti-colonial politics and state formation.

### *The Literature of the Revolution*

Within days of the outbreak of the revolution, Muhammad Baqir al-Shabibi (b. 1889) began organising a revolutionary publishing campaign. The brother of Muhammad Rida, al-Shabibi was a ‘revolutionary poet (*al-shā’ir al-thā’ir*)’ who was a member of the Najafi Nationalist Party and the Baghdad-based Jam’iyyat Haras al-Istiqlal.<sup>113</sup> At first, he focused on producing leaflets and short pamphlets. Printed at an almost daily rate by the library of al-Zahidi, these were affixed to walls and displayed inside mosques, distributed in the streets and countryside, and read aloud in cafes and public spaces. The newspapers of the revolution were

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<sup>111</sup> Al-Wardi, *Lamahat Ijtima’iyya*, Vol. 5, Part 1, 15; Batatu shares this interpretation, noting that the revolution was a ‘national myth of importance for the development of an Iraqi national consciousness.’ Batatu, *The Old Social Classes*, 23.

<sup>112</sup> Kashif al-Ghita, ‘*Uqūd Hayati*’, 119.

<sup>113</sup> ‘Abd al-Razzaq al-Hilali, *al-Sha’ir al-Tha’ir: al-Shaykh Muhammad Baqir al-Shabibi, 1889 - 1960* (Baghdad: Maktabat al-Nahda, 1965), 39–43; al-Tihirani, *Tabaqat A’lam al-Shi’a*, Vol. 13, 203.

released from early August 1920. The first, *al-Furat*, was edited by al-Shabibi. It was short-lived, only releasing five issues between 7 August and 15 September. The second, *al-Istiqlal*, was founded by two very young men from Najaf: Sayyid ‘Abd al-Husayn al-Kadhimi (Editor, b. 1899) and Muhammad ‘Ali Kamal al-Din (b. 1900).<sup>114</sup> It lasted from 1 October until 13 October.

The Najafi newspapers were part of the first wave of independent Iraqi journalism to emerge following the occupation. These included the Baghdadi newspapers, *al-Iraq*, opened in June 1920; *al-Sharq*, opened in August; and *al-Istiqlal*, opened in September.<sup>115</sup> All those newspapers released prior to this date had been directly controlled by the colonial state. Testament to the diligence of the writers and editors, and to the availability of information from abroad, the literature of the revolution was an impressive synthesis of local and international news. It documented battlefield developments in almost real time, allowing readers to trace the liberated territories week by week, and to despair at atrocities committed by the occupying forces.<sup>116</sup> These appeared alongside news on Turkish politics, Anglo-Russian negotiations and proceedings of the British parliament.<sup>117</sup>

This material interpreted and curated the revolutionary violence. Kadhim’s argument that the newspapers ‘serve as the best original documents on the declared motives of the Iraqis who participated in the revolution, their goals and their demands’ is hard to substantiate, given that only a limited number of men wrote them, while circulation numbers are unknown.<sup>118</sup> However, they did represent the beginning of the nationalist project of myth creation and history writing in Arab Iraq. Crucially for our argument, this process appears to have begun

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<sup>114</sup> *Jaridata al-Furat, Jarida ‘Usbu’iyya Siyasiyya Ta’rikhiyya Sudirat Sanat 1920 li-Sahibiha Muhammad Baqir al-Shabibi; al-Istiqlal, Jarida Siyasiyya Adabiyya Ijtima’iyya Sudirat Sanat 1920 li-Sahibiha al-Sayyid Muhammad ‘Abd al-Hussayn al-Kadhimi* (Najaf: Maktabat al-Rawda al-Haydariyya, n.d.), 25, 36.

<sup>115</sup> Bati, *Sahafat al-Iraq*, 32, 36.

<sup>116</sup> See leaflets in *Jaridata al-Furat wa-l-Istiqlal*, 63, 65, 70.

<sup>117</sup> *Al-Istiqlal*, 1, 1 October 1920, 1; *al-Istiqlal*, 6, 10 October 1920, 2; *al-Furat*, 2, 13 August 1920, 4.

<sup>118</sup> Kadhim, *Reclaiming Iraq*, 108.

after the experience and politics of anti-colonial nationalism was already well underway across the Euphrates. The Najafi literature of the revolution shows how much the parameters of legitimate political community and political action had changed from the pre-war period, but it also attests to the endurance of pan-Eastern and pan-Islamic motifs within the transformed regional and global context of the post-war world.

The revolutionary journalism was the first print material to appear in Najaf which framed the categories of 'Iraq' and the 'Arabs' as legitimate political communities, and the first in Iraq to define these communities against British colonial domination. These were used more or less interchangeably, although there was a preference towards the former as a definition of the ongoing revolutionary struggle – *thawrat al-'Iraq*.<sup>119</sup> Iraq was historicised as an ancient and sovereign polity: 'a king, not a slave.' One writer framed the modern nation as the successor to the Babylonian King Hammurabi, who was described anachronistically as an 'Arab' and one of the 'first kings and law-givers on the face of the earth.' The same article referenced the Arab kings of al-Hira who had resisted Persian hegemony throughout the pre-Islamic era. Brief and lacking in detail, these historical musings were early manifestations of a territorial conception of Iraqi Arab nationalism which would be fully developed in the interwar period.<sup>120</sup>

*Al-Furat* framed the revolution as an anti-colonial nationalist struggle, part of a worldwide Eastern resurgence against Western hegemony. The newspaper's first article – 'Iraq is resisting colonial rule' – accused the 'colonial parties' of interfering in the 'rights of weak nations.'<sup>121</sup> Iraq was one of the 'smaller peoples' who had finally realised the 'vehemence of colonialism.' Addressing the colonial powers directly, it implored the 'civilised world' (*al-*

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<sup>119</sup> *Al-Furat*, 2, 13 August 1920, 1.

<sup>120</sup> *Al-Istiqlal*, 7, 13 October 1920, 2.

<sup>121</sup> *Al-Furat*, 1, 6 August 1920, 1.

'*ālam al-mutamaddun*) to act 'humanely.' But it combined this moral message with a veiled threat which illustrates the awareness of the writers of the precarious international situation faced by the colonial powers in immediate aftermath of the First World War. The treachery of the British at the San Remo conference was foolish, the writer contended; for 'didn't the conference know that . . . the Eastern issue, if it is not solved rationally, on the basis of justice and the satisfaction for the peoples and the respect of the rights of the Turkish and Arab *umam*, will renew the danger on the general peace and spark off the world a second time.' The implicit message was that if 'the West' wanted peace, it had to recognise the rights it purported to represent.<sup>122</sup>

The writers in *al-Furat* displayed a sense of themselves as being part of a simultaneous revolutionary moment of global proportions. The year 1919 witnessed cascading anti-colonial or anti-government insurrections in Egypt, Ireland, India, China, Korea and, of course, Syria. Diffuse aims and contextual differences belie similarities and interconnections between these movements. According to Erez Manela, 1919 was a 'waypoint, and sometimes a launching pad, for a rush of novel and renewed revolutionary discourses, connections and mobilisations' that gave 'contemporaries a sense that the international order, its power structures and its norms of legitimacy, were uniquely malleable, amenable to concerted action.'<sup>123</sup> This temporal start point provided *al-Furat* with a roadmap of revolutionary praxis, filling the early days of the revolution with optimism. The newspaper noted that revolutions could have national or global ambitions. An example of the latter was the Bolshevik. The Iraqi revolution was an example of the first, in that it sought to change 'a particular system of government' in a nation

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<sup>122</sup> *Al-Furat*, 1, 6 August 1920, 2.

<sup>123</sup> Erez Manela, 'Asia in the Global 1919: Reimagining Territory, Identity, and Solidarity', *The Journal of Asian Studies* 78, no. 2 (2019): 409.



experiencing political and economic suppression. According to the newspaper, this made it ‘similar to its Irish and Egyptian sisters from all perspectives.’<sup>124</sup>

Less than ten years early, such an interpretation would have had no resonance in Najaf, as an attempt by al-Shahrastani to define revolution in 1912 illustrates. Al-Shahrastani’s definition lacked any sense of territoriality in favour of temporality and emotion. For him, ‘the revolution is an extraordinary situation (*ḥāla ghayir i’tiyādiyya*) which is inconsistent with its components (*aṭrāfahā*), and if its components were to become consistent, it would not be happening anymore (*law allafatahā al-aṭrāfu lam takun*).’ Al-Shahrastani’s revolution did not pertain exclusively to states or polities, but could be found in inanimate objects such as volcanoes, in humans such as love and madness, and in governments. They were abstract moments of instability precipitating change. The ambiguity of the words *ḥāla* and *aṭrāf* highlighted this abstraction. The former could mean anything from the personal constitution of a human to the political economy of a vast state, while the latter could denote people, parties, space, time, or any other substance. This reflected al-Shahrastani’s conception of legitimate political action prior to the First World War – at one and the same time, narrowly local and expansively trans-imperial.<sup>125</sup> All this had changed by the time *al-Furat* approached the topic eight years later. The revolutions of Russia, Ireland, Egypt and others and the ease with which information about them flowed through Najaf, offered concise blueprints for interpreting the violence of Iraq, based on tangible notions of anti-colonial nationalism and sovereignty over a delimited territory.

The literature of the revolution, and especially the leaflets, were designed to curate the revolutionary violence. Al-Shabibi addressed the fighters as the men undertaking national revival – *al-nahḍiyyīn*. He reminded the ‘leaders of the tribes to make all its individuals

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<sup>124</sup> *Al-Furat*, 2, 13 August 1920, 1.

<sup>125</sup> *Al-Manar*, 15, July 1912, 547.

understand that the intention of this Nahda is complete independence.’ His instructions for conduct and strategy on the battlefield reflected this concern. They were not only military advice to preserve ammunition, maintain communications and reuse rather than destroy enemy hardware. Instead, they laid the groundwork for national governance in the liberated areas. He implored the revolutionaries to refrain from looting and plunder; leave a temporary government in every town and village; refrain from destroying government offices and furniture; and protect telephone wires and hospitals – which will be of ‘great benefit’ to the nation.<sup>126</sup> The fact that al-Shabibi was inclined to produce these instructions could be interpreted as proof that national consciousness was not sufficiently developed. Yet such an argument misses the point, controversially put by Franz Fanon, that it is often only ‘violence committed by the people’ (and by people he means primarily the rural nation) that ‘makes it possible for the masses to understand social truths’ – in other words, to achieve national consciousness.<sup>127</sup> Al-Shabibi’s leaflets transposed the experience of the rural revolutionaries into a more or less coherent national narrative, which each could use to explain, justify and remember their own involvement.

Despite its evocation of a sovereign Iraqi Arab future, the revolutionary literature showed occasional nostalgia for the Ottoman past. The Ottoman legacy was framed as preferable to British domination and proof of British treachery. *Al-Furat* argued that the English had deceived the people of Iraq with the promise of ‘civilisation and prosperity’ (*al-amrān wa-l-ḥaḍāra*), of restoring Iraq to its former glory. Naively, the Iraqis had trusted these promises. But the tender words of the British were replaced by corrupt practice which not only did *not* bring the promised reforms but rolled back those already in place. In a jubilant passage about the achievements of the Ottoman constitutional era, the writer noted that the English:

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<sup>126</sup> *Jaridata al-Furat Wa-l-Istiqlal*, 67.

<sup>127</sup> Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 118.

entered a constitutional land, bound by a civil law and teeming with elementary and high schools with a community of military men, administrators, lawyers, engineers, doctors, writers and ulama, endowed with the right by the basic law to send representatives to the capital of the Turks and question the Turkish ministers about the affairs of the land with all freedoms uninterrupted by spite or coercion.<sup>128</sup>

They proceeded to replace this with schools geared only towards teaching hard labour and an administration which vested all power in a single man, ‘violating individual and group rights.’<sup>129</sup> While the tone of the article evidenced resentment of both the British and the Ottomans, its content revealed how – much like the political institutions of the revolutionary government – referents for constitutional rights and obligations were still rooted in the experience of the Ottoman constitutional period.

The last issue of *al-Furat* presented a long article by al-Shabibi titled ‘After the veiling.’ It was published on 16 September 1920 with the entire mid-Euphrates independent of British rule and violence ongoing in the south and north. A lengthy address to the British military commander in Iraq, Arnold Wilson, the article came when the revolution was at a turning point. Although they still retained a considerable amount of land, the tribal forces already sensed that negotiation was their only way out of the impasse because the tribes outside of the mid-Euphrates had not revolted in sufficient numbers. Al-Shabibi’s article attacked Wilson’s brutality and hypocrisy: ‘Oh, instigator of the calamities in Iraq’, he lamented, ‘serial killer of the English, you have committed felonies which history has never before seen.’ And ‘all of this because the *umma* refused your guardianship and refused to live in the shade of your protection.’ You justified your actions on the premise that ‘the [English] government, as is known in the countries of the world, has always been committed to the three concepts of mercy,

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<sup>128</sup> *Al-Furat*, 3, 20 August 1920, 2.

<sup>129</sup> *Al-Furat*, 3, 20 August 1920, 3.

justice and religious tolerance: the hallmarks of a free state.’ Al-Shabibi was not convinced. ‘As for mercy, it is one of the human characteristics of which you do not know the meaning.’ As for ‘religious tolerance . . . was it from religious tolerance that you fired on the mosques of the Muslims, besieged their gatherings and prevented their festivals? Is the appropriation of the Islamic *awqāf* tolerance? If this is tolerance, what is the meaning of blind fanaticism?’ Al-Shabibi then presented the Iraqi people’s contrary three pillars: nationalism (*qawmiyya*), patriotism (*waṭaniyya*) and the Islamic Sharia. Success had come to the revolution because ‘we have determination in place of the innovation of machines, and the blessing of God in place of external assistance.’<sup>130</sup>

While the revolution failed, there was an enduring resonance in al-Shabibi’s bitter rebuke. It was not just that Wilson was removed, replaced by the more conciliatory Percy Cox, while plans were initiated for Arab sovereignty in Iraq. A cursory survey of the historical record proves that the type of independence advocated by the revolutionaries was a far cry from that which was granted. Yet the literature of the revolution set the tone and agenda for what was to come. It left Najafis with the barebones of a nationalist narrative they could build on to interpret and understand their new nation as the twentieth century wore on. In this respect, it was the opening salvo of one of the protracted historiographical debates within the contested domain of nationalism in Iraq.

### *The Years of Resistance*

The five years following the revolution were characterised by momentous and rapid change in the institutional fabric of Iraq. This included the establishment of the Iraqi Council of Ministers and Council of Representatives; the crowning of King Faysal; the promulgation of the Iraqi Organic Law; and the firming up of the new nation’s borders with Turkey. These

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<sup>130</sup> *Al-Furat*, 5, 14 September 1920, 1 – 4.

were not insignificant developments, and they responded to several demands of the nascent nationalist movement. But they did not radically depart from the indirect system of colonial administration the British government had intended to implement for some time.<sup>131</sup> Iraq was a British Mandate, bound to Britain through a treaty which undermined its sovereignty. The British exercised power through a co-opted governing elite of mainly ex-Ottoman army officers; a network of ‘advisors’ in all the government ministries and the provinces; and the coercive power of aerial bombardment and surveillance.<sup>132</sup> Most of the Iraqi population were not blind to the reality of this deception, and the politics of the initial years of the state represented a continuation of the politics of the years of revolution.

Resistance to the Mandate during the early 1920s was concentrated in two areas. The first was the shrine cities of the ‘Atabat ‘Aliyya, where the ulama and *ayān* continued to devise strategies to mobilise the wider population against the state. The second was party political activity in Baghdad, led by Hizb al-Nahda and Hizb al-Watan, both founded in 1922. Anti-Mandate press activity emerged in Baghdad, with the stubbornly oppositional *al-Istiqlal* taking its name from the Najafi newspaper of the same name.

The British and their allies in the Iraqi government did not recognise the oppositional nationalists or the ulama and *ayān* as legitimate political voices. In colonial discourse, both were tarred with either the derogatory slur of ‘extremism’ – for the nationalists and those whom the British considered secular urban activists – and ‘fanaticism’ – for the ‘ulama’, which essentially denoted anyone who wore a turban. The Mandate state sought to defuse the threat posed by both groups. Their solution was the suppression of the nascent institutions of Iraqi civil society. In 1922, the High Commissioner, Percy Cox, wrestled executive power away

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<sup>131</sup> Sluglett, *Britain in Iraq*, 27–41.

<sup>132</sup> Priya Satia, *Spies in Arabia the Great War and the Cultural Foundations of Britain’s Covert Empire in the Middle East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 245; Toby Dodge, *Inventing Iraq: The Failure of Nation Building and a History Denied* (London: C. Hurst & Co. Ltd, 2003).

from the King and government, expelled the leaders of the oppositional political parties and curtailed the freedoms of the press.<sup>133</sup>

While these activities were effective at stalling the nationalist movement in Baghdad, they had relatively little impact elsewhere. One reason for this was that the colonial state was incapable of suppressing the main institution of public and political life in these places: the *majālis*. Nor were they capable of preventing the ulama and *ayān* of the shrine cities from influencing the wider population through releasing fatwas. The problems posed by the *majālis* for the colonial authorities are evident in the extent to which they monitored their activity. The colonial archive throughout the 1920s is awash with details of the British surveillance of meetings between the ulama and their clients. They differentiated between the ‘meeting’, which was public and destabilising, and ‘talk in private houses’, which was apparently benign.<sup>134</sup>

Colonial officials discursively delegitimised such institutions by implying that they represented warped and inaccurate public opinion. In this, they were partly influenced by the representations of elements within Iraqi society sympathetic to the continuation of British rule. One pro-British notable, for example, warned the British not to believe the opinion of the *majālis*: ‘if you had a big *majlis* you would never have obtained any man’s sincere opinion . . . [because] if a big man got up and proposed something we should feel bound . . . to agree with all he said.’<sup>135</sup> Such an observation was likely a legitimate critique of an imperfect *majālis* culture, but also belied the very real threat of the *majlis* as an anti-colonial space. The notable’s observation is further complicated by the fact that *majālis* were not necessarily monolithic echo chambers in their anti-British stance. Al-Jaza’iri’s *majlis*, for example, was perpetually plagued by a disagreement between ‘Abd al-Karim and his brother Jawad. While the latter advocated

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<sup>133</sup> Sluglett, *Britain in Iraq*, 52.

<sup>134</sup> See, for example, ‘Unknown Squadron Leader, Notes on Sunni-Shi’iah movement, 1927’, AIR23/432, TNA; and various reports in ‘Intelligence Reports on the Ulama’, AIR 23/379, TNA; and Sunni – Shi’ah Movement, AIR 23/432, TNA.

<sup>135</sup> Atiyah, *Iraq, 1908-1921*, 271.

for the complete withdrawal of all British advisors, ‘Abd al-Karim was amenable to some British administrative help, despite his heavy involvement in the 1920 revolution. The arguments between the brothers were apparently so intense that ‘Abd al-Karim would often resort to silencing his younger brother by repeating the *hawqala* formula: ‘there is no power nor strength except by God.’<sup>136</sup>

The gathering of influential people caused the British unparalleled paranoia. One in particular – more a conference than a *majlis* – took place in 1922. Organised by the most senior mujtahid in Kadhimiyya, Shaykh Mahdi al-Khalisi, and a group of nationalists, including al-Yasri and Muhammad Baqir al-Shabibi, the conference took place in Karbala at the time of the pilgrimage of Sha’ban. Ostensibly organised to discuss how to retaliate against Wahhabi raids in the south of Iraq, its programme was also designed to reinvigorate the anti-colonial campaign by demanding ‘the abrogation of the Mandate and the complete independence of Iraq on Egyptian lines.’<sup>137</sup> Around 150 leaders of the 1920 revolution were invited.<sup>138</sup>

The next year, these plans came to fruition with the final substantial effort to derail the quasi-colonial foundations of the Iraqi state. Following discussions between nationalists in Baghdad led by Kadhim Abu Timman, the three *Marja’* in Iraq – al-Khalisi, Na’ini and Abu Hassan al-Isfahani – released fatwas prohibiting participation in the elections for the first Iraqi parliament.<sup>139</sup> The fatwas did not represent clerical rejection of the democratic process. They opposed the election ‘in the current time’, commanding the ‘Iraqi umma’ that their participation was an offence to God. The fatwas rejected the election on constitutional ground, challenging its legitimacy when the ‘parties which correspond with the desires of the Iraqi nation’ had been blocked and British aerial bombardments were killing ‘children, the elderly, the innocent and

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<sup>136</sup> Al-Khalili, *Hakadha Araftuhum*, Vol. 1, 378, 390.

<sup>137</sup> Intelligence Report 8, 15 April 1922, CO 730/21, TNA, 3, 16.

<sup>138</sup> Al-Wardi, *Lamahat Ijtima’iyya*, Vol. 6, 140.

<sup>139</sup> Intelligence Report 21, 1 November 1922, CO730 25, TNA, 5 - 6.

women.’ An election on ‘this basis’, al-Khalisi concluded, ‘was harmful for the future of Iraq.’<sup>140</sup> The fatwas were effective and even managed to stall the electoral process in some areas with a majority Sunni population.

The British and government response to the election boycott campaign was to expel the most influential of the three mujtahids, al-Khalisi, using that legal premise that, as he had opted for Iranian nationality in the Ottoman period, he was a foreigner in Iraq.<sup>141</sup> In protest at his deportation, the leading mujtahids of Najaf, including al-Isfahani, Na’ini and al-Jawahiri, began a voluntary exile in Iran, facilitated by the authorities. They were not permitted to return until the process of colonial state formation had been formally institutionalised through the ratification of the first Anglo-Iraqi Treaty by the elected Iraqi parliament. The expulsion of the mujtahids marked the beginning of an oft repeated practice in twentieth century Iraq of expelling Shi’i opposition activists on account of their alleged Iranian-ness.<sup>142</sup> While al-Khalisi died in exile, Isfahani and Na’ini were permitted to return to Iraq, on the grounds that they did not involve themselves in politics again.

Three points can be taken from the electoral boycott campaign to conclude this chapter. Firstly, the campaign is further evidence of how the development of nationalism in Iraq should not only, or even mainly, be understood as the spread of an ideology, but as the experience and articulation of new political demands – themselves giving rise to new identities and historical memories. None of the mujtahids were likely to have spent much time perusing the nascent Iraqi press as it transposed the anti-colonial movement into a coherent nationalist ideology. Evidence of this can be found in the fact that all three harboured rather different and ambiguous views about future governance structures and how the Iraqi state should relate to neighbouring

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<sup>140</sup> Al-Wardi, *Lamahat Ijtima’iyya*, Vol. 6, 202–3.

<sup>141</sup> He was actually ethnically Arab. Al-Wardi, 42.

<sup>142</sup> Nakash, *Reaching for Power*, 86–87.



states.<sup>143</sup> Yet with the boycotts, the mujtahids and their supporters brought Iraq into existence as a constitutionally bounded national entity. Not only did they use the abstract and novel language of nation to conform to the requirements of post-war political discourse. Their injunctions were treaties on how constitutional nation-states ought to function and the meaning of genuine, as opposed to colonially-coerced, representation of the *umma*.

Secondly, the symbolism and memory of the expulsions was long-lasting. Al-Khalisi became a hero and martyr of the nationalist struggle in Iraq. The Iraqi historian ‘Ali al-Wardi remembered the processions and collective mourning which erupted in Kadhimiyya when he died. While the Shi’i symbolism was palpable, with al-Khalisi compared to Imam Husayn and George V to Mu’awiyya, he also became a part of the Iraqi national story. Across the country, mourning ceremonies were hosted and attended by, among many others, Hizb al-Nahda, Jamal Sidqi Zahawi, Ja’far al-Shabibi, Ma’ruf al-Rasafi and Mahdi al-Basir. One poem read: ‘Oh pillar of Islam, protector of the Sharia // These creations, Sunni and Shi’i, have been orphaned.’<sup>144</sup>

The final point pertains to the importance of the expulsions as a watershed in the political history of Iraq. The mujtahid’s campaign marked the end of the first phase of the anti-colonial nationalist movement which began with the battle of Sha’iba in 1915. Throughout this period, nationalism had developed as the hegemonic vernacular of political action which reflected the local experience of colonisation, the transformed international system, as well as the legacy of constitutional political thought from the late Ottoman period. This vernacular infected a substantial cross section of society, but it found its most productive setting in the *majālis* of those families who enjoyed status and influence during the pre-war era. Developed

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<sup>143</sup> Al-Wardi, *Lamahat Ijtima’iyya*, Vol. 6, 42–43, 49. Intelligence Report 6, 16 March 1923, CO 730/39, TNA, 2; Intelligence Report 3, 7 February 1924, CO 730/57, TNA, 11.

<sup>144</sup> Al-Wardi, 252.

and disseminated through these institutions it spread into the countryside and animated the sustained resistance to the imposition of British rule between the Najafi revolution of 1918 and the end of the election boycott in 1924. This was a phase in which activists assertively challenged the state building process undertaken by the colonial authorities, refusing to acknowledge the legitimacy of its basic institutions and foundations. It was not a futile phase: the nascent nationalists won important concessions. Yet ultimately, it did not result in the complete Iraqi independence under constitutional governance which the nationalist themselves had advocated. Their project was undermined – not through any incoherence or lack of political will – but through the persistent suppression of the political process by the colonial state. The politics of the remainder of the monarchical period largely conformed to the institutional models laid down by the British and, incidentally, overt British interference in Iraqi politics dissipated considerably for the remainder of the Mandate.<sup>145</sup> It was not until after the Second World War that these institutions were seriously – and successfully – challenged again.

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<sup>145</sup> Sluglett, *Britain in Iraq*, 42.

## *Chapter Four – The Formation of Najafi Arab Civil Society*

As the dust settled on the years of upheaval, Najafi activists considered how their new language and politics of nationalism should be articulated at a local level. Despite the heady enthusiasm and mass political mobilisation which characterised the revolution, many realised that Najaf did not yet resemble the modern, monocultural and monolingual city of a homogenous national state. This chapter analyses the civic culture of nationalism in Najaf – that is, efforts to affect an Arab Nahda, or a process of Arabisation – throughout the 1920s and 1930s. It discusses the educational project of Madrasat al-Ghari community school, as well as the norms underpinning Najafi associational life and print culture – looking specifically at the newspapers *al-Najaf* and *al-Hatif* – to show how the de- and re-construction of the dominant notion of political community in Najaf was a pedagogical project which worked to reorientate the city away from its trans-regional religious and cultural connections and towards a more secular Iraqi-Arab cultural and political milieu.

Historians of nationalism in 1920s Iraq have tended to focus on its fragmented historical and cultural narratives.<sup>1</sup> While these are important, and will be discussed in chapter six, they fail to appreciate nationalism's civic dimension. In the post-Ottoman Middle East, the 'novel concepts of nation and ethnicity' needed to be taught and learned in cities, such as Najaf, which were characterised by 'tremendous ethnic, religious and linguistic diversity.'<sup>2</sup> As Keith Watenpugh's concise – yet somewhat sinister – epithet neatly captures, 'cleansing the

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<sup>1</sup> Davis, *Memories of State*; Peter Wien, *Iraqi Arab Nationalism, Authoritarianism, Totalitarianism and pro-Fascist Inclinations, 1932 - 1941* (London: Routledge, 2006); Zubaida, 'The Fragments Image the Nation.'

<sup>2</sup> Keith David Watenpugh, 'Cleansing the Cosmopolitan City: Historicism, Journalism and the Arab Nation in the Post-Ottoman Eastern Mediterranean', *Social History* 30, no. 1 (1 February 2005): 4.

cosmopolitan city’ – literally and discursively – was necessary to forge Iraqi Arab citizens and subjectivities in place of the ambiguous and hyphenated identities of the pre-national period.<sup>3</sup> Historians often assume that hegemonic state elites working under the auspices of colonial blueprints were the impetus for this process. This chapter complicates these generalising narratives of top-down and state-centric Middle Eastern state formation by highlighting the role of local non-state elites in Najafi civil society.

Civil society here refers to ‘those institutions of modern associational life set up by nationalist elites in the era of colonial modernity.’ Its purpose, as Partha Chatterjee shows, was ‘pedagogy’ more than the promotion of genuine rights and representation.<sup>4</sup> Although the term was not in common usage in Iraq during the 1920s, it can be overlaid with those men and institutions who appropriated and deployed the language of the Arab Nahda in public life. By the early 1920s, the Nahda was being transformed from a loose ‘organising principle and consciousness raising rallying point’ of anti-colonial politics into ‘the source of a common, modern Arab consciousness.’<sup>5</sup> In other words, it had become a vernacular of reform in Najaf. The men of this Nahda were not, as Chatterjee contends, products of the colonial state – of colonial schools and bureaucracies. They were instead the same men of the Najafi *majālis* who organised politically during the first two decades of the twentieth century, as well as a younger generation who came of age during these years. All these men grew up just before the era of colonial modernity, products of the melange of pedagogical settings common to Najaf, especially its religious *hawza*. Through their action, Najafi society would be transformed considerably as notions of Arab-ness and Arab identity were reframed in relation to a number of discursive binaries: between ‘modern’ and ‘old’, progressive and conservative and – of

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<sup>3</sup> Watenpaugh, 4.

<sup>4</sup> Partha Chatterjee, ‘On Civil and Political Society in Postcolonial Democracies’, in *Civil Society: History and Possibilities*, ed. Sudipta Kaviraj and Sunil Khilnani (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 174, 176.

<sup>5</sup> Hanssen and Weiss, ‘Introduction’, 2–3.

course – Arab and Persian. This reframing ultimately enhanced the social fragmentation of Najafi society and made it increasingly difficult for the ambiguous socio-cultural and political subjectivities of the pre-war period to exist.

### *Affecting the Nahda: Madrasat al-Ghari*

No aspect of Najafi life represented its cosmopolitan character and ambiguous ethno-linguistic identity in the early twentieth century more than its educational provision. A sprawling collegiate university, the Najafi *hawza* hosted madrasas and seminaries in Arabic and Persian, with teachers and students from across the Shi'i world.<sup>6</sup> Although there was only one Ottoman elementary school in the city, several non-religious educational options were available prior to the First World War. These included two Iranian community schools and a number of semi-secular schools established by the *Marja'* Kadhim Khorasani.<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile almost all children had their first experience of formal education in the *katātīb* (s. *kuttāb*), which taught basic reading, writing and counting skills in either Arabic or Persian.<sup>8</sup> All these existed alongside family socialisation and informal education in the *majālis*.<sup>9</sup> Despite this varied and not insubstantial educational provision, the uniformity of modern state education was lacking.

The diversity of provision and lack of modern-style education inspired the founding of Madrasat al-Ghari in 1922 by a group of Najafi activists. They requested permission for the project on the basis that, since the founding of the Iraqi state, only one Amiri elementary school had been opened in the city.<sup>10</sup> The founders were influenced by several similar schools in Baghdad, while their project was reminiscent of a number of educational initiatives

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<sup>6</sup> Litvak, *Shi'i Scholars of Nineteenth-Century Iraq*, 30 - 35.

<sup>7</sup> Mahbuba, *Madi al-Najaf*, 146; Farzaneh, *The Iranian Constitutional Revolution*, 126.

<sup>8</sup> Al-Janabi, *Ta'rikh al-Najaf al-Ijtima'i*, 402–3.

<sup>9</sup> Al-Bahadili, *al-Haya al-Fikriyya*, 107.

<sup>10</sup> Kamal al-Din, *al-Najaf fi Ruba' Qarn*, 86.

synonymous with the politics of the Nahda since the late nineteenth century, especially in Beirut.<sup>11</sup> Madrasat al-Ghari was the first civic pedagogical project to emerge from the Arab Shi'i populations of the former Ottoman Empire. As the interwar period progressed, the government opened several more modern schools in Najaf.<sup>12</sup>

Najafi local histories regularly mention Madrasat al-Ghari as 'one of the leading centres of the Najafi reform movement.'<sup>13</sup> Yet, along with community education generally, it has been largely ignored in other scholarship on education in Iraq, which focuses disproportionately on state provision and state-level policy debates. This partly reflects the bias of the sources.<sup>14</sup> But it also reflects the predilection of post-colonial scholarship more generally to interpret education as a 'new technique of political power' imported by colonial elites to enable the 'colonial order to penetrate and colonise local discourse.'<sup>15</sup> While valuable, such an approach can lead to a distortive and totalising picture of the process and experience of education in colonial settings, which in turn ignores civic initiatives and regional variety. To paraphrase Jens Hanssen writing on *fin de Siècle* Beirut, the constitution and experience of schools such as Madrasat al-Ghari show that education was 'one of the most contested fields of cultural production' in Iraq.<sup>16</sup> Such contestation existed within elite discourse, but also reflected regional and local state building concerns.

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<sup>11</sup> These included Madrasat al-Ja'fariyya al-Ahli (established in 1908), Madrasat al-Markaziyya (established in 1918) and Madrasat Ahli Baghdad (established in 1919). Al-Janabi, *Ta'rikh al-Najaf al-Ijtima'i*, 410. For the political role of Madrasat Ahli Baghdad, see al-Hasani, *al-Thawra al-'Iraqiyya al-Kubra*, 60. See also Jens Hanssen, *Fin de Siècle Beirut: The Making of an Ottoman Provincial Capital* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 163–78.

<sup>12</sup> These included Madrasat al-Ghazi (1926), Madrasat al-Islam (1932), Madrasat al-Haydariyya (1933) and Madrasat al-Talibiyya (1935). Al-Bahadili, *al-Haya al-Fikriyya*, 109.

<sup>13</sup> Al-Mufarriji, *al-Najaf al-Ashraf*, 178; Kamal al-Din, *al-Najaf fi Ruba' Qarn*, 111.

<sup>14</sup> The work of state elites such as al-Husri, and British colonial reportage, are widely used. Both were dismissive of 'community' education. See Sati al-Husri, *Mudhakkirati fi al-'Iraq, 1921 - 1941* (Beirut: Dar al-Tali'a, 1967); and the Colonial Office, *Report by His Britannic Majesty's Government on the Administration of Iraq, April, 1923 - December, 1924* (London: His Majesty's Stationary Office, 1925), 203.

<sup>15</sup> Timothy Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 171.

<sup>16</sup> Hanssen, *Fin de Siècle Beirut*, 164.

The initial founders and supporters of Madrasat al-Ghari were prominent figures from the Najafi *majālis* scene or activists from the years of revolution. Husayn and Said Kamal al-Din initiated the project, with the help of Husayn's brother Muhammad 'Ali, Kadhīm al-Sayyid 'Ali, Yahyī Habubī, Karīm al-Sayyid Sultan, Yusef Abu 'Ajina and Muhsin Abu 'Ajina. The 'Ajina were a wealthy merchant family who hosted a well-attended *majlis* in Najaf and were known for their charitable work.<sup>17</sup> Support was also forthcoming from Sayyid Muhammad 'Ali Bahr al-'Uloom, Jawād al-Jawāhirī, and Muhsin Shalash, who all played an important role in the administration of Najaf during the 1920 revolution.<sup>18</sup> Later, Sayyid Dayā al-Khorasan, 'Abd al-Razaq Shamsa<sup>19</sup> and Kurdi Ibn Attiyya, all of whom had served on the Najafi city legislature during the revolution, became either members of the governing body or financial supporters.<sup>20</sup> The Iraqi Minister of Education who approved the opening of the school was none other than Hibat al-Din al-Shahrastani himself.<sup>21</sup>

Although the founding of the Madrasa al-Ghari represented the political aspirations of a broad cross-section of Najafi elites, the school was also something of a family enterprise for the Kamal al-Dins. Already well-versed in political work from his role in the revolution, Sayyid Said (b. 1886) had been interested in educational reform since before the First World War and occupied several rooms in one of Khorasani's semi-secular schools to teach Arabic and modern political ideas.<sup>22</sup> It was here that he taught two of his nephews, Husayn (b. 1896) and Muhammad 'Ali (b. 1900). Their father, Issa, was an *'alim* and preacher who shared Sayyid Said's interest in educational reform. All four men led very colourful careers throughout the

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<sup>17</sup> Al-Marjani, *al-Najaf al-Ashraf*, 155–56.

<sup>18</sup> Kamal al-Din, *al-Najaf fi Ruba' Qarn*, 88.

<sup>19</sup> Shamsa, born in Najaf in 1881, was a merchant who was a member of the Baladi Council in 1907 and its head from 1909 to 1911. Mir Busri, *A'lam al-Siyasa fi al-'Iraq al-Hadith*, Vol. 2 (London: Dar al-Hikma, 2004), 447.

<sup>20</sup> Kamal al-Din, *al-Najaf fi Ruba' Qarn*, 92. For the City Council during the revolution, see Chapter Three 142–144.

<sup>21</sup> Kamal al-Din, 90.

<sup>22</sup> Al-Khalili, *Hakadha Araftuhum*, Vol. 1, 182.

years of upheaval. Issa fought in the Jihad against the British and was living in exile by 1920.<sup>23</sup> Husayn and Muhammad ‘Ali both participated in the revolution as journalists and combatants, fleeing to Kuwait in its wake to be reunited with their father, who had been funneling weapons into Iraq throughout. They all returned to Iraq after the general amnesty and the two younger men enrolled in the Baghdad teacher training college.<sup>24</sup>

Madrasat al-Ghari was described by Najafis as *al-madrasa al-ahliyya* to distinguish it from state schools or *al-madāris al-hukūmiyya*. The designation of *al-ahliyya* was recognised by the Ministry of Education to denote those non-government schools which were also not foreign (*ajnabī*) run.<sup>25</sup> As an adjective *al-ahliyya* has a number of connotations, ranging from the family and the home, through to indigenous, native, civil, secular and national. These diverse definitions capture something of the scope of the school’s *raison d’être*. It was designed to be both local, parochial and community-based – a reflection of Najaf’s own cultural and religious values yet distinct from the traditional religious seminaries and madrasas. At the same time, it was a national and civic project, embodying the symbolism and narratives of the Iraqi Arab nation.

For the first year of its existence, Madrasat al-Ghari relied on community donations, which meant that its operations were limited to three classes in daytime and a single evening class. All these took place in the school’s rented premises, tucked away in the al-Mashraq Quarter of Najaf. In the 1922–1923 school year, the school secured the patronage of King Faysal and, with that, a monthly stipend of 350 Rupees. This enabled it to expand considerably and by 1925 a new building had been constructed and a total of five and six evening classes

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<sup>23</sup> Al-Tihriani, *Tabaqat A’lam al-Shi’a*, Vol. 16, 1639–42.

<sup>24</sup> Kamal al-Din, *Mudhakkirat*, 11–14; Kamal al-Din, *al-Najaf fi Ruba’ Qarn*, 13–14.

<sup>25</sup> Al-Husri, *Mudhakkirati, 1921 - 1941*, 163–64.



were up and running.<sup>26</sup> The following year the school committee developed plans to open the first secondary class in Najaf.

The curriculum of Madrasat al-Ghari combined modern sciences with nationalist pedagogy, under the banner of an Islamic ethos. Classes were organised in Arabic language and literature, religious studies, history, natural sciences, geography, foreign languages (especially English), drawing and hand craft, sport, oration and anthems (*al-anāshīd*).<sup>27</sup> This was broadly similar to the curriculum reforms enacted by the Ministry of Education in 1922, which inserted nationalist topics such as ‘anthems’ and ‘civics’ into the elementary study programme and unified the overly disjointed and practical British curriculum.<sup>28</sup> In stark contrast to the disorganised *kuttāb* education, the school day of Madrasat al-Ghari was routinised and a system of examination and assessment put in place.<sup>29</sup> Both day and evening classes were offered to enable adult learners to top up their education while working. There was an expectation that those students who graduated would go on to attend secondary schools in Baghdad or become teachers at the school itself. A uniformed scout group was established alongside the regular classes. Through these activities the school’s architects sought to reach disenfranchised members of the Najafi community, both young and old, and pull them into the purview of the Arab national project.

While Madrasat al-Ghari slotted comfortably into the institutional nexus of the Iraqi educational system, it maintained its administrative independence and a distinct educational ethos. Through the 1920s, the Iraqi Director General of Education, Sati al-Husri, was a keen advocate of administrative centralisation and pedagogical uniformity. While he did not treat *al-ahliyya* schools such as Madrasat al-Ghari with the same disdain he reserved for foreign run

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<sup>26</sup> Al-Janabi, *Ta’rikh al-Najaf al-Ijtima’i*, 422.

<sup>27</sup> Kamal al-Din, *al-Najaf fi Ruba’ Qarn*, 86.

<sup>28</sup> Al-Husri, *Mudhakkirati, 1921 - 1941*, 211, 213.

<sup>29</sup> *Al-Najaf* 14, 17 July 1925, 3; 27, 11 December 1925, 3.

schools, he did attempt to increasingly subsume them into the administrative purview of the Ministry.<sup>30</sup> This created a number of tensions between the state and the school, which came to a head in 1925, when the Ministry attempted to sabotage plans by the Governing Body to open a secondary school in Najaf.<sup>31</sup> Although the plans eventually received backing of the state, the uneasy alliance evidences the competing state building priorities of the government and the school's Najafi founders. The latter preferred to preserve administrative autonomy over their community initiatives so they could shape their pedagogical agenda accordingly. This not only meant providing an education which was confessionally appropriate, but also one that corresponded with the students' economic and social needs.

One of the school's managers, Sami Nasir, advocated a holistic approach to education which focused on vocational training and applicable knowledge. He argued that education should be directed towards a 'programme of knowledge' with practical applications: his ideal curriculum put 'knowledge of the skills to gain a living' before all else.<sup>32</sup> Such opinions were commonly held in Najaf, where practical and relevant training was considered more economically valuable and ethical than bureaucratic employment with the state – dismissively equated with the self-interested pursuit of wealth.<sup>33</sup> A few years later, 'Ali al-Sharqi used this preference as proof of the strong nationalist inclinations of the Euphrates region as a whole.<sup>34</sup> These vocational preferences reflected an emerging strand in Iraqi pedagogical thinking throughout the 1920s and 1930s. The 'pragmatist' rebuttals to al-Husri's universal centralism have been analysed at length by a number of historians. Yet they are usually framed within the remit of state-elite discourses or as evidence of the influence – positive or negative – of

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<sup>30</sup> Al-Husri, *Mudhakkirati, 1921 - 1941*, 198–200.

<sup>31</sup> *Al-Najaf*, 23, 2 Octboer 1925, 3

<sup>32</sup> *Al-Najaf*, 35, 12 March 1926, 3.

<sup>33</sup> *Al-Najaf*, 20, 4 September 1925, 5.

<sup>34</sup> For analysis of this, see Chapter Six, 270.

American pedagogical ideas working their way through Iraq and the post-colonial world.<sup>35</sup> Such work has largely ignored the extent to which they reflected the material concerns of peripheral regions of Iraq, where a strong preference for local state craft had been synonymous with reformist activism since the days of the decentralisation movement in the Ottoman constitutional period.

As the lively political biographies of the schools' founders attest, Madrasat al-Ghari was as much as political project as it was an educational one. Soon after opening, its premises became a site for the public pageantry of Arabism in Najaf. The school's inauguration ceremony was attended by swathes of local notables, ulama and intellectuals. Speeches and poetry were delivered by prominent Iraqi poets from Najaf and elsewhere, such as Muhammad Mahdi al-Basir and Muhammad Mahdi al-Jawahiri, whose poem, 'al-'Ilm wa-Waṭaniyya' tied the school's foundation into narratives of national awakening: 'Oh knowledge, nations are fortunate to have you // Let a Sultan put your poison to the test // And let Iraq drink your amorousness // So that its raging thirst be cured and quenched // Discipline for us the morality of its people // Who are engulfed by ignorance and belligerence.'<sup>36</sup> The inauguration and later celebrations were fundraising opportunities. The school's founders used them to impress upon the Najafi population their civic responsibility to support the ongoing Nahda.<sup>37</sup> Their efforts paid off, with several wealthy merchant – including Muhsin Shalash – frequently making huge donations.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Pursley, *Familiar Futures*, 84–89; David M. Ment, 'The American Role in Education in the Middle East: Ideology and Experiment, 1920 - 1940', *Paedagogica Historica* 47, no. 1–2 (2011): 173–89; Reeva Simon, *Iraq Between the Two World Wars: The Militarist Origins of Tyranny* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 69 - 105.

<sup>36</sup> Muhammad Mahdi al-Jawahiri, *Diwan al-Jawahiri* (Baghdad: Matba'at al-Baghdad, 1949), 105. A similar level of highly publicised fanfare accompanied the opening of Madrasat Ahli Baghdad in 1919. See *al-Lisan*, 6, 1 December 1919, 178 – 180.

<sup>37</sup> *Al-Najaf*, 34, 8 March 1926, 2.

<sup>38</sup> Al-Khalili, *Hakadha Araftuhum*, Vol. 1, 166; Kamal al-Din, *al-Najaf fi Ruba' Qarn*, 88. For a list of donors, see *al-Najaf*, 24, 23 October 1925, 2

The school was regularly used as a site for welcoming royal dignitaries, while its pupils and scouts formed the physical lines of young men waving, shouting, playing instruments and baring ‘flowers in their hands’ as the royal motorcade arrived in town for the King’s annual visits.<sup>39</sup> When Crown Prince Ghazi was welcomed in 1925, the school became one of those rare premises where the poor, as well as the ulama and ‘*ayān*, came face to face with their sovereign to be.<sup>40</sup> All these activities were rhetorically embellished in the local press as ‘pure evidence’ of the Arab sentiments of Najaf and its unconditional obedience to the Iraqi Arab nation.<sup>41</sup>

Through hiring teachers from abroad, Madrasat al-Ghari literally imported Arab educators into Najaf. This process reflected a nation-wide practice in interwar Iraq as well as the narrowing of the spatial connections shaping Najafī educational life.<sup>42</sup> Trans-national connections were now confined almost exclusively to the Arab sphere. The school’s first manager, Yahyi Effendi, was a graduate of the Baghdadi teaching college from Mosul, while several other teachers were originally from Baghdad.<sup>43</sup> Importing teachers from Syria and Egypt, such as ‘Abd al-Mu’ti Effendi Hijazi and the third manager of the school, Sami Nasir, enhanced connections between Najaf and the wider Arab world.<sup>44</sup> When ‘Abd al-Mu’ti left his position in 1925 a farewell celebration was thrown to highlight the necessity of maintaining ‘ties and links between the two Arab state, Iraq and Egypt.’<sup>45</sup> Unlike many other schools in the Euphrates, Madrasat al-Ghari hired few, if any, Iranian teachers.

While these activities were designed to illustrate the strong support of the school’s founders for the Iraqi Arab state, they also represented efforts to shape the representation of

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<sup>39</sup> *Al-Najaf*, 4, 8 May 1925, 2.

<sup>40</sup> *Al-Najaf*, 4, 8 May 1925, 3.

<sup>41</sup> *Al-Najaf*, 4, 8 May 1925, 2.

<sup>42</sup> Simon, *Iraq Between the Two World Wars*, 69.

<sup>43</sup> Kamal al-Din, *al-Najaf fi Ruba’ Qarn*, 91.

<sup>44</sup> Al-Janabi, *Ta’rikh al-Najaf al-Ijtima’i*, 433.

<sup>45</sup> *Al-Najaf*, 15, 24 July 1925, 3.

Najafi society by extinguishing its ethnic and linguistic diversity. According to the new script of the Najafi Nahda, Najaf was not, at its core, a diverse and cosmopolitan city. Through a cursory reading of the Najafi press, one might easily assume that the city was more loyal and more ‘Arab’ than anywhere in the whole of Iraq. Other sources reveal that such narratives were efforts to whitewash a more complicated social reality, where dissatisfaction with the central government was sometimes expressed through the harnessing of non-Iraqi symbolism.

British intelligence reportage, as well as the memoirs of Muhammad ‘Ali Kamal al-Din, show that, during the King’s 1925 visit a large Persian flag was flown in the streets of Najaf alongside Iraqi ones. The reason it was hung allegedly related to the ‘extreme chauvinism’ of some members of the school’s community, who had been deliberately provoking the Iranian diaspora.<sup>46</sup> One of the students from Madrasat al-Ghari tore the flag down prior to the King’s arrival, precipitating a fight in the streets between the students and those Muhammad ‘Ali described as ‘Persian nationals’ in the city. On another occasion, posters of Kamal Atatürk needed to be quickly removed from the school’s library before the arrival of al-Husri.<sup>47</sup> Similar events took place in Karbala during the same year, while the event in general is reminiscent of an oft cited incident that took place in Kadhimiyya during a Muharram reenactment of the Karbala passion, when the Iraqi flag was purposely flown next to Yazid bin Mu’awiyya.<sup>48</sup>

Madrasat al-Ghari was subject to a sustained polemical attack by the minbar preacher Sayyid Salih al-Hilli and some of his supporters in 1923. Ostensibly on the grounds that the school was promoting secularism, al-Hilli, whose ability to provoke public outcry was infamous, inspired the urban clans, *Zghurt* and *Shmurt*, to attack the school, forcing some of

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<sup>46</sup> Kamal al-Din, *al-Najaf fi Ruba’ Qarn*, 105.

<sup>47</sup> Kamal al-Din, 95.

<sup>48</sup> Kamal al-Din, 105; al-Husri, *Mudhakkirati, 1921 - 1941*, 88–89. Intelligence Report 10, 14 May 1925, CO 730/75, TNA; SSO to Air Staff Intelligence, 4 May and 6 May 1925, AIR 23 379, TNA.

its teachers into hiding and almost ‘terminating the school and the modern *nahḍa*.’<sup>49</sup> Order was only re-established after the state arrested and imprisoned al-Hilli.<sup>50</sup> The contrast between the unharmonious relations between the school and the wider Najafi population, on the one hand, and the descriptions of the spontaneous national pageantry of Faysal’s reception in the local press, on the other, is striking. They show that the correct articulation of nationalist sentiment had to be sustained and nurtured through carefully choreographed physical and rhetorical spectacles in civil society and – occasionally – violence, to paper over the cracks in a delicate Najafi social fabric.

This was a social fabric in flux, and one which was no longer able to accommodate the ambiguous ethno-linguistic culture of the pre-national era. The interwar period witnessed a heightening of social fissures between Najaf’s ethnic groups. Such social fissures did exist before, but they had rarely been determinative of political behaviour.<sup>51</sup> The reformist initiatives of al-Shahrastani and his peers and the enthusiasm surrounding the Ottoman and Iranian constitutional revolutions meant that calls for Iranian–Ottoman unity dominated in the pre-war reformist milieu. Al-Shahrastani’s repeated calls for such unity, as well as his personal Arab-Persian ethno-political subjectivity is illustrative of this. Such comfortable ethno-linguistic ambidextrousness was out of kilter with the requirements of nation-state modernity. On becoming Minister of Education, he was forced to formally testify that he would become an Iraqi citizen as soon as this could be officially regulated.<sup>52</sup>

Arab-ness and Persian-ness were both forged into mutually exclusive identitarian categories within an emerging Arabist discourse, at both a state and local level. Such rivalries were not, as the British colonial authorities, the Najafi nationalist, and subsequent cadres of

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<sup>49</sup> Kamal al-Din, *al-Najaf fi Ruba’ Qarn*, 98, 100–102; al-Janabi, *Ta’rikh al-Najaf al-Ijtima’i*, 434; al-Khaqani, *Shu’ara’ al-Ghari*, Vol. 4, 155.

<sup>50</sup> Intelligence Report 4, 21 February 1924, CO730 57, TNA, 11.

<sup>51</sup> Amanat, ‘In Between the Madrasa and the Marketplace’, 113.

<sup>52</sup> Nakash, *The Shi’is of Iraq*, 107.

nationalist historians have assumed, the cause of social tensions.<sup>53</sup> But by the mid-century, the Arabist milieu surrounding Madrasat al-Ghari had come to see Najafi society as encompassing discrete and immutable ethnic categories. In his memoirs, Muhammad ‘Ali Kamal al-Din framed Najaf as split into two groups: the Arab Iraqi natives (*al-waṭaniyūn*), on the one hand, and the regional migrants, who usually lived in seclusion, preferring not to mix with the locals, on the other. ‘Negative things’ were said about the migrant groups, remembered Kamal al-Din, but he was not particularly concerned about their ‘rivalry’ with the natives. However, he had noticed a few impurities in the local dialect that were cause for concern.<sup>54</sup> When the flow of Iranian visitors to Najaf dried up following the incident with the flag, he commented that the city ‘benefited morally/culturally’ (*ma’nawī*) from the reduction in the influence of the diaspora.<sup>55</sup> What is pertinent about Kamal al-Din’s testimony was his acknowledgement that many of the so-called migrants did not have citizenship of their home nations and were, for all intents and purposes, Najafi. He thus accepted that their designation as foreign was related to their cultural proclivities, more than any tangible political identity. Implicit acknowledgement of the culturally constructed nature of Persian identity was synonymous with the attitude of the Najafi press towards those teachers and writers from Iranian backgrounds who it considered as assets for the ongoing Nahda. Despite their ethnic backgrounds, poets like Muhammad Mahdi al-Jawahiri and several Iranian ‘graduates from the [Baghdadi] teacher training college’ were celebrated as culturally Arab.<sup>56</sup>

The milieu surrounding Madrasat al-Ghari played on the novel distinction between Arabs and Persians to explain some of the opposition to the school throughout the 1920s. Kamal al-Din stressed how it was a ‘Iranian *‘alim*’ who first advised one of the evening students

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<sup>53</sup> Al-Janabi, *Ta’rikh al-Najaf al-Ijtima’i*, 424.

<sup>54</sup> Kamal al-Din, *al-Najaf fi Ruba’ Qarn*, 61–63.

<sup>55</sup> Kamal al-Din, 106.

<sup>56</sup> *Al-Najaf*, 10, 19 June 1925, 2.

to unenroll from the school, while it was the ‘racial arrogance’ of some of the ‘foreign elements in Najaf’ which partially explained the *fitna* against the school in 1923.<sup>57</sup> It made no difference to Kamal al-Din that the most serious threat came from al-Hilli and the urban clans, all of whom were ethnically Arab. Nor did it matter that al-Hilli’s principal opponent in Najafi society was the ethnically Persian *Marja*’ al-Isfahani, while several of the leading figures in the anti-colonial movement of the years of revolution – recognised by Kamal al-Din in his memoirs of those years – were from Iranian scholarly families.

These discursive manoeuvres mirrored British colonial and state-elite discourses. The British and some members of the Iraqi government also interpreted the Persian presence as detrimental to political modernisation along national lines.<sup>58</sup> Yet according to these perspectives, the epitomes of the ‘conservative Persian ulama’ were the *Marja*’s al-Isfahani, Na’ini, and Jawad al-Jawahiri: in other words, some of the ‘nationalists’ biggest allies. Meanwhile the British represented men like al-Hilli as part of an insurgent Arab revolt – which included the Kashif al-Ghita family – against the Persian hegemony. The latter apparently disapproved of the decadence and wealth of the Persian ‘popes’ and enjoyed the support of Madrasat al-Ghari.<sup>59</sup> The Iraqi nationality law provided institutional backing to these discursive manoeuvres, and has been interpreted as one of the principal mechanisms of the ‘politics of exclusion and inclusion and the institutionalisation of difference in Iraq.’<sup>60</sup>

Scholars have rightly shown how the formation of the Iraqi state and the implementation of the nationality law ‘sharpened national identities’, forcing ‘Shi’is in the country to assess their national identity and make hard decisions as to their future in the new

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<sup>57</sup> Kamal al-Din, *al-Najaf fi Ruba’ Qarn*, 92, 98.

<sup>58</sup> For the state efforts to tarnish Shi’i activist, such as the mujtahids during the election boycott, as being Persian, see Luizard, *La Formation de l’Irak Contemporain*, 471–72.

<sup>59</sup> SSO Baghdad, 31 December 1925, AIR 23 379/16, TNA, 1. For reference to the Persian ulama as Catholic, see: SSO Baghdad to ASI, 18 June 1932, AIR23/385/11, TNA.

<sup>60</sup> Zainab Saleh, ‘On Iraqi Nationality: Law, Citizenship, and Exclusion’, *The Arab Studies Journal* 21, no. 1 (2013): 49.



state.’<sup>61</sup> The anti-Persian discourse of the Najafi milieu shows how this phenomenon also reflected bottom-up processes of self-definition. The discursive requirements of a novel form of nationalism led both the British and state elites, on the one hand, and the Najafi Arabists, on the other, to explain social divisions based on rigid ethno-linguistic categories. Both applied the Persian label to those elements who posed the most substantial threat to their respective priorities. For the British, this was the activist mujtahids who had led the anti-Mandate campaign in the early 1920s, while for the Arabists, it was those who opposed their various pedagogical and political reform projects. The architects of both discourses were simplifying more complex social realities, to serve their long-term political agendas of representing and constructing a monocultural society in a cosmopolitan city.

### *Affecting the Nahda: The Interwar Najafi Press*

In 1925, *al-Najaf* became the first newspaper established in Najaf in the interwar period, marking an era of consistent growth in Arab journalistic production which lasted until the end of the monarchical period. The proliferations of Najafi newspapers and journals in the 1920s and 1930s was facilitated by a rapid expansion in the city’s printing apparatus – as least seven new presses were opened in the interwar period.<sup>62</sup> This enabled intellectuals to publish at home, rather than relying on expensive printers in Lebanon or Baghdad. Each journal or newspaper usually held its own *majlis* or associated with some society or club.<sup>63</sup> Institutional and personally rivalries were common, but so too was collaboration among and between people of different backgrounds and political persuasions.

What Madrasat al-Ghari attempted to do for the young and poorly educated, *al-Najaf* and its successor publications sought for the reading public. Following in the footsteps of *al-*

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<sup>61</sup> Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq*, 105–7.

<sup>62</sup> Mahbuba, *Madi al-Najaf*, 175–78.

<sup>63</sup> Al-Qabiji and al-Qabiji, *Hidarat al-Najaf al-Ashraf*, 189.

*Furat* and *al-Istiqlal*, *al-Najaf* was a lesson-plan on the civic practice of nationalism, sometimes subtly and sometimes not so subtly directing its readership on how to perform their new national subjecthood. The newspaper brought the political ideology of Iraqi and Arab nationalism to the Najafi public by providing a narrative of the city's intellectual and political awakening as well as news on local and regional political developments. While such concerns included at times lengthy and sensationalist accounts of Arab anti-colonial struggles in far off lands, such as the Rif rebellion in Morocco, the overarching narrative of *al-Najaf* did not focus on grand historical narratives – of the Arab revolt or the 1920 revolution, for example – but local issues pertaining to the political, intellectual and pedagogical life of the city.<sup>64</sup>

The political and intellectual subjectivity of *al-Najaf*'s founder and editor, Yusef Rajib, was shaped by his upbringing. Rajib had literally come of age in the midst of the Ottoman defeat and the first Najafi anti-colonial revolution. Born in 1900 the son of an *'aṭṭār*, he spent most of his youth working on his family market stall with his brother, Nasir. While completing a traditional education at the Najafi *kuttāb* schools, he developed a particular interest in *adab*, consuming with interest the poetry of Abu Tammam and al-Mutanabbi. Years of war and revolution halted his education but shaped his political maturation. To top up his education following the establishment of the Iraqi state, Rajib enrolled himself in Madrasat al-Ghari as an adult learner. On graduating, he became a teacher in the school itself before embarking on his journalistic career with *al-Najaf*. In 1927, after closing *al-Najaf*, he travelled to Baghdad to work as a teacher in Madrasat al-Husayni al-Ahliyya and, later, as editor of the newspapers *al-Zaman* and *al-Nahda al-Iraqiyya*.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> See, for example, *al-Najaf*, 29, 2 January 1926, 1; 4, 8 May 1925, 2; and 44, 4 June 1926, 1.

<sup>65</sup> Munir Bakr Takriti, *al-Katib al-Sihafi wa-l-Siyasi Yusef Rajib* (Baghdad: Dar al-Rashid li-l-Nashr, 1981), 11–15.

While Madrasat al-Ghari had shaped the political and intellectual outlook of Rajib, *al-Najaf* was shaped by the intellectual milieu of Madrasat al-Ghari. Historians have highlighted the importance of shared educational background for the formation of political subjectivities in the late Ottoman Empire, especially among state educated Arab elites.<sup>66</sup> Rajib's social and professional network were defined by the school's teachers, alumni and supporters. These represented a new class of journalist intellectuals, who often derived from leading clerical families in Najaf, but also included residents in the city from elsewhere in Iraq and the Arab world. This 'new type of intellectual' dissasociated itself from the old ties and hierarchies defining social status in pre-War Najaf and, much like the generations of Nahdawis from across the Middle East who had preceded it, lived off 'translation, journalism and teaching' in close association with the community and state schools established in Najaf and its surrounds.<sup>67</sup> Teachers and managers from the school, such as Muhammad 'Ali Kamal al-Din, 'Abd al-Mawla al-Tarihi, Sami Nasir and Fawzi Hananu, regularly used *al-Najaf* to articulate their views on nationalism and education. The pages of *al-Najaf* were a space for these up-and-coming young intellectuals to have their work read alongside journalist intellectuals from elsewhere in Iraq, as well as an older generation of poets and thinkers who had come of age in the post-revolutionary period, such as al-Sharqi, Jamal Sidqi Zahawi and Muhammad Mahdi al-Basir.<sup>68</sup>

The journalist intellectuals framed themselves as those educated and refined people who were taking responsibility for the ongoing Najafi Nahda. The scholarly Nahda of the city (*nahdat al-Najaf al-'ilmiyya*), one of the first anonymously authored articles in the newspaper

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<sup>66</sup> Michael Provence, *The Last Ottoman Generation and the Making of the Modern Middle East* (Cambridge: University Press, 2017), 10.

<sup>67</sup> Fawwaz Traboulsi, 'Ahmad Faris al-Shidyaq', in *Arabic Thought beyond the Liberal Age: Towards an Intellectual History of the Nahda*, ed. Max Weiss and Jens Hanssen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 177.

<sup>68</sup> See various articles from the one-year anniversary addition: *al-Najaf*, 42, 25 May 1926.

argued, was a war against ‘ignorance, bad morality and corrupted traditions’, whose first objective was the ‘education of children and the illiterate.’ According to the writer, Najaf was pregnant with potential but still stagnating ‘like a poet with an incurable illness.’<sup>69</sup> The meaning of this stagnation related to the generally low levels of education across the mass of the population, but it also related to the city’s cultural diversity and ambiguous ethno-linguistic identity. The reform of education was therefore of fundamental importance. Reflecting the pedagogical agenda of Madrasat al-Ghari, writers – who were often also teachers – argued for education as the key to the formation of national subjects. Al-Tarihi held that ‘schools and education were the door to prosperity and civilisation.’ The student will ‘adore the principles of the school he is raised in’, so they needed to be ‘national (*waṭaniyya*), free and prosperous with indigenous professors qualified to know the value of the mission towards which they are working.’<sup>70</sup> Muhammad ‘Ali Kamal al-Din warned that schools run by non-Arab teachers would render the nation a ‘terrifying ghost’ in front of their pupils. For a city as diverse as Najaf with many teachers and schools that could be considered culturally Persian, this was a warning that had tangible repercussions.<sup>71</sup>

Tightly knit and incestuous networks underpinned Najafī Arab journalism in the interwar period, most of which returned in some way to Rajib’s initial publication. Just as *al-Najaf* was closing shop in 1927, Rajib’s colleague, al-Tarihi (b. 1899),<sup>72</sup> founded Najaf’s first interwar literary scientific journal, *al-Hira*. Unlike Rajib, al-Tarihi hailed from a prominent scholarly family who hosted the *majlis al-shara’* in the Buraq quarter of the city.<sup>73</sup> As its title suggests, *al-Hira* was a geography lesson on the Arab-ness of Najaf. Its debut article affirmed

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<sup>69</sup> *Al-Najaf*, 1, 17 April 1925, 3.

<sup>70</sup> *Al-Najaf*, 7, 29 May 1925, 2.

<sup>71</sup> *Al-Najaf*, 7, 29 May 1925, 1.

<sup>72</sup> Muhammad Said al-Tarihi, ‘Mukhtutat Maktabat Al al-Tarihi fi-Najaf al-Ishraf, al-‘Iraq’, in *Journal of Islamic Manuscript* 5 no. 1 (2014), 83 – 110, 107.

<sup>73</sup> Al-Asadi, *al-Najaf al-Ashraf fi al-‘Ahd al-‘Uthmani al-Akhir wa-l-Ihtilal al-Baritani*, 233.

the journal's commitment to the Najafi and Iraqi Nahda, linking them both to the 'important cities of the Arab world' and the 'glory of Arabism (*majd al- 'urūba*).'<sup>74</sup> Then it was left to al-Sharqi to take the journal's readership on a historical tour of the 'Arab Capital' that was al-Hira, the ancient city located between Najaf and Kufa and one of the first Arab settlements in Iraq, complete with 'civilisation, palaces, orchards and agriculture.' Al-Sharqi acknowledged that this was a Christian Arab settlement and mentioned some of the architectural remains of Christian sites in the area. 'If you know anything about the origins of the Arabs in Iraq,' he continued, 'you will know something about al-Hira.' Al-Sharqi's articles came under the subsection of 'forgotten relics (*al-āthār al-mansī*)', which is a good indication of how novel this ancient historical narrative was in Najaf in the 1920s.<sup>75</sup> Yet by placing the articles at the forefront of the journal – indeed, by using 'al-Hira' as the journal's title – the men of the Najafi Nahda were aiming to represent Najaf as an Arab city before all else, with an Arab cultural component which preceded even the Islamic conquests.

*Al-Hira* provided the first platform for Ja'far al-Khalili (b. 1904), another schoolteacher and aspirational writer, to enter the Najafi media scene as a special editor on educational affairs. His idealistic musings on the benefits of modern education framed the modern national school as a place of unprecedented equity where a 'young child' stalking the back streets of Najaf could 'sit by the side of the son of a minster and the grandchild of kings, on the same chair, in the same environment, and train his ears to moral and religious anthems as well as fiery patriotic chants.'<sup>76</sup> Al-Khalili's work on *al-Hira* was short-lived, as the journal survived for only three issues. He went on to open three newspapers in Najaf throughout the 1920s and 1930s, the last of which, *al-Hatif*, will be discussed in some detail below.

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<sup>74</sup> *Al-Hira*, 1/1, 29 January 1927, 2.

<sup>75</sup> *Al-Hira*, 1/1, 29 January 1927, 17 – 18.

<sup>76</sup> *Al-Hira*, 1/1, 29 January 1927, 21 – 22.

The early 1930s witnessed two additional former colleagues or schoolmates of Rajib embarking on careers as editors or newspaper owners. Rajib's assistant editor on *al-Najaf*, Muhammad 'Ali al-Balagha, founded *al-I'tidal* in 1933. Al-Balagha (b. 1903) was the quintessential man of the interwar Najafi Nahda for his wide involvement in civic activism and local politics. He served as a member of the Majlis al-Baladiyya and the chamber of commerce. Along with another regular contributor to *al-Najaf*, the minbar preacher Shaykh Muhammad 'Ali al-Ya'qubi, al-Balagha founded Jam'iyyat al-Rabita al-'Ilmiyya al-Adabiyya in 1933.<sup>77</sup> Al-Rabita was a political and literary society which organised local festivals and mourning ceremonies; welcomed foreign delegations in Najaf; established a public library of printed works; and campaigned on the Palestine issue.<sup>78</sup> Al-Rabita hosted one of the most important *majālis* in Najaf during the interwar period, which is rumoured to have been one of the first locations for meetings of Hizb al-Ba'ath in the city.<sup>79</sup>

In 1934 *al-Misbah* became the third Najafi journal edited by an alumnus of Madrasat al-Ghari. It was established by Muhammad Salih Bahr al-'Ulum, (b. 1910), who would go on to become a famous radical poet in Baghdad.<sup>80</sup> As the end of the interwar period approached, a further three journals and newspapers were founded in Najaf: Muhammad Hassan al-Suri's *al-Hadara*, Muhammad Rida Hassani's *al-Qadisiyya* and 'Abd al-Rida al-Kashif al-Ghita's *al-Ghari*, which stayed in print for a further 30 years. Another 13 titles were released between 1941 and the fall of the Iraqi monarchy in 1958.<sup>81</sup> Taken together, the titles of the interwar press captured the ethos of the Najafi reform movement: *al-Najaf*, *al-Hira* and *al-Ghari* were

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<sup>77</sup> Muhammad Hussein 'Ali al-Saghir, *al-'Itidal: Majala Shahriya Taduru fi al-Najaf: Tabhathu fi al-'Ilm wa-l-Adab wa-l-Ta'rikh wa-l-Ijtima'* (Najaf: al-Ataba al-Alawiya al-Muqaddas, 2009), 6–7.

<sup>78</sup> Ja'far al-Khalili, *Mawsu'at al-'Atabat al-Muqaddasa: al-Juz al-Thani min Qism al-Najaf* (Beirut: Mu'assasa al-'alami li-Matbu'at, 1987), 256. For the activities of al-Rabita, see *al-I'tidal*, 2/2, July 1934, 94; 2/3, August, 144; 2/4, September, 192; 2/9, February 1935, 389.

<sup>79</sup> Al-Qabiji and al-Qabiji, *Hidarat al-Najaf al-Ashraf*, 190.

<sup>80</sup> Jones, *The Dangers of Poetry*, 103–29. Muhammad Salih Bahr al-Ulum was a member of Jam'iyyat al-Shabiba al-Amila al-najafiyya. See Sharara Bilqis Sharara, *Muhammad Sharara: min al-Iyman illa Hurriyat Fikr* (Damascus: Dar al-Mada, 2009), 45.

<sup>81</sup> Naji Wada'a, *Lamahat min Ta'rikh al-Najaf al-Ashraf, Vol. 1* (Najaf: Matba'at al-Qada, 1973), 91–92.

all evocative of place, with *al-Hira* especially denoting the Arab history of the region. *Al-Hatif* (best translated as ‘The Call’), *al-Hadara* (Civilization), *al-Misbah* (The Lamp) and *al-I’tidal* (Moderation), were all evocative of the process and goal: careful progress towards an authentic national modernity.

The journalist intellectuals who opened newspapers and journals sought to position themselves between their communities and the state or non-state elites. Newspapers lobbied the government directly, pioneering a ‘politics of demand’ for greater investment and infrastructural reform.<sup>82</sup> One of the most recurrent genres in *al-Najaf* were articles and editorials which recorded in grim details the dismal state of the water supply, public health and, of course, educational provision.<sup>83</sup> The government was culpable, but so were the rich members of society. The regular use of anonymous or pseudonymous authorship, along with the first-person plural – ‘we are’, ‘we want’ and ‘us’ – endowed the newspaper with a populist universalism.<sup>84</sup> Juxtaposed with ‘them’ and ‘they want’ – the government – its pages took ‘on an activist subjectivity of [their] own in the minds of correspondents’, over and above the individual subjectivity of the author.<sup>85</sup> The concerns of the Najafi journalist intellectuals were real: Najaf and southern Iraq was suffering from chronic underinvestment from a Baghdad-dominated state. Yet they were used in the Najafi context as a calling card by the new intellectual classes, in their efforts to act as the ‘sole spokesperson’ for the Najafi community of Iraqi Arabs. It is testament to the endemic nature of the government neglect that similar concerns – about malaria, unemployment and poor educational provision – were being raised by *al-Hatif* ten years later.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> For a comparable case-study of the ‘politics of demand’, see Chalabi, *The Shi’is of Jabal ‘Amil*, 115–17.

<sup>83</sup> *Al-Najaf*, 17, 14 August 1925, 1; 47, 28 June 1926, 1; 49, 10 July 1926, 1; and 16, 7 August 1925, 1.

<sup>84</sup> See, for example, *al-Najaf*, 8, 5 June 1925, 1; 10, 19 June 1925, 2; 18, 21 August 1925, 3.

<sup>85</sup> Stephanie Newell, *The Power to Name: A History of Anonymity in Colonial West Africa* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2013), 30.

<sup>86</sup> See, for example, *al-Hatif*, 125, 2 June 1937, 3; 126, 10 June 1938, 3.

*Al-Hatif* was the third and final journalistic project of Ja'far al-Khalili and the most successful and long-lasting of all the Najafi publications established during the interwar period. Al-Khalili's biography was archetypal for a Najafi journalist intellectual. Born to a prestigious ulama family of Persian origin in 1904, he had been educated in one of the Iranian community schools in Najaf, Madrasat al-'Alawiyya.<sup>87</sup> Like Rajib, his early years were defined by political turmoil and the anxious uncertainties of war. Arabism came to al-Khalili through his brother, 'Abbas, a founding member of Jam'iyyat al-Nahda al-Islamiyya which organised the defense of Najaf during the 1918 revolution. From the emotive and personal recollections laced into al-Khalili's biographical dictionary of Najaf, the influence of his exiled brother in shaping of Ja'far's political outlook is clear.<sup>88</sup> He founded his first relatively unsuccessful journalistic projects in 1930 with the newspaper, *al-Fajr al-Sadiq*. Two years later *al-Ra'i* became his second, equally short lived, attempt. Finally, in 1935 he founded *al-Hatif*, which remained in print until 1954. Al-Khalili used his own print house, the Matba'a al-Ra'i, for the latter two publications, relocating the printer along with *al-Hatif* to Baghdad in 1948.<sup>89</sup>

The voluminous editions of *al-Hatif* indicate the high degree of Najafi integration into the cultural and political environment of the Iraqi state, as well as the strong ties that continued to bind the city to the rest of the Arab world.<sup>90</sup> Like *al-Najaf* before it, *al-Hatif's* pedagogical platform continued to reflect local, national and regional concerns, while building on the civic discourses innate to the Najafi public sphere. Among the pedagogical campaigns pursued by the journal was a concern for female education. This was framed as the only means to ensure mothers possessed the necessary knowledge to instil correct and masculine morality (*al-rujūla*) in the next generation of nationalists.<sup>91</sup> Such concerns mirrored national debates in Iraq and

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<sup>87</sup> al-Khalili, *Hakadha Araftuhum*, Vol. 2, 11.

<sup>88</sup> Al-Khalili, *Hakadha Araftuhum*, Vol. 1, 181.

<sup>89</sup> Mahbuba, *Madi al-Najaf*, 175–78.

<sup>90</sup> Bashkin, *The Other Iraq*, 172–73.

<sup>91</sup> *Al-Hatif*, 8, 21 June 1935, 3; 9, 28 June 1935, 3.



across the Arab world, where the scope and remit of female education was being contested within emerging nationalist discourses.<sup>92</sup>

The team of journalists and editors working on al-Khalili's newspapers reflected the endurance of trans-national Arab and Shi'i connections within the post-Ottoman Middle Eastern public sphere. The two men who provided almost weekly columns for *al-Hatif*, and who did most to promote the shared political and social projects endorsed by al-Khalili, were both originally from southern Lebanon. The son of the Shaykh of a small village in Jabal Amil, Muhammad Sharara (b. 1906) travelled to Najaf in 1920. He was joined soon after by Husayn Muruwwa (b. 1910). Both men had travelled to pursue a religious education. But they became interested in the developing Arabist movement soon after their arrival.<sup>93</sup> They quickly associated themselves with a group of young Lebanese and Najafi scholars critical of the traditional methods of religious education, called Jam'iyyat al-Shabiba al-'Amiliyya al-Najafiyya. Their journalistic careers began with *al-Irfan* (see Fig. 1). This led in turn to work with al-Khalili on *al-Ra'i* and, later, *al-Hatif*. While throughout the early 1930s, Sharara and Muruwwa remained working towards their certificates of *ijtihād*, in 1936 they both left the *hawza* and became teachers in a secondary school in the Euphrates.<sup>94</sup> Their political and intellectual careers thereafter have been well studied: Muruwwa authored an influential materialist philosophical monograph on early Islamic history in the late 1970s; Sharara moved to Baghdad, joined the Communist Party, was later imprisoned and eventually exiled.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Sara Pursley, 'Building the Nation through the Production of Difference: The Gendering of Education in Iraq, 1928 - 58', in *Writing the Modern History of Iraq: Historiographical and Political Challenges*, ed. Riccardo Bocco et al. (Singapore: World Scientific Publishing Co. Pte Ltd, 2012), 133; Noga Efrati, *Women in Iraq: Past Meets Present* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 88; Lisa Pollard, *Nurturing the Nation the Family Politics of Modernizing, Colonizing and Liberating Egypt (1805 - 1923)* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 122.

<sup>93</sup> Sharara, *Muhammad Sharara*, 36.

<sup>94</sup> Sharara, 73-74.

<sup>95</sup> Steve Tamari, 'Reclaiming the Islamic Heritage: Marxism and Islam in the Thought of Husayn Muruwah', *The Arab Studies Journal* 3, no. 1 (1995): 122; Silvia Naef, 'The Arab Shi'a and the Fascination with Communism: The Example of the Life of Husayn Muruwwa (1910-1987)', *Asien Afrika Lateinamerika* 28 (2000): 541-42; Sharara, *Muhammad Sharara*, 267-327.



*Fig. 1. Husayn Muruwwa (seated far right) and Muhammad Sharara (seated far left) with Jam'iyyat al-Shabiba al-'Amiliyya al-Najafiyya*<sup>96</sup>

*Al-Hatif* endowed its nationalist posturing with an Arab regionalism which had only ever been a subtext of earlier Najafi publications. This was partly reflected in the diversity of journalist contributions. The regular 'Amili columnists were joined by figures such as the Egyptian academic Nadhla 'Abdullah al-Hakim and the Lebanese teacher and writer Dalal Safadi.<sup>97</sup> These were some of the first women published in the Najafi public sphere. Along with other Najafi publications of the 1930s, the newspaper presented pan-Arabism as a coherent political programme, rather than a vague regional identity.<sup>98</sup> Starting in the early 1930s, al-Khalili left Najaf regularly in search of content for his newspapers, hoping that the intellectuals and politicians he met would send in material for publication. Yet unlike al-Shahrastani, whose

<sup>96</sup> *Al-Irfan*, 15/7, March 1928, 728.

<sup>97</sup> *Al-Hatif*, 77, 11 June 1937, 4; 80, 2 July 1937, 4.

<sup>98</sup> *Al-Hatif*, 105, 7 January 1938, 7; *al-I'tidal*, 3/1, June 1935, 56.

religious and journalistic connections had led him down the Persian Gulf and eventually to India, al-Khalili visited Lebanon and Syria. His absences were so regular and unproductive at first that they provoked the indignation of his temporary editor, Sharara, who complained in a letter to al-Khalili in 1934 that *al-Ra'i* was 'weak in both *adabī* and financial terms' because al-Khalili's frequent travels had not precipitated the influx of articles and poetry he had anticipated.<sup>99</sup> These problems subsided with *al-Hatīf*, which secured financial backing from Muhsin Shalash.<sup>100</sup> Al-Khalili spent much of the second year of the newspaper reporting from across Syria, Lebanon and Palestine. The ease of his travel and the naturalness with which he nurtured connections with the people he met along the way highlights the endurance of a more expansive regional socio-political environment which the formation of post-war international borders struggled to undermine.<sup>101</sup> His articles evoked a shared Arab political territory, within the backdrop of the deteriorating situation in Palestine.

The Palestine issue increasingly came to provide context for the regional posturing of *al-Hatīf* and other Najafi print media. It became a new script and lesson plan for the Arabisation of the Najafi milieu which engendered a common cause between the Arabist intellectuals and the men of the *hawza*. Contrary to the assertions of some historians that Iraqi Shi'is were critical of both pan-Arabism and its associated Palestinian solidarity campaign, both sentiments found considerable oxygen in the Najafi public sphere.<sup>102</sup> With the beginning of the Palestinian anti-colonial revolution in 1936, *al-Hatīf* published regular updates on political developments, while Najafi civil society mobilised the wider population in protest, periodically closing down markets and organising mass rallies in which individuals such as Muruwwa and Muhammad

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<sup>99</sup> Sharara, *Muhammad Sharara*, 65.

<sup>100</sup> Al-Khalili, *Hakadha Araftuhum*, Vol. 1, 178.

<sup>101</sup> *Al-Hatīf*, 43, 21 August 1936, 1; 48, 25 September 1936, 1; 49, 2 October 1936, 1; 51, October 1936, 3.

<sup>102</sup> Michael Eppel, *The Palestine Conflict in the History of Modern Iraq: The Dynamics of Involvement 1928-1948*. (Ilford: Frank Cass, 2019), 28.

Husayn Kashif al-Ghita delivered speeches on the need for Arab and Islamic unity.<sup>103</sup> The culture of nationalism in Najaf, as in much of the Arab Middle East, was becoming increasingly linked to the Palestine issue. Pan-Arab political positions expressed in *al-Hatif* and other Najafi journals such as *al-I'tidal* were frequently framed within the context of Palestine, which represented both the fragmentation of the Arab nation, as well as a shared political fixation.<sup>104</sup>

### *The Najafi Nahda and the Shi'i Religious Establishment*

The Shi'i religious establishment represented a problem for the men of the Najafi Nahda. This was on account of its cosmopolitanism, its alleged stubbornness in the face of change and, especially, its Persian-ness. By the mid-1920s this had precipitated a critical discourse against Shi'i institutions and, to some extent, Shi'i religious culture in general. In his only article for *al-Najaf*, al-Sharqi offered a bleak summary of the intellectual movement in Najaf, which heaped blame on its religious culture. His narrative stressed the importance of Najaf as a 'place' for the emergence of the 'Najafi spirit and its psychological development', a reference which should be read in the context of his work on the Arab-ness of al-Hira. This focus implicitly decentred Shi'ism from the intellectual history of Najaf. The Shi'a, he noted, had scholarly cities which migrated according to social and political circumstances. He criticised the nature of the Shi'i religious establishment as well as the scholarly culture it had precipitated. The 'scholarly centralisation in Najaf', he argued, 'was in a scattered and disorganised manner.'<sup>105</sup> He compared Najaf unfavourably with al-Azhar in Cairo. While he conceded that Najaf was 'for Iraq what al-Azhar is for Egypt', al-Azhar had

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<sup>103</sup> *Al-Hatif*, 35, 12 June 1936, 2; 51, October 1936, 4; 83, 16 July 1937, 2; 84, 30 July 1937, 2.

<sup>104</sup> *Al-Hatif*, 83, 23 July 1937, 5; 84, 30 July 1937, 6; *al-I'tidal*, 1/10, November 1933, 523; 4/7, December 1937, 401.

<sup>105</sup> *Al-Najaf*, 40, 8 May 1926, 12.

been affected by Egyptian civilisation (*al-ḥaḍāra al-miṣriyya*) and the intellectual movement in it, for this had altered it, disciplined it and ordered it. Najaf did not possess any effects of the psychology of its country. While the scholarly spirit which developed in al-Azhar was an Arab spirit, the scholarly spirit that developed in Najaf was a Persian spirit because the Shi'a, in their history, rites, and scholarly and *adabī* life were Persian more than Arab.<sup>106</sup>

While al-Sharqi accepted that the Persian diaspora had precipitated some positive intellectual and political results for Najaf, he concluded that their overall impact had been negative. They had corrupted the 'splendour and status' of the 'correct Arabic and high Arab culture' until only an 'incoherent section of Arabic labels remained.'<sup>107</sup>

In the same article, al-Sharqi turned his fire on religious institutions in general, despite his education within the *ḥawza*. He noted that religion, in its 'rites and traditions, was pure ancientness which does not accept renewal.' Centuries had passed and Najaf had still not been afforded its prescribed agent of religious renewal. This meant its cultural life remained stagnating, despite the recent 'political Nahda.'<sup>108</sup> Ahmed Jamal al-Din agreed with al-Sharqi's assessment. He equated the Persian influence in the Najafi *ḥawza* with a 'colonisation' (*al-isti'mār*). He put all the recent positive intellectual developments down to the influence of Egyptian media and particular Arab families, such as that of Kamal al-Din and al-Shabibi.<sup>109</sup> The religiosity of Najaf was one cause of its 'rigidity' but he considered *al-Najaf* and Madrasat al-Ghari two reasons to be optimistic about the future.<sup>110</sup> Ahmed Jamal al-Din's attitude towards religious education and institutions closely aligned with his Iranian namesake from the late nineteenth century, al-Afghani, in its aversion to institutional and traditional religious

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<sup>106</sup> *Al-Najaf*, 40, 8 May 1926, 13.

<sup>107</sup> *Al-Najaf*, 40, 8 May 1926, 14.

<sup>108</sup> *Al-Najaf*, 40, 8 May 1926, 15. By 'political Nahda', al-Sharqi was likely referring to Najaf's integration into the Iraqi Arab state.

<sup>109</sup> *Al-Najaf*, 42, 25 May 1926, 2.

<sup>110</sup> *Al-Najaf*, 44, 4 June 1926, 3.

systems: the true ‘Islamic system’, he contended, was ‘enough to satisfy human needs and provide happiness’, but its practitioners were ‘incapable and unsuitable for this task.’<sup>111</sup>

There are elements of an emerging secular discourse in both al-Sharqi and Jamal al-Din’s rhetoric. They both played on the ‘binaries which pervade modern secular discourse, especially in its polemical mode’, between ‘belief and knowledge, reason and imagination’: ‘ancient rites’, ‘traditions’ and modern rational science.<sup>112</sup> They subscribed to a modernity project which understood history as the transformation from the timeless, stagnant, intellectual rigidity of the ‘old’, on to an enlightened national future. The tone of their arguments, their anti-clericalism and institutional critique, implied that they were drifting towards an understanding of the religious as belonging primarily to the ‘domain of the private.’ A shift in the meaning of Shi’ism was at stake, wedded to the new national political terrain. This was from Shi’ism as an all-encompassing moral and legal system, buttressed by the institutions and ulama of the Shi’i religious establishment, and into one of the cultural markers of a modern political identity, a private faith to believe and an external culture to exude.

More importantly, both men linked the retrograde nature of the religious to its cultural characteristics – the fact it refused neat categorisation within the rigid binaries of modernity and was, to borrow from Asad, ‘divided into overlapping, fragmented cultures, hybrid selves, continuously dissolving and emerging social states.’<sup>113</sup> To make Shi’ism modern required that its institutional nexus undergo a spatial and cultural re-localisation, away from its pluralistic networks of authority and consociation and towards the cultural and empirical uniformity and quantifiability of modern national life. Calls for the reform of the Shi’i religious institutions –

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<sup>111</sup> *Al-Najaf*, 57, 15 October 1926, 4.

<sup>112</sup> Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, 23.

<sup>113</sup> Asad, 15.

and especially religious education – consequently became synonymous with the Arabist project and a recurrent feature of public discourse in the Najafi Arab press.

The assertions that the Shi'i *hawza* represented a reactionary stumbling block in the way of the ongoing Nahda elicited a critical response from one young member of the religious establishment. But his rebuttal illustrated that some of the Arabists' discursive assumptions were infecting the ulama themselves. Muhammad Rida al-Muzaffar was only 22 years old when he came across the edition of *al-Najaf* which included al-Sharqi's critical remarks.<sup>114</sup> He was incensed by article, in disbelief that al-Sharqi – 'our poet' – could harbour such 'prejudiced' opinions. Yet while al-Muzaffar's response defended the *hawza*, he did so on the same terms as the attackers themselves. He accepted their binary between 'old' and 'new', and insisted that the Madrasa's extremely time-consuming system of study was not 'due to the consonance of religion and oldness.' Rather, such a system was necessary due to the incomparably vast nature of *fiqh* which required that each book be fully absorbed. It was this that distinguished *fiqh* from other scientific studies – where economisations could be made – and it was for this reason that those who advocated shortening the curriculum in the madrasa were 'extremists' (*al-mutaṭarrifūn*).<sup>115</sup>

In a follow-up article he refuted al-Sharqi's concerns about the cosmopolitanism of Najaf. Yet his argument was not that the trans-regional networks of the Shi'i world were a positive aspect of the faith. Instead, he questioned the notion that Shi'ism had instilled a Persian spirit into Najaf at all by citing the example of Shaykh Murtada al-Ansari, who, despite being of Iranian origin, was as proficient in Arabic as anyone. He finished his response by rejecting al-Sharqi's assertion that religion – in its rites and traditions – was pure ancientness, arguing

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<sup>114</sup> For a biography of al-Muzaffar, see al-Asifi, 59–76; al-Khalili, *Hakadha Araftuhum*, Vol. 2, 11–48; and Chapter Five, 207–227.

<sup>115</sup> *Al-Najaf*, 43, 28 May 1926, 2.

instead that it was the only conduit of reform available to the people of the East.<sup>116</sup> Far from a rebuttal of modern nationalist thought, al-Muzaffar framed himself as a moderate modernist, juxtaposed against the ‘extremists’ in civilisation, a label he reserved for a private remark on Jamal al-Din himself. A note in his diary read: ‘we must beware of him (Jamal al-Din), his extremism in civilisation (*al-tamadun*) and rejection of religion (*rafḍuhu li-l-din*).’<sup>117</sup> Foretelling the post-secular critiques of nationalist movements generally, al-Muzaffar equated the Najafi Arabists with a European derived colonial ploy to undermine religion. Yet in recognising and combatting such a ploy he imbibed several of the assumptions on which the Arabist modernity discourse itself was based. These factors motivated him to embark on an Islamic pedagogical project in the 1930s, conceived primarily as a counterweight to the secularising tendencies of the Arabists.

These reforms garnered wide support from the Najafi press, especially *al-Hatif*, which launched a campaign for the full-scale reform of Shi’i education in the 1930s. The reforms themselves will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter. While the support of the Najafi Arabists for the reforms shows their concern for modernising the *ḥawza*, it also evidences the anxieties of Najafi civil society vis-à-vis the social and cultural development of their city. Neither Muruwwa, Sharara nor al-Khalili saw any contradiction in simultaneously promoting Islamic reform (*al-iṣlāḥ*) and Arab revival (*nahḍa*), but they did recognise that a fundamental problem facing Najafi and Iraqi society was the development of two types of people: the religious man, representative of the old and the conservative, in their parlance, and the modern educated effendi. Neither group, according to them, was morally right.<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> *Al-Najaf*, 44, 4 June 1926, 4.

<sup>117</sup> Muhammad Rida al-Qamusi, *Min Awraq al-Shaykh Muhammad Rida al-Muzaffar, 1904 - 1964* (Baghdad: al-Maktaba al-Asriyya, 2014), 34–35.

<sup>118</sup> *Al-Hatif*, 32, 22 May 1936, 1-2.



The schism between the two sections of Najafī and Arab society was not only impracticable because the ‘chord of intellectual unity was falling apart’ but potentially dangerous: it meant society was at risk of ungirding itself from its Islamic culture and national characteristic.<sup>119</sup> As both ulama and journalists, these competing priorities manifested themselves within the individual personas of Sharara and Muruwwa. These cultural and epistemic division were still in their nascent form in the 1920s, as *al-Najaf*’s lack of concern for tackling them illustrates. Yet by the mid-1930s, they had become one of the defining problematics of the Najafī Nahda, which *al-Hatīf* committed itself to solving through promoting religious reform. Its aspirations did not succeed. The discourse of division promoted by Muruwwa and Sharara and the Najafī press accentuated the actual societal divisions between the religious and the secular, rendering moribund the uneasy harmony between the two which had been a defining feature of politics and political thought in Najaf since the 1910s.

Throughout much of the 1910s and 1920s the extent of the cultural and political divisions between the men of religion and the journalist intellectuals – or effendis, as they are called in the secondary literature – has been overly exaggerated by historians.<sup>120</sup> This is at least partly a reflection of the influence of British colonial discourse, which had effectively invented the effendiyya as a distinct subject category in Egypt.<sup>121</sup> In interwar Najaf, al-Sharqī used the term effendiyya to refer to the Turkified political elite in Baghdad who refused to take Iraq on the course of genuine independence.<sup>122</sup> Meanwhile some ulama used effendi as a slur to attack children enrolled at modern schools, occasionally using the creative compound *affanṭīzī*, derived from the Arabic words ‘effendi’, ‘arse’ (*ṭīz*) and ‘English.’<sup>123</sup> The notion of effendi in

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<sup>119</sup> *Al-Hatīf*, 65, 5 March 1937, 1.

<sup>120</sup> Al-Wardī, *Lamahat Ijtima’iyya* v. 6, 315–17; Eppel, ‘The Elites.’

<sup>121</sup> Wilson Chacko Jacob, *Working Out Egypt: Effendi Masculinity and Subject Formation in Colonial Modernity, 1870–1940* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2011), 47.

<sup>122</sup> Al-Sharqī, *Mawsu’at*, 180.

<sup>123</sup> Thibaud Laval, ‘Les Nouvelles Portes Du Savoir: Jalons et Experiences de l’école Moderne a 1918 - 1958’, Forthcoming. I would like to thank Thibaud for allowing me an early glimpse of this article.

interwar Najaf therefore appears as a discursive device to attack perceived colonial or inauthentic cultural and political performance. Its designation as a rigid or meaningful socio-economic category – especially in the 1920s – is doubtful at best.

The Najafi journals and newspaper published during this period, the biographies of men who edited and wrote in them and the social networks to which they belonged: all of these illustrate that lay and religious figures – if the distinction is useful at all – shared common platforms and spaces, exchanged ideas and, more often than not, got along quite well. The subjectivities, upbringing and even dress of all of the first generation of Najafi reformers – al-Shabibi, al-Sharqi, Kamal al-Din – evidence an imperfect division between journalist intellectual and religious scholar. All received religious education to varying degrees.<sup>124</sup> Al-Sharqi even became a Sharia court judge. Each dressed ‘like an alim’, as one British report on al-Sharqi noted (See Figs 2, 3 and 4).<sup>125</sup> The latter evidenced the colonial state’s difficulty in comprehending political and cultural subjectivities which did not fit neatly into their pre-defined categories of secular and religious. Yet the sense of a cultural chasm was not only a figment of colonial imaginations. It was palpable at a local level, as the opposition of some members of the ulama to Madrasat al-Ghari and the fracas between al-Sharqi and al-Muzaffar on the pages of *al-Najaf* illustrated.

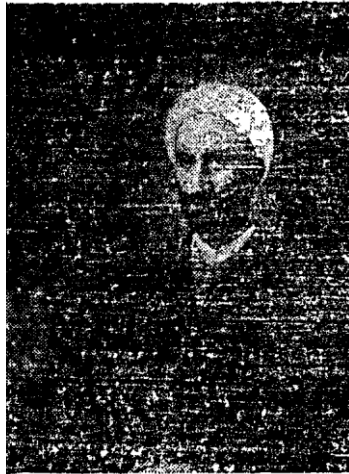
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<sup>124</sup> Said Kamal al-Din attended Khorasani and Na’ini’s study circle and was a student of al-Shahrastani. Al-Khaqani, *Shu’ara’ al-Ghari*, Vol. 4, 146.

<sup>125</sup> Shi’i Activities: Authorship of Petition, 14 March 1932, AIR23/385, TNA.



*Fig. 2. 'Ali al-Sharqi*<sup>126</sup>



*Fig. 3. Muhammad Rida al-Shabibi*<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> *Al-I'tidal*, 2/5, October 1934, 230.

<sup>127</sup> *Al-I'tidal*, 1/2, March 1933, 117.



Fig. 4. Said Kamal al-Din<sup>128</sup>

Muruwwa and Sharara directly linked the rationale for religious reform to the requirements of the modern nation state, secularising religious discourse in the process. Comprehensive *hawza* reform was the preferred solution for both men, who wanted a new and codified curriculum and a complete overhaul of the method of instruction. When it came to Muruwwa's attention that the course of religious reform had stalled in 1938, his optimistic calls to renew its energy and activity were rooted in the need to restore 'national morals.' The decay of the Sharia had resulted in the 'death of the spirit of *faḍīla* in the souls.' The meaning of *faḍīla*, denoting moral excellence and virtue, had a natural Islamic resonance relating to the individual attributes of a single scholars. But in Muruwwa's argumentation, *faḍīla* was applied to the *umma* as a whole and denoted those distinctive moral and spiritual aspects which formed the cultural substance of the national subject.<sup>129</sup> His ideas about civilisation, which rejected al-Shahrastani's sharp distinction between East and West, complemented this schema. For Muruwwa, 'civilisation' was a 'global' aspiration, universal to the West and East. He framed Eastern culture and morality – 'our inherited possessions' – including language, *adab* and religion, as an aspect of the 'personality of the *umma*': 'the inclinations of national

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<sup>128</sup> Kamal al-Din, *Mudhakkirat*, 31.

<sup>129</sup> *Al-Hatij*, 111, 25 March 1938, 3.

characteristics from traditions and practices.’<sup>130</sup> No longer an internal spiritual or moral domain that would enable the Eastern and Islamic world to exceed the civilisational pretensions of the West, Muruwwa reduced Islam to an aspect of national culture – an external veneer necessary to facilitate progress towards world civilisation.

The problem faced by both Sharara and Muruwwa was that the recognition of the need for religious reform, on the one hand, and national revival, on the other, was different from the ability to be, at one and the same time, an *‘alim* and a journalist intellectual. Both men ‘put down the turban’ in 1937 and abandoned their religious studies. They were joined after by several colleagues from Jam’iyyat al-Shabiba al-‘Amiliyya al-Najafiyya, such as Sadr al-Din Sharaf al-Din and Muhammad Salih Bahr al-‘Ulam.<sup>131</sup> In *al-Hatif*, they reflected on this transition. Sharara’s melancholy literary metaphor recounted a young man bidding farewell to a school of knowledge: ‘the farewell of one lover to another – he does not know his condition, will he return to it after this or not? – the farewell was emotional and painful.’ But it was the school which suffered most: ‘it returned from the farewell [filled with sorrow at the leaving of this] valuable asset . . . it remains searching for him and asking about him from all who pass by. Yet it does not hear anything, except that he went to a school bigger than this school and a world wider than this world.’<sup>132</sup> Muruwwa equated his turban with a pair of ‘handcuffs’ preventing him from fulfilling his quest for knowledge and truth. ‘I offended it’, he conceded, ‘more than it offended me, for I tried to commission it for what it could not bear; I tried to make it a symbol of knowledge, love and beauty.’<sup>133</sup>

The ‘bigger school’, the ‘wider world’, the symbol of ‘knowledge, love and beauty’: all evoked the claustrophobia which both men had begun to feel within the *hawza*, the culture of

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<sup>130</sup> *Al-Hatif*, 81, 9 July 1937, 4.

<sup>131</sup> Sharara, *Muhammad Sharara*, 74.

<sup>132</sup> *Al-Hatif*, 25 - 26, 10 April 1936, 7.

<sup>133</sup> *Al-Hatif*, 99, 19 November 1937, 4.

excluding particular topics of knowledge and methods of enquiry which traditional religious study usually entailed. Yet at the same time, the feeling of claustrophobia was equally representative of a new spatial imaginary towards which both men were directed.

Although both Muruwwa and Sharara became Marxists later in their lives and made much of the ‘rigidity’ and ‘conservatism’ of the Shi’i educational institutions, their decision to renounce the turban was not associated with a renunciation of their faith, nor a brewing socialism. Muruwwa was not exposed directly to Marxist ideas until he left Najaf in the late 1930s.<sup>134</sup> Prior to that, he remembered, was a period of ‘intellectual fertility’, in which he greedily consumed Iraqi, Lebanese and Egyptian media, whether it be Shibli Shumayyil or Salama Mousa’s work in *al-Muqtataf* or books by Tah Husayn and Ahmed Amin fresh from the Cairene press.<sup>135</sup> In light of this, the abandonment of the turban cannot be interpreted as the swift passage to atheism following exposure to European-inspired materialist thought, but the result of a melange of cultural and intellectual factors distancing Muruwwa and his colleagues from the prevailing environment of the *hawza*. It was as much a cultural readjustment as it was a metaphysical one.

The difficulties of synthesising the cultural norms of the *hawza* with the modern profession of an Arab journalist was starkly exposed for Muruwwa in the Iraqi national centre, Baghdad. He recollected how, during a visit to the capital donned in full religious attire, he felt like an alien in the secular environment of parliament square. ‘Tongues of curiosity’ emerged from people’s mouths as he – a ‘naïve country man’ – moved around, the only ‘turban flickering among the crowd.’ When he attempted to enter the Iraqi parliament to report on political affairs, presenting a ‘journalist card’ from one of the ‘great Beirut newspapers’, the

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<sup>134</sup> Naef, ‘The Arab Shi’a and the Fascination with Communism’, 541–42.

<sup>135</sup> Mousa Barhouma, *al-Turath al-Arabi wa-l-’Aql al-Maddi: Dirasa fi Fikr Husayn Muruwwa* (Beirut: al-Mu’assasa al-Arabiyya li-l-Dirasa wa-Nashr, 2004), 21.

guards were so surprised to see a shaykh wearing the ‘Najafi’ turban bearing the certificate of a Lebanese journalist that he was initially refused entry. Once he eventually managed to get inside, a group of Baghdadi ‘youth’ in the viewing platform gawped as he made his way to the journalists’ enclosure.<sup>136</sup> The symbol of the turban, representative of a traditional religious education and trans-regional Shi’i networks, prohibited Muruwwa from slotting comfortably into the capital and – with it – the Iraqi Arab public sphere; it entailed stigmatisation, not only on account of its association with tradition, but also due to its association with peripheral and non-national space in Iraq: the rural, underdeveloped hinterlands of Najaf and the Euphrates and the non-Arab milieus which resided there.

Although Muruwwa evoked his anxiety at almost being barred entry to the Iraqi parliament and feeling like a stranger in Baghdad, his recollections betrayed a sense of self-righteous satisfaction, as well as efforts to deflate the urban pretensions of the Baghdadi elites. His experience of life on the margins of national society, whether in Jabal ‘Amil or in Najaf, meant that he was proud to dismantle some of their prejudices – whether they were sectarian, regional or secularist. But there was a more substantial element to Muruwwa’s account which cut straight to the heart of the Najafi *hawza*’s complicated confrontation with modernity. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, the culture of the madrasa became increasingly out of kilter with his own intellectual and cultural curiosity. He remembered how fellow students criticised him for reading the poetry of Ibrahim al-Tabataba’i, and ‘instructed him to stop reading it lest he become distracted from religion and study.’ A prevailing stigma associated with learning European languages meant both he and Sharara were forced to hide their efforts to learn English from their fellow students.<sup>137</sup> All this made it increasingly difficult for them to integrate into a

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<sup>136</sup> *Al-Hatif*, 69, 9 April 1937, 1.

<sup>137</sup> Sharara, *Muhammad Sharara*, 69.

national milieu where knowledge of Arabic literary culture and European languages were considered markers of sophistication and intellectual proficiency.

Poetry, especially, was becoming something of a cultural battleground in Najaf. Many Najafi ulama were known to have written poetry in their youth; some, such as Muhammad Said al-Habubi, were as famous for their poetry as their *fiqh*. Yet in his introduction to the *dīwān* of Muhammad Mahdi al-Jawahiri, al-Sharqi commented that the ‘gibberish of the foreigners (*raṭānat al-a‘jamiyīn*)’ – by which he meant some of the ulama – ‘was working to bring down Arab *adab* because it did not appreciate it.’ Their pretext, al-Sharqi continued, ‘was that poetry diminishes the work of spiritual knowledge and the spiritual ones’ and even ‘negates ablutions.’ This was all preposterous to al-Sharqi. He did not directly associate these negative assessments with an essentialist notion of Persian-ness. Al-Jawahiri’s Persian origin, he noted, were negated by the ‘Arab environment of Najaf.’<sup>138</sup> Such remarks again speak to the constructed nature of the Persian cultural threat in Najaf. But they also point to the overlap between anti-clerical discourse and nationalism. The ‘foreign gibberish’ and the conservatism of the clerics were inseparable to al-Sharqi. To be a poet, ‘*alim* and prose writer – as al-Sharqi himself purported to be – was becoming increasingly difficult.

The cultural component of the transformation from ‘*alim* to journalist intellectual can be seen in the importance ascribed by both Muruwwa and Sharara to the piece of headgear that would replace their turban. Since the early nineteenth century, the Ottoman Empire experienced successive waves of clothing reform, especially around headgear. The most famous of these was the 1925 Turkish Fez prohibition. This coercive attempt to engender ‘socialisation into a national culture’ has often been analysed through the lens of an

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<sup>138</sup> Al-Qabiji and al-Qabiji, *Hidarat al-Najaf al-Ashraf*, 189.



increasingly culturally hegemonic state.<sup>139</sup> No such state existed in Iraq. Yet there was a clear cultural project, fostered in civil society with state approval, to dismantle the complex hierarchies attached to traditional forms of headgear and replace them with a homogenising national symbol. The ‘contradictions and oppositions’ between his ‘new’ and ‘old’ self, according to Muruwwa, were encapsulated in two distinct head pieces: the turban, representing immutable tradition, and the *sidāra*, a hat popularised by King Faysal in the 1920s and worn by educated urban Iraqis (See Fig. 6). When Muruwwa fantasised a dialogue between the two iterations of himself, the ‘turban’ and the *sidāra*, he framed his turbaned self as ‘mumbling’ and ‘self-conscious’, trying to hide under the turban’s weight and aware of the limitations it was setting on him. It represented a generational restraint on his character, a garment worn simply to appease the desires of his parents, who encouraged him to train as an ‘*alim*. But wearing the *sidāra* he was brimming with *futuwwa* and looked down on his turbaned self with ‘bitter ridicule’, accusing him of naivety, shrouded thinking and, ultimately, a misunderstanding of the universal Islamic message he purported to represent.<sup>140</sup> The utilisation of a national symbol, so intimately associated with the Iraqi monarchy and Iraqi identity, was partly a means for Muruwwa and Sharara to don a hybrid national modernity, which could not be associated with blind copying of European fashion. The *sidāra* was authentic – in so much as it was locally produced and unique to Iraq – but it was also modern. At the same time, wearing the *sidāra* was a way to integrate into a national cultural milieu: according to al-Khalili, Iraqis could be immediately identified abroad by this piece of headgear alone.<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> Hale Yilmaz, *Becoming Turkish: Nationalist Reforms and Cultural Negotiations in Early Republican Turkey, 1923 - 1945* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2013), 32–33.

<sup>140</sup> *Al-Hatîf*, 154, 10 February 1939, 3.

<sup>141</sup> *Al-Hatîf*, 51, October 1936, 3.



*Fig 5. Muruwwa before removing his turban<sup>142</sup>*



*Fig 6. Muruwwa wearing the sidāra<sup>143</sup>*

The new cultural space into which Muruwwa and Sharara were installed was the Middle East state system with its accompanying nationalist ideologies; but it had a longer history than that. Its substance was the Lebanese and Egyptian print culture that had been arriving in Najaf since the 1910s and continued to fill its journals and newspapers in the interwar period. It was this spatial imaginary which was embodied in the new pedagogical institutions of the Najafi

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<sup>142</sup> *Al-Hatif*, 73, 14 May 1937, 6.

<sup>143</sup> *Al-Hatif*, 297, 24 April 1942, 12.

community and government schools in the interwar, as they strove to create a new national modernity in Iraq. The Najafi press had subsequently animated and invigorated this imagined community by whitewashing the pluralism and diversity of Najafi civil society in a conscious campaign of national allegories and editorial biases. In other words, as much as Muruwwa and Sharara decision to leave the *hawza* represented genuine personal concerns with the limitations placed on study in traditional religious institutions, it also represented the crystallisation of a new Arabist cultural formation in Najaf tilted away from the cosmopolitan knowledge systems of the traditional *hawza* and towards the ethno-linguistic knowledge systems of the Arab public sphere. This represented the beginning of the end of the reformist consensus in Iraq, as more clear-cut ideological positions began to dominate the political and intellectual scene, such as communism, secular nationalist ideologies and, ultimately, Islamism.<sup>144</sup> While Muruwwa's and Sharara's shifting political and intellectual ideas had reflected this transition, it was greatly enhanced by the coming of age of a new generation of Iraqis educated entirely in the new pedagogical institutions established after the founding of the state.

As *al-Hatif's* campaign to reform the religious education system indicates, the *hawza* was not a lost cause for the reformers. Projects of reform developed throughout the 1930s and achieved considerable success. The intriguing reality is that it was not the introduction of these reform projects that drove men like Muruwwa and Sharara to choose careers outside of the *hawza* or to question the potential of the *hawza* to facilitate critical enquiry. If anything, the opposite was true. The question then becomes how, if the traditional Najafi *hawza* was so insular, it was capable of engendering the kind of critical thought adhered to by Muruwwa and Sharara, and indeed, the vast majority of men who participated in the Najafi Nahda. One of the answers can be found in the method of education of the old system itself, its flexibility, lack of

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<sup>144</sup> For communist, Islamist and nationalist political trends in Iraq after the 1930s, see Tareq Y. Ismael, *The Rise and Fall of the Communist Party of Iraq* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 21; Batatu, 'Iraq's Underground'; 'Abdul-Jabar, *The Shiite Movement*; Wien, *Iraqi Arab Nationalism*.

structure and reliance on individual autonomy. These factors were beginning to undermine the very institutions on which the *hawza* was based; they became a problem which the men committed to religious reform decided to confront.

## Chapter Five – Print, Pedagogy and Ecumenicalism

Education and Sunni-Shi'i ecumenicalism lay at the heart of Shi'i religious reform in the interwar period. This chapter analyses both these phenomenon by looking at Muhammad Rida al-Muzaffar's publishing and educational society, Muntada al-Nashr, and the Shi'i contribution to the intra-Islamic ecumenical movement of the 1920s and 1930s. Both these movements stemmed from the same Islamic reformist priorities pioneered by Hibat al-Din al-Shahrastani and Muhammad Husayn Kashif al-Ghita in the pre-war period, but they were rearticulated and reordered for the national-state context. Such rearticulation, I argue, not only entailed the appropriation of some of the discourses and idioms of the concomitant Najafi Arab Nahda discussed in the previous chapter, but also had important political implications for the meaning of Shi'ism and Shi'i identity. As a counterweight to narratives of Shi'i 'radicalisation', the chapter argues for the interwar period as the onset of the institutionalisation and textualization of Shi'i religious culture in Najaf.

Max Weiss and Linda Sayyed have analysed the institutional origins of modern Shi'i socio-legal identities for the Lebanese context, unearthing the roots of an assertive Lebanese Shi'i 'sectarianism' in Ja'fari personal status courts and Shi'i community schools respectively.<sup>1</sup> Yet little attention has been paid to the development of such institutions in Iraq. Historians of the main institutional focus of this chapter, Muntada al-Nashr, have analysed it within the context of Shi'i religious reform, longstanding pedagogical debates about the traditional *hawza*, political and religious revivalism, as well as a the *taqrīb* movement.<sup>2</sup> Yitzhak Nakash

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<sup>1</sup> Weiss, *In the Shadow of Sectarianism*, 19; Linda Sayed, 'Education and Reconfiguring Lebanese Shi'i Muslims into the Nation-State during the French Mandate, 1920-43', *Die Welt Des Islams* 59, no. 3/4 (2019): 284.

<sup>2</sup> Al-Janabi, *Ta'rikh al-Najaf al-Ijtima'i*, 387; 'Abd al-Khadar, *Jam'iyyat Muntada al-Nashr*, 263; al-Asifi, *Madrasat al-Najaf*, 101-3; Sabrina Mervin, 'The Clerics of Jabal 'Amil and the Reform of Religious Teaching in Najaf Since the Beginning of the 20th Century', in *The Twelver Shia in Modern Times*, ed. Werner Ende and Rainer Brunner (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 84-86.

offers a critical take, arguing that the Muntada represented the realisation of the Iraqi state's efforts to isolate members and graduates of the traditional Shi'i religious establishment.<sup>3</sup> No studies have questioned the Muntada's importance as an institutional setting for the inculcation of a transformed Shi'i identity. The same can be said of the ecumenical genre, hitherto analysed within the rubric of anti-colonial posturing, Islamic reformism, or as a response to the age-old problem of 'sectarianism' in the Islamic world.<sup>4</sup>

This chapter argues that the new sense of Shi'i identity which Muntada al-Nashr and the ecumenical genre helped ferment was shaped by the requirements of national modernity. It was national, corporate, legalistic, self-assertively modern, rationalised, utilitarian and homogenous. This sat in sharp contrast to the informal, diverse, adaptable and largely oral nature of the legal, educational and popular religious institutions of Imami Shi'ism in the pre-national – and most certainly pre-print – era. One of the most radical transformations enacted in the modern context was the substitution of the oral authority of the traditional institutions with the written, often published, text of modern legal handbooks, codes of instruction, modern school curricula, ecumenical pamphlets and op-eds. While writing and reading has of course always been central to Islamic education and cultural production, the modern period witnessed a shift in the power dynamic between the text, teacher, student, preacher and reading public.<sup>5</sup> The text became determinative, where it had previously been interpretive, albeit only by a very few qualified thinkers or charismatic performers. Texts democratised knowledge and enabled pedagogical campaigns both in and out of the formal school setting. The ecumenical genre was one such campaign, ostensibly intended for consumption by non-Shi'is. The second section of this chapter argues that such a genre did not simply reflect a coherent Shi'i religiosity to an

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<sup>3</sup> Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq*, 267.

<sup>4</sup> Al-Asifi, *Madrasat al-Najaf*, 139–42; Mervin, *Un Réformisme Chiite*, 287; Brunner, *Islamic Ecumenism in the 20th Century*, 2–3.

<sup>5</sup> Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt*, 82 – 83.

external non-Shi'i audience. Instead, it was equally important for shoring up a doctrinally discrete, political and in many ways more exclusivist conception of Ja'fari Shi'ism itself.

### *Muntada al-Nashr and Interwar Shi'i Reform*

The origins of serious debates over the reform of religious education and – by implication – the entire *hawza* system in Najaf can be traced to the mid-1920s when the Lebanese 'alim Muhsin Sharara published a scathing critique in *al-Irfan*. The intensity of the critique was so great it earned Sharara scorn across the city and apparently forced him into hiding.<sup>6</sup> Yet views of a similar, albeit less radical, nature were not uncommon among a growing cohort of young and middle aged ulama. Like so many of the leading proponents of Najafi *al-iṣlāḥ*, al-Muzaffar was a precocious student. Widely tipped to become a *Marja'*, his interest in educational reform derailed him from climbing the clerical hierarchy.<sup>7</sup> In 1927 and 1928 he began holding preliminary meetings with a group of scholars committed to *hawza* reform who called themselves al-Jam'iyya al-Islahiyya. At one point they met with Sharara and his associates from Jam'iyyat al-Shabiba al-'Amiliyya al-Najafiyya, but al-Muzaffar concluded that the latter's proposals were too radical.<sup>8</sup> Al-Janabi identifies two broad approaches to *hawza* reform during this period: the radicals, associated with Sharara, and gradualists, who favoured incremental change.<sup>9</sup> Al-Muzaffar can be associated with the latter group. While he decided to keep his plans secret in the 1920s, he enjoyed support from a number of older, more influential ulama, especially his elder brothers and their associates. It was in the *majālis* of these men, including 'Ali Bahr al-Ulum, that his ideas matured and fermented throughout the 1920s.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Werner Ende, 'From Revolt to Resignation: The Life of Shaykh Muhsin Sharara', in *Humanism, Culture, and Language in the Near East*, ed. Asma Afsaruddin and A. H. Mathias Zahniser (Winona Lake: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), 62–69; Mervin, *Un Réformisme Chiite*, 216–21.

<sup>7</sup> Al-Asifi, *Madrasat al-Najaf*, 61–62.

<sup>8</sup> Al-Qamusi, *Min Awraq*, 36, 40–41, 44.

<sup>9</sup> Al-Janabi, *Ta'rikh al-Najaf al-Ijtima'i*, 354–55.

<sup>10</sup> Al-Qamusi, *Min Awraq*, 35.

Al-Muzaffar's project finally came to fruition with the founding of Muntada al-Nashr in 1935. The Muntada promoted a holistic agenda committed to public education and engagement. The semantic resonance of the society's name was chosen to capture this ambiguous ambition. While Muntada al-Nashr can literally be translated as 'the society for publication', al-Muzaffar recognised that the name was 'deceptive at first glance.' Publication in the 'technical sense of the word today', he explained, was only one of the society's objectives. Together, they were 'much loftier and more expansive', encompassing the full 'linguistic meaning' of *al-nashr*, which could just as well pertain to propagation, dissemination, diffusion or even resurrection.<sup>11</sup>

Early work undertaken by the Muntada reflected the activities of other civil society organisations in Najaf.<sup>12</sup> The Muntada's first largescale project was to arrange a mourning ceremony for the Najafi 'alim, nationalist and senator, Muhammad 'Ali Bahr al-'Ulum.<sup>13</sup> Thereafter it embarked on its first significant publishing venture: the fifth section of *Haqa'iq al-Ta'wil fi Mutashaba al-Tanzil*, by the tenth century theologian al-Sharif al-Rida. This manuscript was chosen because it was both 'old' and in Arabic and therefore 'corresponded with the sympathies of the country and showed that the principles of the society were to serve *fushhā*.'<sup>14</sup> Preparing the manuscript for print was lengthy and tedious, a process essentially of translation by a committee of ulama who clarified ambiguities in the text and compared anomalies in different manuscript versions.<sup>15</sup> There were parallels here with the process undertaken by 'Ali al-Sharqi and Muhammad Rida al-Shabibi in the pre-war period, when they compiled and printed the *dawāwīn* of two Najafi Arab poets. By doing the same with a *tafsīr*

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<sup>11</sup> Al-Qamusi, 135.

<sup>12</sup> For example, the society hosted a lively and popular *majlis* which played host to boisterous poetic performance. Al-Qabiji and al-Qabiji, *Hidarat al-Najaf al-Ashraf*, 193.

<sup>13</sup> *Al-Hatīf*, 2/31, 16 April 1936, 31. Muhammad 'Ali Bahr al-Ulum was a leading figure in the anti-colonial movement during the years of revolution and one of the founders of Madrasat al-Ghari.

<sup>14</sup> Al-Qamusi, *Min Awraq*, 66.

<sup>15</sup> Al-Sayyid Sharif al-Rida, *Haqa'iq al-Ta'wil Fi Mutashaba al-Tanzil, al-Juz al-Khamis* (Najaf: Matba'at al-Ghari, 1936), 8.



text on the distinctly Shi'i topic of esoteric Quranic exegesis, the Muntada aimed to challenge some of the cultural assumption underpinning the secular Arabist print production characteristic of the Najafi Nahda since the 1910s.

Although the Muntada did not embark on any other large scale printing projects in the interwar period, it maintained a commitment to engaging a broad public through print. *Al-Hatif* became the main journalistic patron of the society, with one article likening its founders to Plato, Socrates and Martin Luther, but the Muntada also published material in *al-Misbah* and *al-I'tidal*.<sup>16</sup> Brief articles responded to readers' questions on topical issues, such as the reasons for disunity in the Arab world. Later, when it had amassed enough funds, the Muntada established a public library of around three thousand mostly printed Arabic works.<sup>17</sup> Through establishing the library under the auspices of the society, rather than an individual 'alim or family, the Muntada aimed to establish an institutional legacy and a corporate identity that exceeded the lifespan of its founders.

The next project for the Muntada was to innovate a new religious educational system. From the onset, these plans were beset with financial and political difficulties. The first school was opened in 1936, known as Madrasat Muntada al-Nashr al-'Aliyya, but was forced to close the following year when its volunteer teaching staff resigned.<sup>18</sup> In 1938, a second attempt was made with the Religious Middle School. Momentum picked up when al-Muzaffar himself took responsibility for the expansion of the educational project. He opened a further three classes and obtained recognition from the Ministry of Education, which then mysteriously withdrew the recognition after three months. The first feeder elementary class for the higher school was opened in the same year.<sup>19</sup> In February 1939, with the school having taught up to 150 students,

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<sup>16</sup> *Al-Hatif*, 2/57, 11 December 1936, 3.

<sup>17</sup> Al-Khalili, *Mawsu'at al-'Atabat al-Juz al-Thani min Qism al-Najaf*, 259.

<sup>18</sup> Al-Janabi, *Ta'rikh al-Najaf al-Ijtima'i*, 366.

<sup>19</sup> *Al-Hatif*, 4/139, 23 September 1938, 23.

it was again recognised by the Ministry of Education, becoming the first religious school at any level to earn such recognition.<sup>20</sup> In the summer of 1939, the Muntada moved premise to the Barak Quarter of Najaf and embarked on plans to open a fourth class. Rapid expansion and restructuring followed with branches opened in Kadhimiyya, Karbala and Hilla.<sup>21</sup> In 1942, the Najafi school was split into two sections, with the upper section morphing into a college of *fiqh*. Throughout this period the school survived off donations and relied mostly on volunteer teachers, which meant budgets could be kept extraordinarily low.<sup>22</sup> Al-Muzaffar's personal diligence has been cited as an important factor in the project's resilience.<sup>23</sup> By the early 1940s, despite a number of public outcries against the society's more ambitious plans (which will be discussed below), the Muntada had begun to resemble an established school, hosting government inspection and posing a realistic alternative to both traditional *hawza* and conventional state or community educational pathways. In the late 1950s, the Muntada opened the Najafi College of Fiqh, the first religious university in Najaf authorised to issue official degree certificates.<sup>24</sup>

One reason for the success was that the Muntada enjoyed genuinely broad-based support within Najaf. While the founding members and executive committee were mostly young men born after the turn of the century, a committee of Mujtahids and *Marja' iyya* were appointed to oversee its affairs.<sup>25</sup> Intergenerational ties were enhanced by familial and professional connections between the founding members and various contemporary *Marja' iyya*, so much so that 'Abd al-Khadar describes the society as being 'born from the womb of the *Marja' iyya*.<sup>26</sup> The dynamics of this power worked much like that associated with

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<sup>20</sup> Al-Janabi, *Ta'rikh al-Najaf al-Ijtima'i*, 366. *Al-Hatif*, 4/154, 17 February 1939, 2.

<sup>21</sup> Al-Qamusi, *Min Awraq*, 156–58.

<sup>22</sup> Al-Qamusi, 161–62.

<sup>23</sup> Al-Khalili, *Hakadha Araftuhum*, Vol. 2, 22.

<sup>24</sup> Al-Janabi, *Ta'rikh al-Najaf al-Ijtima'i*, 378.

<sup>25</sup> Al-Qamusi, *Min Awraq*, 61.

<sup>26</sup> 'Abd al-Khadar, *Jam' iyyat Muntada al-Nashr*, 102.

other civic bodies, such as Madrasat al-Ghari: young men took the risks, experimented, published and taught, while the senior Mujtahids offered their blessing as and when required.<sup>27</sup>

### **The Rationale for the Muntada**

The rationale for the founding of the Muntada stemmed from the perception among some Shi'i ulama that their religious institutions were out of kilter with the social and cultural requirements of modernity. The Shi'i religious establishment, according to al-Muzaffar, was completely isolated from worldly developments, embodied by modern institutional forms and disciplines. To the public mind, he lamented, 'those who wear the turban' were branded 'obstacles in the way of progress (*taqaddum*).'<sup>28</sup> This alienated young Shi'is from their religion and stoked recurrent waves of anti-Shi'i sentiment in the Iraqi and Middle Eastern public sphere. Muntada al-Nashr was designed to bridge the gap between the 'old' and the 'new' through harnessing the means – but not the substance – of what al-Muzaffar perceived as a secular colonial modernity: print culture and standardised education. The danger of colonialism, according to al-Muzaffar, was epistemological as much as it was political. Through the pedagogical institutions of the secular state, he argued, colonialism aimed to erase Islam and spread atheism in order to suppress the Islamic East. One way this had been achieved was through creating the false dichotomy between Islam and science (*'ilm*), as well as through efforts to divide Islamic societies and sects.<sup>29</sup>

At the core of the Muntada's pedagogical project was a concern for utility and efficiency. Scathing critiques of the ostensibly inefficient and lengthy educational system of the traditional *hawza* in the local press captured this concern. Husayn Muruwwa used his weekly column in *al-Hatif* to recollect the chaos (*fawḍā*) he experienced on arriving in Najaf

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<sup>27</sup> Al-Khalili, *Hakadha Araftuhum*, Vol. 2, 23.

<sup>28</sup> Al-Qamusi, *Min Awraq*, 56.

<sup>29</sup> Al-Qamusi, 139; *al-Hatif*, 5/187, 6 October 1939, 5.

to study in 1925. The search for a logic teacher, he remembered, was a process of ‘barter’, which lasted for more than a month. During this period, he did not open a single logic book and, once the negotiations were complete, it was in the hands of fate as to whether the teacher he ended up with was sufficiently qualified.<sup>30</sup> Another advocate of reform, ‘Abd al-Zahra al-Saghir, compared the old system to the ‘disordered pages of a book.’ The course of study had lost its ‘purity and refinement’ by becoming shambolic and distorted. He bemoaned absent and tardy professors and the unreasonable number of public holidays precluding study for a substantial portion of the year. A lack of discipline undermined teaching at all levels, often resulting in ‘violent clashes at gatherings in the teaching *majālis* with shouting and screaming’ over ‘insignificant grammar issues.’<sup>31</sup> All this wasted time and led to intellectual chaos by upturning the scholarly hierarchies of the classroom.

The substance of Muruwwa and al-Saghir’s critique pertained to pedagogical method and inconsistent and unproductive outcomes. The old system’s ‘complexity was abhorrent to correct Arab taste’ and lacked utility and efficiency. It did not ‘produce anything except unemployment and laziness (*al-baṭāla wa-l-kasal*)’, stifling innovation and precipitating conservatism. These observations were fleshed out within an Arabist idiom: evidence for the unproductive nature of the old system could be found in the fact that one of its ‘strange outcomes’ was that students read all the allotted books yet were still unable to express a ‘modicum of poetry or even one complete *bayt*.’<sup>32</sup>

While these critiques reflected the difficult lived experience of students working their ways through the Shi’i *ḥawza*, the framing of the old system as chaotic and conservative reflected a modernist polemic more than an astute or substantive call for rationalisation.

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<sup>30</sup> *Al-Hatīf*, 2/61, 29 January 1937, 5.

<sup>31</sup> *Al-Hatīf*, 4/162, 7 April 1939, 14.

<sup>32</sup> *Al-Hatīf*, 2/61, 29 January 1937, 6.

Despite the contentions of Muruwwa and Saghir, the *hawza* did have a programme of study. This was divided into three phases: the introductory (*al-muqaddimāt*), intermediate (*al-suṭūh*) and final stage (*al-baḥth al-khārij*).<sup>33</sup> At each level, students were obliged to study independently, with intermittent supervision from their teachers. Learning was deeply personal and holistic with no preference given to topics of particular social or religious-juristic application. Certificates of *ijtihād* were granted on an individual basis, without standardised exams. The time allotted for study at each phase was not limited, but dependent on the student's pace and personal capacity. Some spent over ten years to become a mujtahid; others never graduated. While, as Muhammad Mahdi al-Asifi remarks, this was a system which has been interpreted as 'conservative in its approach and ideas', it is more aptly characterised by the notion of pedagogical 'autonomy (*al-istiqlāliyya*)' than 'conservatism (*al-muḥāfiziyya*).'<sup>34</sup> Such an autonomy was not only embodied in the financial and political independence of the *hawza* from temporary authorities, but in the method of study itself. Study circles were not lessons where teachers imparted a pre-set corpus of knowledge onto their students but 'fertile environments' where the students were encouraged to actively participate with 'intellectual freedom.'<sup>35</sup>

An autonomous system such as this was compatible with the prevailing political economy of Najaf in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Almost all the religious and community leaders who provided spiritual and judicial services for the world's Shi'a spent time in Najaf or comparable Shi'i centres of learning. They required socialisation and instruction in the art of reading, writing and orating in order to fulfil their role as community leaders and to integrate into the trans-national networks which undergirded their status. The competitive nature of Shi'i scholarly centralisation meant there was no incentive to economise the learning

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<sup>33</sup> Al-Asifi, *Madrasat al-Najaf*, 8.

<sup>34</sup> Al-Asifi, 15.

<sup>35</sup> Al-Asifi, 6–7, 25, 118.

process. Najaf's economic prosperity relied on its capacity to draw in students and keep them for as long as possible, until they returned to their place of origin and inaugurated a flow of charitable donations or sent on the next generation of students.<sup>36</sup> The plurality of places where graduate ended up working, and the consequent diversity of social, economic and religious problems they confronted, meant that a homogenous and standardised curriculum was inappropriate.

Parallels can be made here with Timothy Mitchell's assessment of al-Azhar in Cairo. In the nineteenth century, the pedagogical approach of this prestigious centre of Sunni scholarship was 'flexible' and 'free of coercion', while the relationship between student and teacher was one of parity. 'Argumentation and dispute' superseded lectures and the student was never 'passive.' According to Mitchell, al-Azhar was not a centre of education in the contemporary sense of the word, but an institution for inculcating the 'art and authority of writing', which in turn was necessary for the acquisition and protection of positions of authority for the pre-capitalist and pre-national Egyptian elite.<sup>37</sup> With the expansion of the modern state in the late nineteenth century in Egypt and in the early twentieth century in Iraq, both al-Azhar and the Najafī *hawza* were forced to confront the new political and economic requirements of the national state. In both contexts, reformers began to fuse the pedagogical priorities of modern state education – its focus on productivity, homogeneity, equity and nationalism – with notions of Islamic reform and renewal.

The teaching programme in the Muntada al-Nashr's schools differed substantially from the traditional *hawza*. The first class established by the school offered lessons in *fiqh*, *tafsīr* and philosophy, teaching all disciplines through 'lectures in clear and simple language.'<sup>38</sup> In the

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<sup>36</sup> Al-Asifi, 16.

<sup>37</sup> Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt*, 84.

<sup>38</sup> Al-Qamusi, *Min Awraq*, 135, 150.

old *hawza*, organised lectures of this sort were unknown. As the school expanded throughout the late 1930s and 1940s, the concern for rationalisation and standardisation was maintained. A set curriculum was established which expanded on the three phased *hawza* approach. The secondary school included four phases of study which took the student from basic Arabic, religious studies, mathematics and engineering skills at the first level, to a wide curriculum encompassing logic, rhetoric, *uṣūl al-fiqh*, *tafsīr*, Islamic history and the history of *adab* at the fourth level. In the college of *fiqh*, Arabic and grammar were taught alongside *adab* and logic at the first phase. In the second phase, this was supplemented by *uṣūl*, *fiqh* and Islamic history. The third phase continued these Islamic sciences with the addition of sociology, psychology and natural history.<sup>39</sup> The course of study was no accident. Arabic language dominated the early stages at both secondary and higher education, indicating that national considerations geared towards the revival of an ‘Arab identity’ were trumping the traditional prioritisation of *fiqh* and *uṣūl*.<sup>40</sup> The second phase delved deeper into religious sciences, and it was only in the third phase, once this linguistic and religious knowledge had been firmly implanted, that modern disciplines were brought in. The system was designed to prepare students for the final stage of traditional *hawza* study – *al-baḥth al-khārij* – where they could achieve the level of mujtahid.<sup>41</sup>

The new order was embodied by the physicality of the Muntada’s classrooms. Gone were the spectacles of mujtahids in their teaching *majlis* (see Figs. 1 and 2.), standing atop shaking minbars surrounded by crowds of eager students. The ‘wave of white and black turbans’ were often in motion as they jostled for prime position – some in front and some behind the podium, facing their peers. Such images evoke the individualistic nature of the study process, when students took personal responsibility for the environment of the classroom,

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<sup>39</sup> Al-Janabi, *Ta’rikh al-Najaf al-Ijtima’i*, 367–68; *al-Hatīf*, 4/148, November 1938, 6.

<sup>40</sup> Al-Janabi, 369–70.

<sup>41</sup> Al-Asifi, *Madrasat al-Najaf*, 127.

competing for physical space and free to challenge the teacher. Distinguishing the mujtahid from the students was a matter of physical status and symbolic authority, a ‘spectacle’ of power. Positioned above the students, he looked down upon them but was also surrounded. He could not regulate their learning; they regulated him in reverence and critique. Talented teachers maintained their status through mobilising their intellectual or charismatic power: the fear of Khorasani’s rebuke infected even the student standing in the most distant corner of the mosque, according to al-Sharqi.<sup>42</sup> This was a system in which authority was invested in the reputation of the cleric. But his authority was constantly being questioned and interjected; he was scrutinised, physically and intellectually.<sup>43</sup> Despite the power of his position, the old system encompassed a spirit of equity between teacher and taught.



*Fig 1. Kadhimi Khorasani leads his teaching majlis<sup>44</sup>*

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<sup>42</sup> Al-Sharqi, *al-Ahlam*, 110.

<sup>43</sup> Al-Asifi, *Madrasat al-Najaf*, 25.

<sup>44</sup> [https://www.xwhos.com/person/muhammad\\_kadhimi\\_khorasani-whois.html](https://www.xwhos.com/person/muhammad_kadhimi_khorasani-whois.html) [Accessed: 29 July 2022].





*Fig 2. Khorasani teaching outside*<sup>45</sup>

The messy equality of the teaching *majlis* was transformed by the Muntada (See Figs. 3 and 4.). The crowd, the ‘compact mass, a locus of multiple exchanges, individualities merging together’ below the shaky minbar was ‘abolished and replaced by a collection of separated individuals’ in classrooms, with rows – albeit cramped – of desks and chairs.<sup>46</sup> Although the instructor lost his physical superiority, the equity between mujtahid and student was gone. The former was now positioned afront, capable of regulating and assessing the students’ progress at a microlevel day-to-day. But while the authority of the teacher was affirmed, his agency was diminished by a set curriculum, a timetabled school day and an overarching administrative structure. A universal printed text, rather than the individual, determined the course of study.

<sup>45</sup> ‘Majlis Daras Akhund Khorasani’, <https://www.jamarkan.news/> [Accessed: 29 July 2022].

<sup>46</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1991), 201.



*Fig 3. The Exam Hall of the College of Fiqh<sup>47</sup>*



*Fig 4. A lesson in progress at the Muntada<sup>48</sup>*

The Muntada published study manuals for lessons on logic, grammar and rhetoric.<sup>49</sup> These were intended to comprise a more accessible and utilitarian teaching corpus, especially for students at the elementary level.<sup>50</sup> Al-Muzaffar's contribution was on logic. His initial lessons were published in a short pamphlet in 1937. These were expanded and republished as

<sup>47</sup> 'Abd al-Khadar, *Jam'iyyat Muntada al-Nashr*, pic. 13.

<sup>48</sup> 'Shaykh al-Muzaffar wa Jam'iyyat Muntada al-Nashr', <https://almadasupplements.com/view.php?cat=15806> [Accessed: 29 July 2022].

<sup>49</sup> Al-Qamusi, *Min Awraq*, 150. For the problems with the old books of study, see al-Asifi, *Madrasat al-Najaf*, 120, 130.

<sup>50</sup> 'Abd al-Khadar, *Jam'iyyat Muntada al-Nashr*, 115.

al-Muzaffar's most famous monograph in the 1940s, titled *al-Mantiq*.<sup>51</sup> The book followed the same general structure of traditional Islamic school logic books.<sup>52</sup> Yet while the teaching logic books of the classical scholars were often short and generally quite vague, al-Muzaffar's expanded on each topic, erasing vagaries, providing numerous examples and presenting the lessons in highly accessible prose.<sup>53</sup> Each section included diagrams and ended with a set of exercises which the teachers could use to aid their students' learning.<sup>54</sup> Pedagogical inserts urged teachers to encourage their students to use logic in the learning process by adopting 'inductive teaching . . . by example', as the contemporary 'scholars of education were advocating.'<sup>55</sup>

*Al-Mantiq* was an influential book, still widely published today. While more research is needed on how its contents relates to the theoretical underpinnings of classical Islamic philosophy, its structure reveals much about the transformed pedagogical environment of the Muntada. The traditional Najafi *hawza* taught logic through a discursive exchange between students and teachers. Lessons were based on one or several of the classical logic teaching texts, which the students would read or memorise before an oral debate with their teacher. They were encouraged to call out queries and expand on vagaries, with the teacher's assessment of the students' individual achievement based on those who were best able to hold their own. This process could produce whole new commentaries on a given text. John Walbridge points out that, if combined, these commentaries might read like a 'written imitation of the lively debate

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<sup>51</sup> 'Abd al-Khadar, 116, 119.

<sup>52</sup> Such as Shaykh Nasir al-Din al-Tusi's (d. 1274) *Tajrid al-Mantiq*. *Al-Mantiq* began by defining knowledge, before introducing and discussing formulations (*al-alfādh*) indications (*al-dalāl*), the difference between particular (*jiz'ī*) and universal (*kullī*) descriptors, propositions, syllogisms and finishing with the 'five crafts' for deriving truths in Islamic philosophy. Muhammad Rida al-Muzaffar, *al-Mantiq* (Najaf: Matba'at al-Nu'man, 1968), 12, 31, 67, 311; John Walbridge, 'Logic in the Islamic Intellectual Tradition: The Recent Centuries', *Islamic Studies* 39, no. 1 (2000): 65.

<sup>53</sup> Walbridge, 'Logic in the Islamic Intellectual Tradition', 63.

<sup>54</sup> Al-Muzaffar, *al-Mantiq*, 26–27.

<sup>55</sup> Al-Muzaffar, 118–22.

in the seminary classroom': the fragments of an evolving pedagogical tradition.<sup>56</sup> In compiling *al-Mantiq*, al-Muzaffar appears to have consulted a wide range of classical texts and their commentaries.<sup>57</sup> Yet while thorough and faithful to the Islamic philosophical tradition in content, the book's framing broke with the discursive pedagogy of the old system, where scholarly autonomy was key. It instead offered a set logic curriculum, designed to encourage rational thinking within a more tightly structured teaching environment. Within this new system, students were assessed, not necessarily by the ability to challenge what they read during the seminary, but by their capacity to respond correctly to a set corpus of written exercises.

These new methods enabled the Muntada to assess how well each student was performing. Formal exams were instituted, to differentiate the 'knower from the ignorant'. Students could not progress to the next level of study without passing the level below.<sup>58</sup> The meaning of knowledge itself was reconfigured by this transformation. Through standardising the curriculum and organising and streamlining the students' progression, the Muntada tacitly acknowledged the difference between knowledge as an objective and innately valuable category and knowledge as a useful, practical device for engaging the world. This cognitive leap was a dominant feature of modernist Islamic reform, as it sought to reformulate the Sharia into a functional political ideology of the nation state.<sup>59</sup> It was also a common attitude adopted by state educators towards Islamic education at a national level. Starrett has shown how Egyptian policy makers in mid-twentieth century incorporated religious studies into a 'comprehensive system of social planning' designed to create the next generation of national subjects. Within this paradigm, religious studies conceived as a quest for 'mastery of a body of

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<sup>56</sup> Walbridge, 'Logic in the Islamic Intellectual Tradition', 64.

<sup>57</sup> This can be deduced from a review of the few footnotes included in the work. Al-Muzaffar did not list all of his references.

<sup>58</sup> *Al-Hatîf*, 4/128, 1 July 1938, 23; 4/142, 14 October 1938, 23.

<sup>59</sup> Hamzah, 'From 'ilm to Şihāfa', 115–16.

spiritual literature' was substituted by a 'functionalisation' of the Islamic heritage, in which 'real religion' was defined by 'its social utility' rather than its innate truth.<sup>60</sup> In Starrett's case study, this transformation was initiated in the service of a state-backed modernity project but led to outcomes which the Egyptian state had never intended. In the Muntada's case the impetus came from below, from a civil society organisation emerging from a traditional religious institution. Such an observation highlights the salience of Starrett's observation that 'subordinated populations [i.e., those, like the Shi'i ulama, who were not heavily involved in the machinery of the state] . . . appropriate educational systems for their own purpose' and, in doing so, articulate the disciplinary power of the state at a local level, challenging the state's dominance through credible religious educational alternatives.<sup>61</sup>

Plans for the expansion of the Muntada in the 1940s illustrate that the ambition of the founders was to create an educational network for young children from elementary level up to university. This pyramid structure would exist as a parallel system to the secular state or community provision at a national level. As well as graduating ulama, the Muntada was equally interested in producing state functionaries, elementary and middle school teachers, lawyers and businessmen. Hence the sixth executive council forwarded proposals for a college of *adab* and history, a conventional secondary school and an evening middle school offering classes in record keeping and the science of trade. A combination of day and evening classes were intended to reach as broad a cross section of society as possible.<sup>62</sup> There are striking similarities between these proposals and those instituted in al-Azhar throughout the twentieth century, which organised primary, preparatory and secondary education as feeder schools for al-Azhar university.<sup>63</sup> The intention of the projects in both contexts was not to challenge the state or

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<sup>60</sup> Gregory Starrett, *Putting Islam to Work: Education, Politics, and Religious Transformation in Egypt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 73.

<sup>61</sup> Starrett, 7.

<sup>62</sup> Al-Qamusi, *Min Awraq*, 156–57.

<sup>63</sup> Starrett, *Putting Islam to Work*, 208.

undermine its authority. The Muntada instead offered a local and alternative modernity project. It was a Shi'i community initiative with national aspirations, which aspired to forge a distinctly Shi'i Iraqi national subject.

Rather ironically, given the rhetoric of the Najafi reformers themselves, the religious-political subjectivity of the graduates of the Muntada was arguably far more 'rigid' than that of the graduates of the traditional *hawza*. While the advocates of the Muntada such as Muruwwa and Muhammad Sharara highlighted the intellectual limitations of the traditional system, they also acknowledged that it had been instrumental in their own political and intellectual maturation. Muruwwa acknowledged that one of the reasons he was able to muster the intellectual courage to put down his turban was due to 'the nature of the relationship between the student, the teacher and the text' in the old system, which:

puts the student, immediately after his attendance at one of the study circles, in front of his assertive responsibility for himself, and for forming his relationship of understanding with the teacher and the study text . . . this pushes the student – automatically – to free himself from following the ideas of the teacher or the ideas of the text and opens for him the field of intellectual independence and freedom of serious debate with the teacher and text without constraint.<sup>64</sup>

The characterisation of the old system as a font of independent and free scholarly enquiry is powerfully put by Muruwwa. Walbridge points to a similar situation in twentieth century Iran.<sup>65</sup> These recollections verify al-Asifi's remarks about the importance within the Najafi *hawza* of casting doubt (*al-tashkīk*), debate and critique in the traditional subjects of *fiqh*, *uṣūl* and philosophy.<sup>66</sup> While the old system was awash with too many public holidays, it

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<sup>64</sup> Barhouma, *al-Turath al-Arabi*, 22.

<sup>65</sup> He notes, somewhat anecdotally, that much of the modern secular intelligentsia who were educated within the traditional madrasas 'invariably' remembered the vibrant debates of their religious education with great fondness. Walbridge, 'Logic in the Islamic Intellectual Tradition', 64.

<sup>66</sup> Al-Asifi, *Madrasat al-Najaf*, 21.

was during such holidays that students attended the Najafi *majālis* to engage in less structured learning, where the debate was even more uninhibited.<sup>67</sup> This likely explains, at least in part, the diversity and originality of Najafi political and intellectual thought throughout the first half of the nineteenth century: Islamists, communists, nationalists and much in between appear to have emerged from the seminaries of Najaf, much to the confusion of historians and ulama alike.<sup>68</sup> Such intellectual freedoms and diversity of outcome cannot be associated with the pedagogical institutions of Muntada al-Nashr, where the relationship between teacher, text and student was heavily tilted towards the text, not as a platform of self-expression, but as an authoritative and determinative guide. The Muntada did not then, represent the spread of a rationalist and liberal Islamic education in place of a limited and limiting tradition, but the replacement of a diverse and essentially unlimited system by a modernist and quasi-statist disciplinary regime.

### **Public Reform and the Husayni Majlis**

On a societal level, one aspect of religious life which the Muntada believed was in serious need of reform was the institution of the Husayni *majlis*. This ubiquitous and notoriously unregulated space was the institution which played the greatest role in shaping the religious and political mentalities of the wider and often only semi-literate public of Najaf.<sup>69</sup> Since al-Shahrastani, the danger of uneducated public opinion was recognised by Najafi reformers. Such anxieties were intensified in the interwar period when the scholarly debates around the permissibility of flagellations during the Husayni mourning ceremonies rippled across the Shi'i world in the late 1920s. This explosive episode has been recognised as an important aspect of the Shi'i community's reconfiguration of their political and cultural identity

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<sup>67</sup> Al-Asifi, 27.

<sup>68</sup> See, for example, Naef, 'Shi'i-Shuyū'ī'. Jones discusses the Najafi radical poet Muhammad Salih Bahr al-Ulum as 'assailing the conservative ulama.' Jones, *The Dangers of Poetry*, 107.

<sup>69</sup> For the Husayni *majlis*, see Chapter One, 49–50.

in the very public context of the modern nation state.<sup>70</sup> Al-Muzaffar, incidentally, was one of several reform-minded ulama to support the continuation of the flagellations.<sup>71</sup> Rather than rehashing these historical narratives here, I will conclude this analysis of the Muntada by looking at one of the less well studied repercussions of the controversy and what it says about the ways the Muntada sought to change public religious culture.

The Husayni *majlis* played an important role in the ‘Ashura debates because Sayyid Salih al-Hilli, the same infamous minbar preacher who had opposed Madrasat al-Ghari, campaigned vociferously against the reforms, directly undermining in the process the authority of the *Marja’ al-Taqlid* of the day, Abu Hassan Isfahani. In doing this, he was apparently in the service of Isfahani’s rival, Ahmed Kashif al-Ghita.<sup>72</sup> According to contemporary accounts, it was the ferocity of al-Hilli’s rhetoric – he accused the supporters of the reforms of being Umayyads, a slur which associated them with the dynasty responsible for Imam Husayn’s death – which engendered a violent social reaction against those who supported the reforms.<sup>73</sup> Many were forced into hiding and there were apparently a number of violent incidents in the street.

It was not only the content of al-Hilli’s campaign which caused anxieties among the reformers in Najaf but the power he was able to exercise in the unregulated public space of the Husayni *majlis*. Some years later, Ja’far al-Khalili penned an article in *al-Hatif* critiquing the whole institution of the Husayni minbar. Utilising the same language his newspaper threw at the old system of *hawza* education, he deplored the ‘chaos spreading to all aspects of the religion and the common people (*al-‘awām*). The monetisation of the minbar preachers’ profession, according to al-Khalili, meant the preacher – whom he denoted with the degrading

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<sup>70</sup> Weiss, *In the Shadow of Sectarianism*, 75; Nakash, *The Shi’is of Iraq*, 154–62; Werner Ende, ‘The Flagellations of Muharram and the Shi’ite “Ulama”’, in *The Development of Islamic Ritual*, ed. Gerald Hawting (NA: Routledge, 2006).

<sup>71</sup> Al-Khalili, *Hakadha Araftuhum*, Vol. 2, 20.

<sup>72</sup> Al-Janabi, *Ta’rikh al-Najaf al-Ijtima’i*, 297; al-Khalili, *Hakadha Araftuhum*, Vol. 2, 145.

<sup>73</sup> Al-Khalili, *Hakadha Araftuhum*, Vol. 2, 145–46.



Persian slur of *rūḍa khūn*<sup>74</sup>— were motivated solely by the need to attract crowds to their *majlis*. He accused preachers of having no consideration for proper grammar, history or religious knowledge and of saying whatever the crowd desires, repeating the maxim: ‘religion is by the hand of the masses and if the common people are satisfied with it then God is satisfied.’ He urged the ulama to take responsibility for correcting the corruptions of these three hundred or so preachers.<sup>75</sup>

Al-Khalili’s article reflected tangible material concerns common to both ulama and the preachers themselves about the organisation of the minbar profession, especially its financial model.<sup>76</sup> But the article also reflected a common strand of Najafi reformist thought that associated the intrinsically messy, irregular and oral world of the Husayni *majlis* with the pre-modern and, in their parlance, conservative rigidity of Najafi society. This was not a clash between a traditional and modern conception of Shi’ism, nor between traditional and insurgent hierarchies of authority. It is noteworthy in this regard that al-Khalili affirmed the traditional authority of the *Marj’iyya* when he supported the reform of the ‘Ashura mourning ceremonies in the modern genre of the newspaper, while it was al-Hilli, in the traditional oral world of the *majlis*, who refused to acknowledge Isfahani’s authority.<sup>77</sup> Instead, the intervention by al-Khalili was a modernist polemic. Its aspiration was to transform the Husayni minbar into a site where religious narratives, such as the story of the Karbala tragedy, were not only forms of entertainment, but tools for inculcating a modern and universal political and religious subjectivity.

In lectures delivered at Muntada al-Nashr in the late 1930s, al-Muzaffar presented the theoretical foundations for a similar aspiration when he discussed the Islamic philosophical

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<sup>74</sup> For *rūḍa khūn* see al-Sharqi, *al-Ahlam*, 98 and al-Wa’ili, *Tajarubi ma’ al-Minbar*, 50.

<sup>75</sup> *Al-Hatif*, 2/68, 2 March 1937, 3.

<sup>76</sup> Al-Wa’ili, *Tajarubi ma’ al-Minbar*, 129.

<sup>77</sup> Al-Khalili, *Hakadha Araftuhum*, Vol. 2, 145–46.

concept of rhetoric (*al-khaṭāba*).<sup>78</sup> He linked the value and danger of rhetoric to a sociological assessment of the public and their inability to understand both evidence (*al-burhān*) and dialectics (*al-jadaliyya*). This was because they were ‘ruled by emotion more than rationalism . . . and will therefore accept or reject in full any complicated idea they come across.’<sup>79</sup> Al-Muzaffar argued that it was ‘imperative that those who want to lead the public towards goodness learn the craft of rhetoric.’<sup>80</sup>

In the early 1940s, Muntada al-Nashr attempted to put this suggestion into practice by opening a training school for preachers. The hope was that, through creating a bespoke educational pathway, the ‘*fitna*’ of the ‘Ashura controversies could be avoided in future, while the popular Husayni *majlis* could be denuded of its chaotic, populist tendencies.<sup>81</sup> A committee was formed of well-known minbar preachers and school premises were rented. The exact programme of the school is unknown, but it is unlikely it aspired to completely dictate the minbar experience.<sup>82</sup> Nevertheless, the school’s rationale was enough to elicit a negative response from some sections of Najafi society. Immediately after the inauguration of the building, protests erupted. In a manner reminiscent of the ‘Ashura controversies, a group of preachers and ulama accused the Muntada of seeking to rehabilitate the popular image of the Umayyads. Ironically, these were in part organised by the minbar preacher Shaykh Muhammad ‘Ali al-Ya’qubi, co-founder of Jam’iyyat al-Rabita al-‘Ilmiyya al-Adabiyya. Al-Ya’qubi was anything but a staunch conservative: Isfahani had deployed him specifically to challenge al-Hilli on the minbar during the ‘Ashura controversies and he had previously called for the

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<sup>78</sup> For rhetoric in Islamic philosophy, see Walbridge, ‘Logic in the Islamic Intellectual Tradition’, 65.

<sup>79</sup> Al-Muzaffar, *al-Mantiq*, 413.

<sup>80</sup> Al-Muzaffar, 414.

<sup>81</sup> ‘Abd al-Khadar, *Jam’iyyat Muntada al-Nashr*, 153.

<sup>82</sup> This can be deduced by al-Muzaffar’s recognition that rhetoric could not be learnt by imitation alone. He believed that the skill of *al-khaṭāba* was a ‘natural talent for some and a learnt skill for others, which would improve through exercises and learning.’ He recognised that the ‘secret of good oratory’ could be found in ‘instinct and experience before copying the example of others’. Al-Muzaffar, *al-Mantiq*, 420–21.

reform of the Husyani minbar himself.<sup>83</sup> But as a minbar preacher, and a member of the Muntada's rival institution within Najafi civil society, al-Rabita, he was naturally suspicious of the proposals.<sup>84</sup> With the Najafi street mobilised, the premises were attacked and the project was quickly cancelled.<sup>85</sup>

The Muntada's minbar training project was an abject failure, but other comparable schemes were attempted later in the century. The significance of the project does not necessarily lie in the impassioned reaction it elicited in Najafi society. Such a reaction likely encompassed genuine economic anxieties from the minbar preachers themselves as well as popular concerns about a programme aimed at restructuring social and cultural symbols and institutions. The significance of the project instead lies in what it sought to achieve, and – therefore – what it demonstrates about the ambition and scope of the Muntada's reform package. Like its educational initiatives, the minbar training college was a civil society project designed to regulate an aspect of public life in Najaf. It was another way – albeit largely unsuccessful – that the Muntada sought to endow its subjects, be they students or society at large, with a peculiarly Shi'i modernist sense of self, a universal and shared understanding of what Shi'ism was, and a normative understanding of how it related to other ways of being in the world. It is no surprise, in this regard, that one of the Muntada's biggest legacies was political, rather than pedagogical, in that its schools produced several of the founders of Hizb al-Da'wa, the first Shi'i Islamist party to emerge in Iraq in 1958.<sup>86</sup> While Islamist historians themselves explain this by highlighting the importance of the Muntada for reigniting an 'Islamic consciousness' in Najaf, this section has tried to show how such a consciousness was less an Islam reignited than it was one transmuted at a discursive and institutional level.

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<sup>83</sup> Al-Madani, *al-Ta'rikh al-Ijtima'i al-Hadith*, 178.

<sup>84</sup> Al-Karbasi, *Mu'jam Khutaba al-Minbar al-Husayni*, Vol. 1, 67; al-Khalili, *Hakadha Araftuhum*, Vol. 2, 146.

<sup>85</sup> 'Abd al-Khadar, *Jam'iyyat Muntada al-Nashr*, 156; al-Wa'ili, *Tajarubi ma' al-Minbar*, 183–86.

<sup>86</sup> 'Abd al-Khadar, *Jam'iyyat Muntada al-Nashr*, 215; 'Abdul-Jabar, *The Shiite Movement*.

## *Shi'i Reform and Islamic Unity*

The same year that al-Muzaffar founded Muntada al-Nashr, he embarked on a brief but significant media exchange with the Egyptian historian Ahmed Amin in the Cairene journal, *al-Risala*.<sup>87</sup> Al-Muzaffar sent in the article after reading Amin's introduction to a book by the Iranian scholar, Abu 'Abdullah al-Ranhani, titled *Ta'rikh al-Quran*. In the introduction, Amin deplored the social antagonism he saw developing between Sunnis and Shi'a, arguing that it was caused by irrelevant historical and political factors. In an oft-repeated ecumenical turn of phrase, he argued that a Sunni should view a Shi'i as a Hanafi views a Maliki or a Maliki a Shafi'i, before imploring the ulama of both sects to collaborate in publishing reliable historical and scientific research to undermine discord.<sup>88</sup>

Al-Muzaffar was surprised by the conciliatory tone because he remembered reading earlier work by Amin which had inspired condemnation in Najaf for its derogatory characterisation of Shi'ism. In Amin's most famous work published in 1928, *Fajr al-Islam*, he flippantly remarked that Shi'ism was the 'reside of those who wanted to destroy Islam . . . and bring Jewish, Christian, Zoroastrian or Indian rulings into the faith.'<sup>89</sup> These opinions quickly filtered through to the Shi'i population of the Middle East, precipitating a wave of condemnation.<sup>90</sup> Amin was invited to Najaf along with a delegation from al-Azhar, where Muhammad Husayn Kashif al-Ghita discussed Shi'ism with him in a highly public spectacle. According to the written transcript of the meeting, al-Ghita wasted no time in challenging

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<sup>87</sup> See *al-Risala*, 118, 7 October 1935, 23 – 26; 121, 28 October 1935, 9 – 13; 128, 16 December 1935, 46 – 49; 130, 30 December 1935.

<sup>88</sup> Ahmed Amin, 'Muqaddima', in *Ta'rikh al-Qur'an*, by Abu 'Abdullah al-Zanjani (Cairo: The Hindawi Foundation for Education and Culture, 2016), 7.

<sup>89</sup> Ahmed Amin, *Fajr al-Islam*, Vol. 1 (Cairo: Matba'at al-I'timad, 1928), 330. For an overview of Amin's arguments see 'Inayat, *Modern Islamic Political Thought*, 43–44

<sup>90</sup> The book became a recurrent premise for defensive Shi'i tracts and Amin a quintessential example of entrenched Sunni prejudice. See, for example, Muhsin al-Amin, *A'yan al-Shi'a*, Vol. 1 (Beirut: 1935, Dar al-T'arif), 46; Muhammad Husayn Kashif al-Ghita, *The Origins of Shi'ite Islam and Its Principles [Translation]* (NA: Ansariyan Publications, 1982), 3.

Amin's characterisation of Shi'ism. Al-Ghita dismissed Amin's protestations that any errors in his work resulted from a dearth of published books on the Shi'a.<sup>91</sup> Yet Amin's defence alerted al-Ghita to a gap in the market, influencing his subsequent decision to compose a book on the basic principles of Shi'ism for an external audience.

It is unsurprising then, given these factors, that al-Muzaffar greeted Amin's newfound ecumenical posturing with both optimism and a dose of cynicism. Confounded by the difference between Amin's earlier and later work he suggested Amin had 'two diverging personalities.' Yet he offered broad support for Amin's conclusions, reiterating that further research was required to improve relations between Sunnis and Shi'a. To achieve this, al-Muzaffar suggested that Muntada al-Nashr work together with Amin's own modernist publishing house, Lajnat al-Ta'lif wa-l-Tarjam wa-l-Nashr.<sup>92</sup> Al-Muzaffar was using his response to Amin to promote the Muntada at a regional level as a publishing body with ecumenical ambitions. The collaboration between the two groups never happened. But the suggestion does evidence al-Muzaffar's ambition to use print culture and civic activism to continue the ecumenical work instigated by al-Shahrastani and others in the pre-war period.<sup>93</sup> This section argues that such work had important implications – not only for relations between Sunnis and Shi'is – but also for the meaning of Shi'ism at a doctrinal and political level.

Intra-Islamic ecumenicalism has a long history, stretching back at least the eighteenth century, when Nadir Shah sought rapprochement between the Ottoman Empire and Iran through promoting Ja'fari Shi'ism as a fifth mainstream Islamic sect.<sup>94</sup> In the modern period, calls for Sunni-Shi'i unity were synonymous with anti-colonial resistance and a recurrent

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<sup>91</sup> *Al-Irfan*, 21/3, March 1931, 309.

<sup>92</sup> *Al-Risala*, 118, 7 October 1935, 25. Translation: The Committee for Authoring, Translating and Publishing. This institution was founded in 1914 to publish Arabic texts and translations from European languages.

<sup>93</sup> Al-Asifi, *Madrasat al-Najaf*, 142.

<sup>94</sup> Kohlberg, 'Aspects of Akhbari Thought', 151.

subtext of pan-Islamic activism.<sup>95</sup> According to Rainer Brunner, the ‘classical ecumenical movement in modern Islam’ took place between the end of the First World War and the 1970s.<sup>96</sup> This periodisation is salient. However, it fails to account for shifts in the focus of ecumenical discourse precipitated by the fall of the Ottoman Empire. As was discussed in chapter two, the intra-Islamic element of the pre-war reform movement was only a relatively minor aspect of a much more expansive and ambitious trans-regional and trans-imperial ecumenical project. Al-Shahrastani’s understanding of ecumenicalism was not limited to Sunni–Shi’i *taqrīb* but evoked a vast pan-Eastern alliance. One reason for this was because, in the pre-national period, there was relatively little intra-Islamic polemical activity, social strife or derision between Sunnis and Shi’is to inspire ecumenical campaigning.

One notable example of pre-war Sunni–Shi’i intellectual wrangling was a brief fracas between two of *al-Ilm*’s principal journalistic influences. An article in *al-Manar* by Rashid Rida warned that the spread of Shi’ism among the rural population of southern Iraq posed a political threat to the Ottoman Empire and cynically suggested that it had been facilitated by Shi’i ulama tricking the tribes into submission through the lure of *muta*.<sup>97</sup> The article elicited a powerful response from the Shi’i community. A young writer in *al-Irfan* accused *al-Manar* of publishing ‘reprehensible fanaticism’, which was out of kilter with the era of ‘knowledge and freedom.’<sup>98</sup> The thrust of the response was to illustrate how Shi’ism was compatible with Sunnism in all major issues of *uṣūl*. For literary effect, each paragraph began with the one-word phrase: ‘we believe.’ The writer concluded that divergences between Sunni and Shi’i Islam were exclusively ‘*fiqhī* issues’, unrelated to *uṣūl*, and therefore no different from legal differences between the Sunni *madhāhab*.<sup>99</sup> The journalistic response was followed up one year

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<sup>95</sup> ‘Inayat, *Modern Islamic Political Thought*, 41–42.

<sup>96</sup> Brunner, *Islamic Ecumenism in the 20th Century*, 121.

<sup>97</sup> *Al-Manar*, 11/1, February 1908, 45.

<sup>98</sup> *Al-Irfan*, 1/7, July 1909, 351.

<sup>99</sup> *Al-Irfan*, 1/10, October 1909, 493.

later by a pamphlet on the need for unity by the high profile ‘Amili reformer, Muhsin al-Amin.<sup>100</sup>

The brief exchange between *al-Irfan* and *al-Manar* was a sign of things to come and foretold many of the discursive genres, forms and intentions which would define Shi’i–Sunni ecumenical and/or polemical exchanges throughout the interwar period. Firstly, *al-Irfan*’s response was premised on a modernist conception of progress that explicitly equated discord between Sunnis and Shi’is with the pre-modern era of fanaticism and sectarianism. The campaigner believed that the spread of modern science and modern means of communication and exchange would extinguish Sunni–Shi’i discord. The second elements of *al-Irfan*’s response that warrants attention was its attempt to educate – by plainly stating for an ostensibly external audience – what Shi’ism was and exactly how it differed from the Sunni *madhāhab*. The important thing to note here is that, while the writer was clearly intending to educate Rida and the largely – but by no means solely – Sunni readership of *al-Manar*, his decision to publish the response in *al-Irfan* meant that its pedagogical impact must have been equally, if not more, pronounced among the latter journal’s largely – but again by no means solely – Shi’i readership.

As with so many teleological narratives of progress, the contention among the modernist reformers that the political, technological and communications revolutions of the early twentieth century would rid the Middle East of sectarian fissures was a fiction. Transformations in the Middle East public sphere and the development of modern states and nationalist movements created new cadres of Sunni and Shi’i intellectuals who engaged with each other for the first time. Although this could and did bring communities and ideas together, it also revived old theological and historical disagreements, reconfiguring them anew in networks of symbols, signs and tropes which hitherto had little or no meaning. These were

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<sup>100</sup> Mervin, *Un Réformisme Chiite*, 290–96.

formed in relation to modern political discourses and requirements, stemming from concerns around territoriality, cultural ownership of the state, and national and imperial political loyalties.

Rida's concerns about the spread of Shi'ism in Iraq were political as much as they were religious. They were reflected in the late Ottoman state's paranoia about the loyalty of the Iraqi population to the Empire.<sup>101</sup> The emergence of the Middle East state system was accompanied by a cascade of published material or public incident which shaped relations and perceptions of relations between communities. Within Iraq, the Nusuli incident and the Kadhimiyya violence were particularly high-profile examples of sect-centric public discord.<sup>102</sup> Elsewhere, the already shaky relations between Rida and the Shi'a of Jabal 'Amil completely evaporated as the former reorientated himself into a forceful advocate of Wahhabism, while Muhsin al-Amin and his Iraqi colleagues condemned the Wahhabis as unbelievers. The tit-for-tat polemical exchange between *al-Manar* and *al-Irfan* throughout the 1920s eventually led Rida to declare that the Shi'i 'practiced *taqiyya* in their commitment to Islamic unity.'<sup>103</sup> In Najaf, rumours abound that Egypt was rife with misinformation that Shi'ism was a 'plan devised by the Iranians and a political stunt to overthrow Umayyad rule.'<sup>104</sup> Such opinions filtered down the social pyramid as print allowed them to reach an increasing large reading or listening public. Hence the account of one Shi'i Iraqi in 1931 that he had met a Sunni convinced beyond all doubt that every tribe in southern Iraq was ethnically Iranian and the regular elision of Shi'ism (*al-shī'a*) with communism (*al-shuyū'iyya*).<sup>105</sup> This stemmed from an unfortunate coincidence of language, aptly captured by Naguib Mahfouz in the last pages of the Cairo Trilogy. Confused

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<sup>101</sup> Selim Deringil, 'The Struggle against Shi'ism in Hamidian Iraq: A Study in Ottoman Counter Propaganda', *Die Welt Des Islams, New Series* 1, no. 4 (1990): 45–62.

<sup>102</sup> For these incidents, see Chapter Six, 254–255.

<sup>103</sup> Rashid Rida, *Kitab Rasa'il al-Sunna Wa-al-Shi'a Li-Rashid Rida* (Online: al-Maktabat al-Shamila, NA), 13; Werner Ende, 'Ehe Auf Zeit (Muta) in Der Innerislamischen Diskussion Der Gegenwart', *Welt Des Islams* 20, no. 1 (1980): 32.

<sup>104</sup> Kashif al-Ghita, *The Origins of Shi'ite Islam*, 2.

<sup>105</sup> *Al-Irfan*, 22/1, May 1931, 15.



as to why her son is being arrested for political subversion, one of the female protagonists proclaims in disbelief: ‘a Communist? What community is this? The Shi’i community of ‘Ali?’<sup>106</sup>

### **The Shi’i Public Information Campaign**

With the public image of Shi’ism in the national and regional public sphere at something of a nadir by the late 1920s, Shi’i intellectuals and ulama realised that something needed to be done to correct misrepresentations of the faith. As a result of their contention that sectarian discord was associated with a pre-enlightened past, they concluded that ignorance, as much as prejudice, was to blame. The imperative was to ‘remove the veil’ of confusion from the minds of their Sunni co-religionists by universalising correct knowledge, rather than getting bogged down in divisive *fiqhī* or historical debates. This was not something that came naturally to all Shi’i ulama, some of whom feared that engaging Sunni publics would do more harm than good.<sup>107</sup> Neither were they agreed about the overall intention of the campaign. While some subscribed to the notion that the Shi’a should be recognised as a fifth *madhhab* alongside the four Sunni law schools, others, such as al-Muzaffar, disagreed that Shi’ism could be reduced to a legal school alone and criticised those who said otherwise.<sup>108</sup>

The main product of the campaign was a new genre of print material and a new form of activism designed explicitly to reach non-Shi’i audiences. Some of this was published in journals produced by Shi’is, such as *al-Irfan* or the Najafi *al-I’tidal*. Some was published in journals or newspapers run by Sunnis, such as the Egyptian *al-Risala* and, from the late 1940s onwards, *Risalat al-Islam*, the official journal of the Cairene Jam’iyyat al-Taqrīb.<sup>109</sup> But the

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<sup>106</sup> Naguib Mahfouz, *The Cairo Trilogy: Palace Walk, Palace of Desire, Sugar Street* (London: Everyman, 2001), 1300.

<sup>107</sup> Mervin, *Un Réformisme Chiite*, 290; Abbas, ‘Imam Kashif al-Ghita’, 47.

<sup>108</sup> Al-Qamusi, *Min Awraq*, 116; al-Asifi, *Madrasat al-Najaf*, 139–42.

<sup>109</sup> Although Shi’is only made up 24 out of 111 contributors to this newspaper. Brunner, *Islamic Ecumenism in the 20th Century*, 187.

principal mechanism for this public information campaign was the production of standalone pamphlets and books. Some of this material was written by the ulama themselves; some was written by historians or lawyers with ulama oversight. From Iraq, these works included al-Ghita's *Asl al-Shi'a wa Usuliha*, first published in 1931;<sup>110</sup> Shaykh Muhammad al-Din Al Yasin's *al-Difa' 'an al-Shi'a* (published in Baghdad in 1933);<sup>111</sup> Sayyid Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr's *al-Shi'a* (published in Baghdad in 1933);<sup>112</sup> 'Abd al-Razzaq al-Hasani's *Ta'rif al-Shi'a* (published in Lebanon in 1933); Muhammad al-Husayn al-Muzaffari's *Ta'rikh al-Shi'a* (1934); and works dealing with particular aspects of Shi'i doctrine, such as Taqfiq al-Fakiki's *al-Muta': wa Athharaha fi al-Islah al-Ijtima'i*.<sup>113</sup> From Lebanon, significant contributions came with 'Abd al-Husayn Sharaf al-Din's *al-Muraja'at* (1936) and Habib al-Ibrahim's *al-Haqa'iq fi al-Jawami' wa-l-Fawariq* (1937).<sup>114</sup> One would be hard pressed to think of any other Islamic sect compulsively publishing political, social and religious histories of themselves at any other point in history. While Sunni writers, such as Ahmed Amin, penned histories of Islam, the 'History of Sunnism' is yet to be written.

This published material was supplemented by efforts to engage with Sunnis and Sunni institutions. Al-Muzaffar's call for institutional collaboration between the Muntada and Lajnat al-Ta'lif was one example of this. But by far the most active proponent of interfaith activism was al-Ghita. One year after his well-publicised meeting with Amin in Najaf, he became the first high profile Shi'i 'alim to attend a pan-Islamic conference, held in Jerusalem to discuss the Palestine problem and plans for an institute of Islamic learning at al-Aqsa.<sup>115</sup> Travelling as head of a cross sectarian delegation, he led the Friday prayer, allegedly in front of up to 20,000

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<sup>110</sup> Translated title: *The Origins and Principles of Shi'ism*.

<sup>111</sup> *Al-Irfan*, 24/2, July 1933, 212. Translated title: *Defense of the Shi'a*.

<sup>112</sup> *Al-Irfan*, 24/2, July 1933, 211.

<sup>113</sup> Translated title: *al-Mut'a and its Effect on Social Reform*.

<sup>114</sup> Mervin, *Un Réformisme Chiite*, 284, 304–5. Translated titles: *Consultations* and *The Truths in Gatherings and Divisions*.

<sup>115</sup> Martin S. Kramer, *Islam Assembled: The Advent of the Muslim Congresses* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 132.

worshippers.<sup>116</sup> Thereafter he delivered one of his most well-known speeches on the need for Islamic unity. The foreboding speech was premised on a rather bizarre conspiracy that he had received a telegram from somebody purporting to be the direct descendent of the Fatimid Caliph exhorting him not to participate in the pan-Islamic congress because the Sunnis were forwarding plans to re-establish the Caliphate. Al-Ghita saw in the letter ‘fingers of evil’ – of colonial design – working to sow the seeds of division.<sup>117</sup>

The speech quickly found its way into print. A group of journalists standing below the minbar scribbled it down and published it in the newspaper *al-Jami'a al-Islamiyya*. The speech was even mentioned in Reuters, where it was described as ‘one of the strangest events in the world’ and the ‘first time in the history of Islam that Muslims of the four *madhāhab* emulated a Shi'i 'alim.’<sup>118</sup> Eventually published as a standalone pamphlet, the speech became one of the most widely read artefacts from al-Ghita's oeuvre. Now official denoted ‘the historic sermon’, it gained meaning and significance of its own, as a symbol of the intersection between colonial resistance and Shi'i–Sunni reproachment. Its passage from a single oral performance at one of Islam's holiest but most imperilled locations, and on into the mass-produced and well-circulated genre of the ecumenical pamphlet, shows how the oral and print world coalesced to give the ecumenical movement form and momentum.

The writers and activists involved in the ecumenical campaign recognised the unprecedented nature of this new genre of print cultural production. In his introduction to *Ta'rif al-Shi'a*, Muhammad Rida Kashif al-Ghita framed its author, the well-known Iraqi historian, al-Hasani, as being ‘among a group of outstanding writers . . . who have begun reviewing the noble *umma* (the Shi'a)’ in order to undermine ‘negative assumptions . . . detached from the

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<sup>116</sup> Al-Tihriani, *Tabaqat A'lam al-Shi'a*, Vol. 14, 615. *The Iraq Directory, 1936* (Baghdad: Dangoor's Printing and Publishing House, 1936), 598, 603.

<sup>117</sup> Muhammad Husayn Kashif al-Ghita, *al-Khutba al-Ta'rikhiyya* (Jerusalem: Matba'at Dar al-Aytam al-Islamiyya, 1931).

<sup>118</sup> Kashif al-Ghita, *'Uqud Hayati*, 148.

reality of the Imami Shi'i and their rich history.<sup>119</sup> In turn, al-Hasani himself explained his motivation on the basis that, up to that point, the ulama had primarily been concerned with writing material for the benefit of the Shi'a themselves. As a non-clerical figure, he was writing to 'inform the foreigners (*al-ajānib*) from the people of other *madhāhab* about the truth of Shi'ism.'<sup>120</sup> By framing the 'people of other *madhāhab*' as *al-ajānib* – a word generally reserved for non-Muslims or Europeans – al-Hasani premised his pamphlet on a corporate and political conceptions of the Shi'a. He would defend them, not only on the terrain of *fiqh* as a discrete legal *madhhab*, but as a discrete political community as well.

Although ambitious, writers took pains to remind their readership that their intentions were limited to reconciliation and mutual understanding. As has been recognised by other historians, the *taqrīb* genre avoided discussion of divisive questions about the Imamate and the succession of the Prophet.<sup>121</sup> Campaigners highlighted the positive aspect of disagreement. Al-Ghita reminded his audience at al-Aqsa that the companions disagreed on many issues, but still prayed together and did not attack one another's beliefs.<sup>122</sup> Al-Muzaffari – the older brother of Muhammad Rida al-Muzaffar – noted in the introduction to his *Ta'rikh al-Shi'a*: 'all I want with this book is to show that the group known as the Shi'a originate from a testament of the message of Muhammad and not from the Persians or Ibn Saba', a seventh century figure usually considered founder of the first *ghulāt* Shi'i sect.<sup>123</sup> His narrative stressed that a discernible '*shī'at* 'Ali' had existed since the days of the Prophet.<sup>124</sup> He tried to universalise Shi'ism by pointing out that, after the meeting of al-Ghadir when Shi'is believe that Muhammad appointed 'Ali as his successor, 'all the people became the Shi'a of 'Ali', including Abu Bakr and 'Umar,

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<sup>119</sup> 'Abd al-Razzaq al-Hasani, *Ta'rif al-Shi'a* (Saida: Matba'at al-Irfan, 1933), 2.

<sup>120</sup> Al-Hasani, 5.

<sup>121</sup> Brunner, *Islamic Ecumenism in the 20th Century*, 209–10.

<sup>122</sup> Kashif al-Ghita, *al-Khutba al-Ta'rikhiyya*, 6–7.

<sup>123</sup> Muhammad al-Hussein al-Muzaffari, *Ta'rikh al-Shi'a* (Najaf: Matba'at al-Zuhara, 1934), 3.

<sup>124</sup> Al-Muzaffari, 8.

who apparently congratulated ‘Ali on his accession. Al-Muzaffari diplomatically chose not to make any comment about the reason for Abu Bakr’s appointment to the Caliphate in ‘Ali’s stead, noting only that his ascendancy did not diminish the people’s love and loyalty for the family of the Prophet.<sup>125</sup>

Al-Ghita followed similarly: while he provided a detailed historical narrative of the early Islamic period based on Shi’i interpretations of events and argued that a sizeable number of the companions of the Prophet should be seen as Shi’i, he did not seek to assertively refute other narratives. He noted, for example, that the first three Caliphs may not have ‘consciously violated the words of the Holy prophet in superseding ‘Ali’, but simply not have understood him.<sup>126</sup> The point was to illustrate that Shi’ism spread, not through the ‘innovations of the Iranians, or the ingenuity of the Sabaeans’, but through the ‘simply and straight way of Islam.’<sup>127</sup> These arguments aimed to revise assumptions about the origins of Shi’ism, common to Sunni scholarship, that its political and theological tenets originated in groups with an extreme messianic attachment to ‘Ali. By showing that the term Shi’i and a discernible group of proto-Shi’is existed among the companions, al-Ghita and al-Muzaffari foretold more recent assessments of early Islamic history which accept the existence of a movement committed to the family of the Prophet before even the ascendancy of ‘Ali’s caliphate.<sup>128</sup> Yet implicit in their argumentation was acknowledgement of the permanency of harmonious differentiation between the Islamic sects. The intention was to encourage Sunnis to see the Shi’a as a ‘special branch of their society’, while repeatedly highlighting how the Shi’a were ‘like all other Muslims’ on most matters.<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> Al-Muzaffari, 12–13.

<sup>126</sup> Kashif al-Ghita, *The Origins of Shi’ite Islam*, 20.

<sup>127</sup> Kashif al-Ghita, 25.

<sup>128</sup> Wilfred Madelung, ‘Shi’a’, *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition* (Leiden: Brill, 2012).

<sup>129</sup> Kashif al-Ghita, *The Origins of Shi’ite Islam*, 16, 40, 43.

The new genre aimed to prove the modernity of specific Shi'i beliefs and practices. In the first instance, this meant rebranding *usūlī* Shi'ism's liberal attitude towards *ijtihād* as proof that Shi'is were the rationalist sect par excellence. Responding to a question from Amin during his visit to Najaf, al-Ghita proudly affirmed that *ijtihād* was unrestricted among the Shi'is. Foretelling recent scholarship questioning whether the gates to *ijtihād* were ever actually closed by the Sunni *madhāhab*, he challenged Amin's request for evidence of the Shi'i position by rhetorically asking what evidence there was for the Sunni embargo.<sup>130</sup> Islam is 'higher and loftier' than a faith based on 'ignorance and despotism', he concluded. This observation alone was enough for him to contend that unlimited *ijtihād* among the Shi'a was a positive practice, which could precipitate scientific, social and political progress.<sup>131</sup>

Particularly controversial aspects of Shi'i belief were framed as consonant with modern ideas. The defence of *muta'* was not only based on the premise that the practice had been carried out by the companions, but also predicated on a number of scientific and social factors. Al-Ghita argued that *muta'* was necessary to prevent young Muslim travellers committing adultery or suffering the 'serious physical and mental illness' associated with long period of sexual abstinence.<sup>132</sup> Fakiki used Sunni sources themselves to refute the ban on *muta'*, but also highlighted that it could prevent aberrations (homosexuality), venereal diseases and extra-marital affairs.<sup>133</sup> Al-Hasani used an analogy with similar practices being instituted in the 'most civilised state' (*arqā dawla mutamaddina*), namely the United States, where he alleged that a law legalising 'temporary marriage' (*al-'aqd al-muwaqqat*) was being instituted in recognition of the 'social benefits' of *muta'* which the Shi'a had recognised for some time.<sup>134</sup> Al-Hasani's

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<sup>130</sup> Wael B. Hallaq, 'Was the Gate of Ijtihad Closed?', *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 16, no. 1 (1984): 3–41.

<sup>131</sup> *Al-Irfan*, 21/3, March 1931, 314–316.

<sup>132</sup> Kashif al-Ghita, *The Origins of Shi'ite Islam*, 66–67.

<sup>133</sup> Ende, 'Ehe Auf Zeit (Muta)', 20.

<sup>134</sup> Al-Hasani, *Ta'rif al-Shi'a*, 55–56.

strange analogy mirrored those of other Shi'i activists linking *muta* ' with family law reforms and new ideas about marriage voiced by European thinkers.<sup>135</sup> The intention was to use these analogies to de-exceptionalism the custom and divorce it from the association with prostitution and social chaos.

The association of *muta* ' with these negative moral stereotypes meant that it was one issue where the Shi'i activists' work frequently produced negative responses. Al-Ghita's book, *Asl al-Shi'a*, was by far the highest profile and well-read product of the campaign. It precipitated positive responses from both Sunni and Orientalist readers.<sup>136</sup> The Egyptian philologist, Ahmed Zaki Pasha, dispatched a commentary to the book's publisher, al-Hasani, praising it generally but offering a number of criticisms. After questioning some of al-Ghita's more outlandish examples of anti-Shi'i prejudice, Zaki turned to the issue of *muta* '. Al-Ghita's argumentation had not 'uprooted the disturbances' from his mind about the negative 'legal' (*shar'ī*) and 'civilisational' (*umrānī*) impact of the practice; for what would happen, he pontificated, to a boy born of *muta* ' if his father travelled after the end of the contract?<sup>137</sup> Al-Ghita's response to Zaki was published alongside Zaki's critique in the Najafi journal *al-I'tidal*. It reiterated a number of normative legal provisions within the institution of *muta* ' that would apply in such circumstances.<sup>138</sup> Thereafter, several increasingly vitriolic interventions were published by Sunni and Shi'i writers. An anonymous 'servant of the ulama' from Baghdad deplored the Shi'i defence of *muta* ' and implored al-Ghita to 'refine the morality' of his people so they may reach a higher level of integrity.<sup>139</sup> In response, a Shi'i writer accused the anonymous author of harbouring 'sectarian chauvinism and *madhhabī* inclinations.'<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> Ende, 'Ehe Auf Zeit (Muta)', 18.

<sup>136</sup> For some of the positive responses from the Orientalists, see *al-Irfan*, 24/1, June 1933, 76.

<sup>137</sup> *Al-I'tidal*, 1/2, March 1933, 56, 58.

<sup>138</sup> *Al-I'tidal*, 1/2, March 1933, 60 – 61.

<sup>139</sup> *Al-I'tidal*, 1/4, May 1933, 162.

<sup>140</sup> *Al-I'tidal*, 1/4, May 1933, 164.

The rather rapid descent of a civil and productive dialogue into a heated polemical exchange highlights the ambiguous results of the ecumenical campaigning. As much as increasing the availability of public focused information on Shi'ism enabled outsiders to see past their prejudices, they also reemphasised those areas of *fiqh* discord which underlined negative assumptions about the faith. Needless to say, assessing the success or failure of the campaign is a largely futile task, entirely dependent on the length of one's historical lens and subjective criteria of how ecumenical activism should be assessed. The fact that dialogue was taking place at all, while advocating *taqrīb* was almost synonymous with a modernist and reformist mentality, should be seen as evidence enough that a 'culture of coexistence' was developing in the region, and involved, as Ussama Makdisi argues, 'attempts to cohere modern political solidarities and to reconcile these solidarities with the reality of religious and ethnic differences.'<sup>141</sup> What Makdisi has dubbed a 'culture of sectarianism' was a necessary precondition for the 'culture of coexistence' and, as the dynamic and shifting exchange in *al-I'tidal* mapped out above illustrates, both cultures – the sectarian and the anti-sectarian – emerged and developed in dialectical syncretism throughout the modern period.

### **Shi'ism Refashioned**

While the ecumenical campaign was ostensibly aimed towards an external audience of non-Shi'is, it also affected and reflected changing self-understandings of what being Shi'i meant in the post-imperial world. Just as al-Muzaffar was inclined to write and publish educational texts in clear and concise language to create standardised teaching aids for the Muntada, the ecumenical campaigners were obliged to do likewise with an equally expansive body of texts, beliefs and customs. There was no pre-existing text on the dos and don'ts of Shi'ism they could recast as an ecumenical treatise, only a vast corpus of *fiqh* and history, fully

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<sup>141</sup> Ussama Makdisi, *Age of Coexistence: The Ecumenical Frame and the Making of the Modern Arab World* (California: University of California Press, 2019), 1–7.



known by no one and subjectively understood by few. Al-Hasani remembered that the process of pulling together *Ta'rif al-Shi'a* was as much one of codification as it was of explication: it involved sifting through a plethora of 'comprehensive *fiqh* books' to extract the relevant 'detail and regulations', before passing the text on to a group of ulama who reviewed it and indicated their approval.<sup>142</sup>

Once they were published, the press coverage about the ecumenical material from within the Shi'i milieu is indicative of how these books and pamphlets were being consumed eagerly by a Shi'i reading public as much as an external audience. *Al-Irfan* and the Najafi journals reviewed or mentioned all of the aforementioned works, praising the efforts of the authors and acknowledging the need for material to challenge misconceptions about the Shi'a. The administration of *al-I'tidal* sold copies of al-Ghita's book.<sup>143</sup> They acknowledged an intrinsic value in the content. Commenting on *al-Shi'a* by al-Sadr, *al-Irfan's* editors noted that 'nothing new came in the book which did not come in al-Ghita's *Asl al-Shi'a* but we thank the writer for his efforts.'<sup>144</sup> The implication of this response attests to the novel utility of al-Ghita's book: it was a useful and useable text not only as a brochure for non-Shi'is about Shi'is, but as a concise articulation and justification of Shi'i doctrine. This was at least partially because a by-line of the campaign was to assure Shi'is that the slanderous views they came across in the press were incorrect and provide them with the knowledge to justify aspects of their faith coming under public scrutiny.

It was no doubt for this reason that the response to Rida's very first defamation of the Shi'a in *al-Manar* was published, not in *al-Manar*, but *al-Irfan*. While the list of things the writer stated 'we (as Shi'is) believe' was ostensibly pointed towards *al-Manar's* largely Sunni

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<sup>142</sup> Al-Hasani, *Ta'rif al-Shi'a*, 4–5.

<sup>143</sup> *Al-I'tidal*, 1/1, February 1933, 50.

<sup>144</sup> *Al-Irfan*, 24/2, July 1933, 211.

audience, it also conveniently reminded *al-Irfan*'s largely Shi'i readership exactly what it was they did believe. It was for similar reasons that al-Hasani decided to send the responses he received from al-Ghita's book to the Najafi journal *al-I'tidal*, and that the journal happily used prime page space in some of its first issues to air a debate between Sunni and Shi'i writers over the permissibility of *muta'*. Clearly, this was not because they thought publishing such a debate would have a credible impact of Sunni perceptions, but because the mainly Shi'i reading public of Najaf were eager to learn about their traditions, the controversies surrounding them, and the correct ways to defend them from a critical external discourse.

This process engendered an internal reification of Shi'ism into a modern doctrinal community – imagined by an increasingly large number of self-aware adherents as constitutive of particular beliefs, practices and topical positions which clearly distinguished it from other creeds. Although one of these distinctions was with the Sunni mainstream, an ironic subtext of the discourse was its efforts to appropriate and increasingly limit the meaning of Shi'ism itself to the Imami creed and, as such, delegitimise the beliefs of other Shi'i groups. Thus, within the same exchange which al-Muzaffar launched against Amin in 1933, Muhammad Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr berated Amin not for his mischaracterisation of Shi'i beliefs and practices, but his assertion that 'Shi'ism' encompassed a broad spectrum of Shi'i groups. The Imami Shi'a were not 'one among a number of groups remaining to this day', replied al-Sadr, but:

The only sect from the Shi'i sects spread out in Iraq, Persia, India, Afghanistan, Syria, Bahrain, al-Ahsa and al-Qatif . . . all of what is displayed to the world from scholarly texts and *adabī* production is from the ulama, writers and poets of this sect and nothing remains of the numerous other Shi'i sects except some small unmentionable ones. Therefore, the label of Shi'i has become, in these days,

particular to this [the Imamai] sect . . . and most of those misguided sects which distorted the label of Shi'a have perished, thank God.<sup>145</sup>

He finished by encouraging Amin to only use the term Shi'a to describe the Imami in future because they were the 'only sect from among the sects of the Shi'a which can be referred to with the Shi'i label with all that it has from meaning.'<sup>146</sup> Shi'i criticism of the so-called *ghulāt* sects was nothing new. It had been a part of Shi'i heresiography since the early Islamic period.<sup>147</sup> What was different was that such concern was now part of a public focused ecumenical discourse, aimed at envisioning a universal Islamic consensus. The implications of the claims consequently took on a political and social significance that earlier Shi'i polemics never had.

The political nature of these claims was evident; it represented an attempt by advocates of Shi'i religious reform to reframe Shi'ism as a separate but equal component of a more expansive Islamic and nationalist modernity projects in the early twentieth century. This was a continuation of the reformist work pioneered by al-Shahrastani, al-Ghita and Muhsin al-Amin in the pre-war period and the early 1920s. But there were clear differences between the expansive, trans-imperial, inter-religious and anti-colonial ecumenicalism of the earlier period and the later external-focused Shi'i apologetics of the interwar.

Al-Ghita's *al-Din wa-l-Islam* (published in 1911) shared several similarities with his later *Asl al-Shi'a*. Both were written in response to what al-Ghita considered a pressing threat to the Islamic world; both were intended for an external audience of non-Shi'is, more than they were intended for Shi'is themselves.<sup>148</sup> The fundamental differences in the two works reflected the transformed contexts of their publication. In the days of *al-Din wa-l-Islam*, the principal

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<sup>145</sup> *Al-Risala*, 128, 16 December 1935, 46 – 47.

<sup>146</sup> *Al-Risala*, 128, 16 December 1935, 46 – 47.

<sup>147</sup> Marshall G. S. Hodgson, 'How Did the Early Shi'a Become Sectarian?', *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 75, no. 1 (1955): 4.

<sup>148</sup> Al-Ghita sent *al-Din wa-l-Islam* to several Sunni and Christian intellectuals.

problematic facing al-Ghita's ambitious plans for Eastern and Islamic unity were irreligious political projects gaining traction in the constitutional public sphere, linked to colonialism. Al-Ghita's call for unity acknowledged the need to pull together the Islamic sects. But it was first and foremost a case for the resilience of monotheism through an Islamic idiom. While he accused the Christians of having devised 'atheism' as a ploy to undermine Islam, he argued that if Christians and Muslims 'considered the rules of their religion together they would find that they agreed on most things.'<sup>149</sup> He assured his readership that he was not writing for 'my millet or the people of my group' but instead for 'each person who desires truth.' He made no reference to Shi'ism in his introduction. His message was Islamic because Islam was the building blocks for 'each divine law (*sharī'a*) and each faith (*diyāna*)'. 'Religion is Islam and Islam is religion', was his message. He had 'composed the book to . . . unite the sects, not to bring about their difference (*ikhtilāf al-farīq*).'<sup>150</sup>

Al-Ghita's overarching commitment to unity remained the same when he published *Asl al-Shi'a* 20 years later, but his strategy was entirely different. Divisions within and among Muslims now sat at the heart of the unity problematic and he had shelved his commitment to ignoring the 'differences in the [Islamic] sect.' His calls for unity no longer relied on delving into the fundamentals of Islam by framing it as a universal monotheism. It now relied on explicating differences between Sunnis and Twelver Shi'ism, while simultaneously claiming the insignificance of such differences. In sum, the scope of ecumenical discourse was circumscribed by the political realities of the post-Ottoman nation-state system which brought the minutia of the Sunni-Shi'i divide into the regionally integrated public sphere for the first time.

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<sup>149</sup> Kashif al-Ghita, *al-Din wa-l-Islam*, 21–22.

<sup>150</sup> Kashif al-Ghita, 25, 27.

The extent to which the national frame and the new genres were interlinked and constitutive of a new Shi'i self-understanding can be gleaned from the manner Shi'i reformers dealt with the issue of *taqiyya*, the tradition common to the Shi'a of disguising their religion to avoid persecution. An implicit historiographical assumption links the ecumenical movement of the early twentieth century with the Shi'i community's abandonment of *taqiyya*. No longer able or willing to hide their beliefs, a narrative holds that they began to publicise them and seek accord with the Sunni majority.<sup>151</sup> Such an interpretation falls into the recurrent trap of assuming that a coherent and universal Shi'i culture existed in secret throughout the period of *taqiyya*, ready to be revealed to the world fully formed in the twentieth century. Rather than seeing the end of *taqiyya* as a watershed, it is more useful to look at how the ecumenical activists themselves talked about the institution.

Like *muta'*, *taqiyya* was an aspect of Shi'ism which provoked external criticism. It was a political problem, as much as a religious one, because it enabled anti-Shi'i thinkers to argue that the Shi'a could not be relied on to be honest about any of their beliefs. Al-Amin discussed the issue in the first section of his immense encyclopaedia of Shi'i thinkers, *A'yan al-Shi'a*, directly challenging the idea that *taqiyya* was a peculiarly Shi'i practice at all. It was instead a 'natural' principle in 'all rational people' who feared persecution. Implicit in this argument was the ecumenical practice of de-essentialising Shi'i customs by framing them as common-sense notions, which all rational individuals (*al-'uqalā'*) should carry out for self-preservation.<sup>152</sup> Al-Hasani continued in the same vein as al-Amin but took the argument a step further. Not only was *taqiyya* natural for all human beings: it was also a political strategy to preserve an '*umma*' from tyranny. In making this argument, al-Hasani directly compared the Shi'a to a 'German minority living in some country surrounding Germany', striving to hide their 'opposition to the

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<sup>151</sup> Mervin, *Un Réformisme Chiite*, 275.

<sup>152</sup> Al-Amin, *A'yan al-Shi'a*, Vol. 1, 65, 119.

local authority and adherence to the principles of Hitler.<sup>153</sup> The Meaning and resonance of such an analogy can be read on multiple levels. On the one hand, the assertion that Shi'i *taqiyya* could be equated with that of a disloyal ethnic minority refusing to acknowledge the sovereignty of a constituted nation-state is unlikely to have ameliorated the scepticism of some Sunni politicians about the loyalty of Shi'is to the Iraqi state. On the other hand, the reference to German Nazism was perhaps an effort to show common ground between the Shi'a and those Arab nationalists in Iraq who saw national socialism as a useful and wholly modern political model.<sup>154</sup> The Shi'a were a majority in Iraq and had recognised themselves as such since the 1920s. Al-Hasani's assertion that *taqiyya* was a minority strategy may therefore have been intended to undermine the notion that the Iraqi Shi'a would ever need to use *taqiyya* in the first place.

Whatever his intention, the implication for the political meaning of Shi'ism was clear. Al-Hasani's analogy shows how the ecumenical genre itself was precipitating a discursive reconfiguration of Shi'ism within the national polity. He was evoking a secularised Shi'i imagined community that was ambiguously national but united through a shared sense of 'minority' status. Recourse to these types of political analogies was ubiquitous in the ecumenical movement: al-Muzaffar did similarly in a publication by the Muntada when he compared Islam's competing sects to party political struggles in the 'civilised world' (*al-'ālam al-mutamaddin*).<sup>155</sup>

The political and religious collectivity evoked through these analogies was different from those imagined communities constructed in other genres important for the formation of

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<sup>153</sup> Al-Hasani, *Ta'rif al-Shi'a*, 53–54.

<sup>154</sup> This is not to say that Nazism and fascism were universally popular among Iraqi Arab nationalists in the interwar period. See Orit Bashkin, 'Iraqi Shadows, Iraqi Lights: Anti-Fascist and Anti-Nazi Voices in Monarchical Iraq, 1932 - 1941', in *Arab Responses to Fascism and Nazism: Attraction and Repulsion*, ed. Israel Gershoni, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014). 143–44; and Wien, *Iraqi Arab Nationalism*, 2.

<sup>155</sup> *Al-Misbah*, 1/2, December 1935, 65 – 67.

modern political identities. Local histories – of Jabal ‘Amil or Najaf, for example – ubiquitous as they were in the print sphere of this period, evoked local conceptions of identity, formed in conversation with Shi’i discourses and symbolism, but rooted in the histories of particular villages, quarters, families, professions and historical events.<sup>156</sup> The ecumenical genre brought something new, in that it pertained exclusively to a corporate Shi’i identity, devoid of local peculiarities. Its recurrent rhetorical motifs were lesson plans on how to be Shi’i, modern and national in the world, all at the same time. Combined with the new institutional settings such as the Muntada, these texts enabled the development of new Shi’i subjectivities. This was not a sense of self waiting under the cloak of *taqiyya* to emerge fully formed with the decline of the Ottoman Empire; nor was it a refined and open-minded Shi’i religiosity uninhibited by the inefficiencies and ‘rigidity’ of the old Madrasat system. Instead, it needed to be learnt and internalised, through schools, colleges, books, pamphlets and journals. In other words, through a new institutional and print culture.

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<sup>156</sup> For example, the first comprehensive history of Najaf, first published in the 1930s, or the various histories of Jabal ‘Amil published in *al-Irfan*. See Mahbuba, *Madi al-Najaf*; and an *al-Irfan* historical series on 'The Shi'a of Jabal 'Amil'. *al-Irfan*, 2/5, May 1910, 237 - 241; 2/6, June 1910, 286 - 289; 2/7, July 1910, 330 - 337; 2/8, October 1910, 381 - 392.

## *Chapter Six – Nationalism, Regionalism and Shi'i*

### *Politics*

By the late 1920s the men of the Najafi Nahda had begun exerting their political energies outside their home city, on the new national political scene. They brought with them memories and ideas about their faith, region and nation. These three markers of modern political identity were not fixed or determinative of political behaviour. But they provided a wealth of symbolism and historical and political memory to draw from in the pursuit of a national politics. This chapter traces the development of a dominant strand within that politics – namely ‘Shi’i politics’: conceived as the various forms of political mobilisation encompassing calls for Shi’i rights and representation in the Iraqi state. Shi’i politics was a novel phenomenon in Iraq, which owed its existence to several national and international socio-economic, political and legal factors. The party which first brought Shi’i politics into the mainstream was Hizb al-Nahda. While its lifespan was relatively short, the priorities for reform, rights and representation it promoted remained an important force in Iraq until the end of the 1930s, finding expression in press activism, petition culture and, eventually, a tribal insurrection.

Historians usually interpret Hizb al-Nahda as a Shi’i sectarian party, while applying similarly primordial language to the various political manifestations of Shi’i politics which succeeded it. This has led several to assume that the party was a pre- or ‘non-nationalist’ political phenomenon: a ‘purely sectarian Shi’i separatist project’ according to Reidar Visser.<sup>1</sup> Iraqi nationalist historians are prone to either ignoring or dismissing the sect-centric activism

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<sup>1</sup> Sluglett, *Britain in Iraq*, 102–3; Visser, *Basra*, 10.



of the Nahda as an embarrassing low point in early Iraqi political history.<sup>2</sup> Despite their critical appraisal of the colonial sources, these historians' narratives do little more than rehash the derogatory assessments of Shi'i politics laced through the colonial archive, based on the 'presumed polarity' between the national and the 'sectarian.'<sup>3</sup> They fail to account for the political priorities and creative impulses of the leading Shi'i rights activists themselves, such as 'Ali al-Sharqi, Yusef Rajib and Muhammad Husayn Kashif al-Ghita. Their ideas, experiences and perceptions of entrenched socio-economic and political inequalities underscored Shi'i politics, which they expressed within the idiom of a particular articulation of Iraqi Arab nationalism. This contested national imaginary was not only, or even mainly, sect-centric, but rooted in regional symbolism and regional inequalities. The Euphrates and its people (*al-furāṭiyyūn*) were the principal political constituent of Shi'i politics and, according to the activists, the most authentic Iraqi Arab population. This found its most succinct expression in al-Sharqi's manifesto for Hizb al-Nahda in the late 1920s.

Al-Sharqi's manifesto and other first-hand accounts of Shi'i politics in the interwar period clash markedly with the interpretation of the party in the secondary literature. While this is partly a result of the biases of colonial knowledge production, it also reflects the nature of the colonial dynamic and the importance of representation. Shi'i politics expressed itself in different ways depending on audience, stressing its 'sect-centric' credentials to the colonial state, foreign diplomatic delegations and regional reading publics, while stressing its universal nationalist principles within the Iraqi public sphere. Neither representation was a veil for the party's true agenda. Both formed the complex reality of emergent nationalisms in a new nation state experiencing both regional and religious fissures.

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<sup>2</sup> Al-Hasani, *Tarikh al-Ahزاب al-Siyasiyya*, 54; al-'Umar, *al-Ahزاب al-Siyasiyya*, 122.

<sup>3</sup> Haddad, *Understanding 'Sectarianism'*, 25.

### *Hizb al-Nahda and the Emergence of Shi'i Rights Activism*

Reflecting on the political instability of 1927 precipitated by the resurgence of Hizb al-Nahda, a British report to the League of Nations was optimistic about the future of Iraq. The new Shi'i movement, they noted, was led by a new class of Shi'i 'lay' activists. It was concerned with tangible political and economic grievances, as much as a sectarian schism with 'roots deep down in the history of Islam.'<sup>4</sup> While less than satisfactory, the report concluded that the 'Shi'i manifestations of discontent [promoted by the party] against the preponderant Sunni influence in the government' were therefore 'less extravagant and more constitutional and logical than were the fulminations of the 'ulama' in 1923', who were naturally inclined 'to work for sectarian rather than national or even community interests.'<sup>5</sup> While the British interpreted both the electoral boycott and Hizb al-Nahda as sectarian, their belief that the development of the modern nation state represented an antidote to sectarianism was absolute. They consequently inserted Hizb al-Nahda into a narrative of progress that framed it as a less 'sectarian' iteration of an innately 'sectarian' community.

Such an assessment should be flipped on its head. Of the electoral boycott and the party-political activism of Hizb al-Nahda, it is only the second which can accurately be labelled sectarian, because it was only with the development of constitutional party politics within the quasi-colonial confines of the Iraqi nation state that Shi'i political activists began to see the Shi'a as a legitimate political community in Iraq. The institutional history of Hizb al-Nahda was a case in point. It was founded in 1922 as a nationalist party, committed to overturning the quasi-colonial underpinnings of the Iraqi state. Yet by the end of the 1920s a substantial aspect

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<sup>4</sup> The Colonial Office, *Report by His Britannic Majesty's Government on the Administration of Iraq*, (London: His Majesty's Stationary Office, 1927), 16 – 17.

<sup>5</sup> The Colonial Office, *Report by His Britannic Majesty's Government on the Administration of Iraq* (London: His Majesty's Stationary Office, 1927), 16.

of its appeal was based around a commitment to increasing the rights and representation of Shi'is specifically. This section outlines the main factors underpinning such a transformation.

The political, economic and cultural disenfranchisement of the Iraqi Shi'i population in the monarchical period has been well documented. No Shi'i became prime minister of Iraq during the interwar period and only two Shi'is rose to that rank before the fall of the Monarchy in 1958. Most cabinets boasted only one or two Shi'is, usually appointed to the Ministry of Education where the real decision-making power lay with the Director General. The state bureaucracy was disproportionately Sunni, as was the judiciary and the higher echelons of the army.<sup>6</sup> As Rajib's *al-Najaf* and Ja'far al-Khalili's *al-Hatif* repeatedly made clear, state investment in the Shi'i south lagged behind the centre and north of the country. Agricultural productivity and working conditions in these areas were low, leading to near intolerable conditions in the countryside.<sup>7</sup>

The reasons for these inequalities did not primarily stem from a concerted policy of sectarian discrimination, but from structures and mentalities derived from the colonial and Ottoman origins of Iraq.<sup>8</sup> The Shi'i population had never participated in the bureaucratic and military apparatus of the Ottoman Empire like the urban-based Sunni elites of Baghdad and Mosul. When the Sharifian ex-Ottoman army officers who had joined the Arab revolt returned to Iraq following the dissolution of Faysal's short-lived Arab Kingdom in Syria, they were natural allies for the British. The latter saw them as pliable vassals, who would ensure the state functioned in accordance with British foreign policy objectives. They had no intentions of creating a genuinely participatory system in Iraq, especially given the hostility which much of the population, and especially the leading Shi'i figures from the south, had shown towards

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<sup>6</sup> Khalil Osman, *Sectarianism in Iraq: The Making of State and Nation since 1920* (London: Routledge, 2014), 157.

<sup>7</sup> Batatu, *The Old Social Classes*, 152.

<sup>8</sup> Azmi Bishara, *al-Ta'ifa, al-Ta'ifiyya, al-Tawa'if al-Mutakhayala* (Doha: The Arab Centre for Research and Policy Studies, 2018), 637–41.

British rule since 1915.<sup>9</sup> Less likely to have received modern state education during the Ottoman period, the British and the urban Sunni elite saw the Shi'a as less qualified to run a modern state.<sup>10</sup> Many Ottoman-educated Arabs associated Shi'ism with Persian influence and disloyalty.<sup>11</sup>

The economic disenfranchisement of most of the population in southern Iraq coincided with the monopolisation of state resources by urban Sunni elites. This was a result of British land distribution policies, which allowed tribal shaykhs to register huge tracts of agricultural land in their name. Combined with legal reforms bestowing unprecedented judicial authority onto the same shaykhs, such policies created a new landowning aristocracy to prop up the regime across southern Iraq.<sup>12</sup> Although many of the main beneficiaries of this policy were Shi'i shaykhs themselves, the main losers – their impoverished tenant farmers – represented the bulk of the Shi'i population in Iraq. Shi'is therefore accounted for the state's most disenfranchised and frustrated peoples – the fellahin of the countryside and the ulama and journalist intellectuals of the southern cities.

It was not long before these structural inequalities were being articulated in sect-centric terms. In 1925, 'Abd al-Razzaq al-Hasani authored an article in *al-Irfan* urging the government to improve representation of Shi'is in the ministries and bureaucracy and fulfil its constitutional commitment to install Shi'i judges on the Sharia courts in majority Shi'i areas.<sup>13</sup> His choice of journal was no coincidence. Recognition of the political significance of Iraq's sectarian

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<sup>9</sup> Charles Tripp, *A History of Iraq* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 30–31.

<sup>10</sup> The first prime minister of Iraq, Naqib al-Ashraf, accused many Shi'i nationalists of being foreigners. Al-Wardi, *Lamahat Ijtima'iyya*, Vol. 6, 125. Al-Husri, meanwhile, wrote disparagingly about the administrative competence of nearly all the Shi'i ministers he worked with. Al-Husri, *Mudhakkirati, 1921 - 1941*, 53, 153, 271, 433. See also The Colonial Office, *Report by His Britannic Majesty's Government on the Administration of Iraq*, (London: His Majesty's Stationary Office, 1923 – 1924), 146 – 147; (1926), 92 – 93.

<sup>11</sup> Al-Wardi, *Lamahat Ijtima'iyya*, Vol. 6, 204.

<sup>12</sup> Batatu, *The Old Social Classes*, 78; Marion Farouk-Sluglett and Peter Sluglett, 'The Transformation of Land Tenure and Rural Social Structure in Central and Southern Iraq, C. 1870-1958', *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 40, no. 1 (2008): 3–5; Dodge, *Inventing Iraq*, 83–128; Haj, *The Making of Iraq*, 9–40.

<sup>13</sup> *Al-Irfan*, 10/10, June 1925, 1015.

diversity was already a taboo – fast becoming *the* taboo – of Iraqi political culture, which everyone, the Shi'a included, was anxious to avoid.<sup>14</sup> Overt expressions of Shi'i rights activism, therefore, often found their clearest expression in non-Iraqi newspapers. Throughout the late 1920s and 1930s, it was *al-Irfan* which hosted the frankest expressions of Shi'i grievances. This material was written by young and disgruntled Iraqi Shi'i graduates, unable to secure employment with the state in line with their level of qualification.<sup>15</sup>

While Shi'i rights activists accused the Iraqi government of pursuing discriminatory policies, they also displayed a sophisticated understanding of how such inequalities manifested and reproduced themselves. The hangover from the Ottoman era was significant, according to al-Jaza'iri, who amused his *majlis* by recounting sarcastically that the Shi'is' scramble to secure positions with the state was naturally met with resistance from the Sunni elite, whose struggle to maintain their predominance simply amounted to 'survival of the fittest.'<sup>16</sup> Activists recognised that a corrupt political culture based on nepotism (*al-maḥsūbiyya*) and cronyism (*al-mansūbiyya*) privileged those with connections (*al-wāsiṭa*). One writer imagined the hypothetical careers of a Sunni and Shi'i graduate from the same high school. While the Sunni would quickly gain employment because 'he knew someone' (*maḥsūb fulān*), his Shi'i co-graduate would have to wait 'days, weeks and years' without getting a job because he had no patron.<sup>17</sup> This was not a charge levelled exclusively at Sunni politicians. The same writer lamented how one Shi'i who had become a minister in the Iraqi government was more interested in hiring members of his own family than in promoting meritocratic advancement for Shi'is generally.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Fanar Haddad, *Sectarianism in Iraq: Antagonistic Visions of Unity* (London: C. Hurst & Co. Ltd, 2011), 53.

<sup>15</sup> *Al-Irfan*, 22/1, May 1931, 12.

<sup>16</sup> Al-Khalili, *Hakadha Araftuhum*, Vol. 1, 378.

<sup>17</sup> *Al-Irfan*, 22/1, May 1931, 12 -13.

<sup>18</sup> *Al-Irfan*, 22/4, October 1931, 434

Hizb al-Nahda was the natural organ to provide party political expression to these grievances. Before 1925, its platform made no reference to Shi'i rights.<sup>19</sup> Yet it had always been dominated by Shi'i merchants from Baghdad who maintained strong links with the religious establishment in Kadhimiyya, Karbala and Najaf. Its leader, Amin Charchafchi (b. 1882), was one of the founders of the Ja'fari and Husayni schools in Baghdad.<sup>20</sup> The first sign that the party might supplement its nationalist agenda with a Shi'i political platform came in the run up to the 1925 parliamentary election, when a leading figure in Hizb al-Umma – the other main opposition party – published an anti-Shi'i article in the press. Eager to capitalise on the public outcry caused by the scandal, Charchafchi tried to reframe Hizb al-Nahda as an anti-sectarian alternative. The move only made his party appear increasingly Shi'i-centric.<sup>21</sup> Whether or not this was an astute political strategy is unclear given that government meddling in the election process prohibited the party from gaining significant representation in parliament.<sup>22</sup>

In 1927, a quick succession of two further sect-centric scandals and a controversial national policy debate foreshadowed the third and final iteration of Hizb al-Nahda, in its most overtly Shi'i-centric guise. The infamous Nusuli affair, where a Syrian employee of the Ministry of Education published a book glorifying the Umayyad Caliphate, was the first of these. Supported by the ulama, Shi'i students protested the book's utilization in the curriculum. Although stemming from competing religious interpretation of Islamic history, arguments were usually framed within a modern 'language of rights' and obligations.<sup>23</sup> *Al-Najaf* complained that the use the text – antithetical to the views of the majority of the Iraqi population – was

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<sup>19</sup> Al-Hasani, *Tarikh al-Ahzab al-Siyasiyya*, 51.

<sup>20</sup> Busri, *A'lam al-Siyasa*, v. 2, 366.

<sup>21</sup> Intelligence Report 25, 11 December 1924, CO 730/63, TNA, 6 – 7.

<sup>22</sup> Al-'Umar, *al-Ahzab al-Siyasiyya*, 86. See also Intelligence Report 15, 23 July 1925, CO 730/76, TNA, 16; and Intelligence Report 17, 80 August 1925, CO 730/77, TNA, 12.

<sup>23</sup> Bashkin, *The Other Iraq*, 48–49; al-Hasani, *Ta'rikh al-Wazarat al-'Iraqiyya*, Vol. 2, 80–81.

incompatible with the *raison d'être* of the national educational system. The Nusuli incident offended Rajib's commitment to national and Islamic unity, inspiring a sobering lamentation that 'it is with severe regret that we view the emergence of a dark cloud on the horizon of Iraq . . . [when] we need cooperation and unity.'<sup>24</sup>

These dark clouds coalesced over Kadhimiyya during the Muharram commemorations of the following year, providing the final issue of *al-Najaf* with its frontpage story. As with the Nusuli affair, the newspaper did not frame the incident as a spontaneous outbreak of intra-religious animosity. Instead, it focused on its specific stimulus: the irresponsible actions of an individual Iraqi soldier, deficient in correct Arab and Islamic codes of conduct. He had advanced to the female viewing platform at the Kadhimiyya shrine and engaged one of the female mourners, whose husband was standing below. Violence ensued, shots were fired, and at least five people were killed.<sup>25</sup>

The primordial implications of the analytical category of sectarianism have led historians to overemphasise the significance of these flash-in-the-pan moments of violent confrontation. It is important to frame both the Nusuli and Kadhimiyya incidents in terms the Nahda activists themselves would have recognised. That is, as al-Sharqi wrote later, as two emotive symbols of the 'most important matters offending the population.' These were substantive economic and political issues, such as excessive taxation, poor administration, excessively high government salaries and regional inequality between the 'north' and the 'southern lands and the lands of the Euphrates.'<sup>26</sup> These issues formed the context for the substantive programmatic commitments of Hizb al-Nahda as it reasserted itself on the political scene in 1927. It called for free elections, equitable distribution of government and ministerial

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<sup>24</sup> *Al-Najaf*, 66, 27 December 1926, 2.

<sup>25</sup> *Al-Najaf*, 80, 13 June 1927, 1. For an account of both incidents, see Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq*, 116–17.

<sup>26</sup> Al-Sharqi, *Mawsu'at*, 53–55.

jobs in accordance with Iraq's demographic composition, the end of corruption, more investment in Shi'i areas and the scrapping of plans to implement conscription.<sup>27</sup>

The conscription issue was both symbolic and substantive. Plans by Ja'far 'Askari's cabinet to push a controversial conscription bill in parliament were ramped up in 1927. While this was a politically divisive policy for other opposition parties, and even for the members of the government, Hizb al-Nahda was united in its opposition. The issue had particular resonance for the inhabitants of southern Iraq because they suffered most from the gruelling experience of Ottoman conscription, which sometimes saw young men snatched from their families for up to twenty years of service and heavy fines levied to secure exemptions.<sup>28</sup> There was a feeling among the inhabitants of the region that the vast sums of money necessary to sustain a large conscript army could be better spent on improving infrastructure and public services, where the repeated calls of the local press to respond to even the most basic social improvements were often ignored.

It was in the shadow of the Nusuli and Kadhimiyya incidents, and with the conscription controversy dominating national political discourse, that Rajib and al-Sharqi migrated from Najaf to Baghdad. Both believed that their ideas would be more readily heeded, their articles more widely circulated, and their remuneration significantly increased if they found employment in the capital. Their shared migration coincided with the beginning of large scale rural to urban migration of mainly Shi'is from southern Iraq to Baghdad and Basra.<sup>29</sup> The new arrivals in Baghdad often possessed shared experiences of marginalisation and frustrated career progression on account of their shared fatality of birth as Iraqi Shi'is from the southern cities of the mid- and lower-Euphrates. They naturally developed a working relationship with the

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<sup>27</sup> SSO Baghdad, "The Shi'i Situation", 19 December 1927, AIR23/432, TNA, 1.

<sup>28</sup> Mohammad A. Tarbush, *The Role of the Military in Politics: A Case Study of Iraq to 1941* (London: Kegan Paul International, 1982), 87–88, 92; al-Hasani, *Ta'rikh al-Wazarat al-'Iraqiyya*, Vol. 2, 91.

<sup>29</sup> Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq*, 96.



Nahda politicians, who had been trying to resuscitate their flagging political project since the early 1920s. Rajib met al-Charchafchi soon after he arrived and was recruited to edit the party's new newspaper, *al-Nahda al-Iraqiyya*.<sup>30</sup> It became a platform for al-Sharqi, Rajib, Muhammad Baqir al-Shabibi and Muhammad 'Abd al-Husayn to present the political rationale for Hizb al-Nahda.<sup>31</sup> Al-Sharqi, who became the party's main political publicist in 1927, used the new newspaper to present a comprehensive historical narrative and political programme for the party.<sup>32</sup>

The younger arrivals like al-Sharqi and Rajib worked alongside established Shi'i parliamentarians. These included Sayyid Kadhim Said 'Ali, Muhsin Shalash and Naji Effendi Al Haji Salih.<sup>33</sup> The Baghdad contingent formed a bridge between centre and periphery. The party open official branches elsewhere in Iraq for the first time, with the main axis pivoted between Baghdad, Basra, Karbala and Najaf. In Najaf, supporters cut across the generational divide and included the usual suspects of the Najafi Nahda, such as 'Abd al-Karim al-Jaza'iri (b. 1872), Jawad al-Jawahiri (b. c.1870s), Muhammad 'Ali Bahr al-Ulum (b. 1870) and Hamid Khan. The milieu surrounding Madrasat al-Ghayri, such as Husayn Kamal al-Din, joined of the movement, while the leading *Marja' iyya*, including al-Isfahani and Na'ini, offered tacit approval.<sup>34</sup> Support for the party was not universal in the city, given pre-existing political rivalries and ambitions, as well as the controversial nature of sect-centric politics. Although Muhammad Husayn Kashif al-Ghita was apparently in close contact with Hizb al-Nahda, he wrote disparagingly about the party and appears to have been more committed to establishing

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<sup>30</sup> Takriti, *al-Katib al-Sihafi*, 22.

<sup>31</sup> Busri, *A'lam al-Siyasa*, v. 2, 366.

<sup>32</sup> SSO Baghdad, 19 December 1927, AIR23/432, TNA, 2

<sup>33</sup> SSO Basra, 32/780, 8 May 1927, AIR 23/432, TNA; Intelligence Report 13, 25 June 1925, CO 730/76, TNA. The first was a Najafi notable who had migrated to Baghdad in 1925. Shalash had been travelling regularly between Baghdad and Najaf since his stint as Minister of Education in the second administration of 'Abd al-Rahman al-Killani.

<sup>34</sup> SSO Basra, 32/780, 8 May 1927, AIR 23/432, TNA; SSO Baghdad Report, I/Bd/29, 4 July 1927, AIR 23/432, TNA.

his own rival movement.<sup>35</sup> Nevertheless, the broad-based membership of Hizb al-Nahda within Najaf is illustrative of how the local priorities of the Najafi press discussed in chapter four morphed into a sect-centric Shi'i politics when transferred onto the national stage. The tangible concerns of Hizb al-Nahda echoed those of newspapers such as *al-Najaf*, which repeatedly called out government corruption, underinvestment and neglect. These were reformulated for the national public sphere in an effort to speak to and for a nation-wide audience of readers: the Iraqi Shi'a as a collective, or *the* collective – the overwhelming 'majority' of the population.

The cognitive leap from forwarding claims based on local experiences of disenfranchisement to representing an entire sect-centric imagined community within the nation-state was premised on the Shi'is' self-recognition of themselves as the majority of the Iraqi population. Their arguments for rights and representation were justified within the framework of a majority – minority paradigm, which recognised the rights of discrete ethnic and religious communities to make political claims as a collective. Although this may appear a common-sense posturing, it was a novel political position which owed its meaning and logic to the quasi-colonial political arrangements of the Mandatory state in the transformed political-legal environment of the post-First-World-War international system.

The very notion of political minorities and majorities presupposes the existence of the nation-state, which promotes a particular narrative of belonging while recognising its subjects as members of immutable religious or ethnic communities. The Ottoman state recognised the legal autonomy of certain non-Muslim religious communities but never recognised the Ja'fari Shi'a as a legitimate *madhhab*. This arrangement precluded the possibility of making claims based on the collective rights of the Shi'i 'minority' within the Empire. It was only as Muslims and equals that their voices had any resonance in Istanbul, especially in midst of the pan-Islamic

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<sup>35</sup> Kashif al-Ghita, *'Uqud Hayati*, 126. SSO Baghdad, "Intelligence Report," 19 December 1927, AIR23/432, TNA, 1.

political enthusiasm which characterised the Empire's last years. While the 'politics of notables' paradigm is an imperfect analytical frame for the ulama and 'ayān of Najaf in the late Ottoman Empire, it does capture the spatial limitations of state society relations – that is, a politics pertaining to individual cities, quarters or tribes, rather than an entire religious community.<sup>36</sup> This all changed with the demise of the Empire in 1918.

Ostensibly to ensure the rights of cultural groups who found themselves outnumbered in the states emerging from the imperial world system, the League of Nations and the colonial powers introduced a 'European vocabulary of politics' centred on the protection of non-dominant minority communities. Such a policy did not protect the individual rights of members of non-dominant religious or ethnic communities, but focused on the rights of collective groups, some of which never existed in a cohesive sense prior to the Ottoman Empire's collapse.<sup>37</sup> Ben White has shown that it is a misnomer that pre-defined groups destined to become majorities or minorities existed politically in the pre-national era. Rather, 'social groups are produced, or produce themselves . . . identities refashioned or (re)invented' and the 'boundaries between culturally defined groups often harden as they become associated with political identities relative to the state.'<sup>38</sup> Through the interwar period, via top-down and bottom-up political manoeuvring, cultural groups asserted themselves politically using the language and strategies of minority rights. In the case of the Iraqi Shi'a – who considered themselves to be an absolute majority – this paradigm was deployed in unconventional ways.

Shi'i rights activists had been aware that they were the most numerous religious group in Iraq since the first British census of 1920.<sup>39</sup> This knowledge allowed them to creatively

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<sup>36</sup> Litvak, *Shi'i Scholars of Nineteenth-Century Iraq*, 23 – 30. For a critique of the 'politics of notables' paradigm, see Chapters One and Three.

<sup>37</sup> Mark Mazower, 'Minorities and the League of Nations in Interwar Europe', *Daedalus* 126, no. 2 (1997): 51.

<sup>38</sup> Benjamin Thomas White, *The Emergence of Minorities in the Middle East: The Politics of Community in French Mandate Syria* (Edinburgh: University Press., 2011), 31.

<sup>39</sup> Al-Hasani, *Ta'rikh al-Wazarat al-'Iraqiyya*, Vol. 2, 102.

appropriate the ‘European vocabulary’ of minority politics, framed instead as a language of majority rights. Across the world, a Shi’i petition from 1933 asserted, ‘majorities’ were grabbing the reigns of political power, so the Shi’i marginalisation in Iraq was not only unjust but ‘unnatural.’<sup>40</sup> One activist questioned ‘how we can prove to the League of Nations that we are protecting the rights of minorities when we are not respecting the rights of the majority.’<sup>41</sup> It was antithetical to the logic of ‘constitutional government’, according to another activists.<sup>42</sup> A third compared the situation of the ‘majority’ with that of the minorities in Iraq – Christians, Jews and the ‘people of the north’ – all of whom had ministers, directors and Mutasarrifs before the Shi’is.

In his manifesto for Hizb al-Nahda, al-Sharqi used the majority-minority paradigm to undermine the assertion that Shi’i rights activists were pursuing a politics of disunity or decentralization. ‘More often than not’, he argued, ‘that claim [for decentralisation] is the recourse of the minority, while the people of the Euphrates are the overwhelming majority . . . [and] the people of the centre. How can they demand division from themselves?’ Al-Sharqi’s use of the ‘people of the Euphrates’ to represent the primary constituents of Hizb al-Nahda will be discussed below. His assertion that they represented the ‘overwhelming majority’ affirmed their loyalty to the Iraqi throne and unity. Within the same article he tarred the actual Iraqi government with the stigma of acting as a minority, by deriving its authority through the protection of the colonial power. Foretelling recent critiques by Fanar Haddad and Ussama Makdisi of dominant analytical language pertaining to sectarianism by one hundred years, al-Sharqi proceeded to call out the opponents of Hizb al-Nahda for their efforts to ‘varnish the nationalist movement [read as Hizb al-Nahda] and the reformist dreams with religious stains

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<sup>40</sup> *Al-Irfan*, 23/1, May 1932, 14.

<sup>41</sup> *Al-Irfan*, 23/4-5, March – April 1933, 683.

<sup>42</sup> *Al-Irfan*, 22/3, July 1931, 351.

and a sectarian inclination.’<sup>43</sup> As the representative of the ‘majority’, he considered any assertion that the party was sectarian meaningless.

Al-Sharqi’s assertion that Hizb al-Nahda was committed to national unity highlights the main ideological difference between his party and the Iraqi governing elite and the other main nationalist parties. This was not related to issues of a specifically sectarian nature – such as calls for secession, autonomy in Shi’i areas, or even recognition of particular Shi’i cultural and political rights. The only specifically ‘Shi’i’ religious issue the party advocated was for the government to implement Article 77 of the Iraqi Organic Law by appointing Shi’i judges in majority Shi’i areas.<sup>44</sup> The party’s platform can more accurately be distinguished from its opponents by its particular interpretation of legitimate political action. The government and other opposition parties, including those established by the most influential Shi’i nationalist politician in Baghdad, Ja’far Abu Timman, ascribed to a conception of Iraqi unity which refused to overtly acknowledge the existence of different sects in Iraq. On the other hand, al-Sharqi and the Nahda preferred a differential conception of Iraqi unity that recognised the rights of marginalised minorities and majorities to assert themselves on the national stage.<sup>45</sup>

The majority–minority paradigm gained additional meaning and utility within the quasi-colonial circumstances of Iraq in the late 1920s, which in turn buttressed the Shi’i sect-centric self-framing of Hizb al-Nahda. The British recognised the Shi’a as a cultural minority within the Iraqi state. In 1927, one British official noted that ‘the Shi’i, though actually more numerous than the Sunni Arabs who monopolise all real authority in the country, are temporarily, for political purposes, a minority, and in obedience with the well-established law,

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<sup>43</sup> Al-Sharqi, *Mawsu’at*, 66.

<sup>44</sup> See SSO Baghdad, ‘The Shi’i Situation’, 19 December 1927, AIR23/432, TNA, 1.

<sup>45</sup> Such views were expressed by one Hizb al-Nahda supporter in specific relation to Timman’s position: *al-Irfan*, 23/4-5, March – April 1933, 682.

look to the dominant power to ensure justice for themselves.’<sup>46</sup> By adopting this lens, the British legitimised a form of politics whereby the Shi’i rights activists could appeal to them to support the Shi’i community against the state. The tepid attitude of the British authorities towards conscription compounded this form of politics because this was one substantive policy area where the Nahda and the British were aligned.<sup>47</sup>

It was in order to conform to the script of a politics based on colonial-based minority protection that the party highlighted its concern for specific Shi’i uplift in its efforts to endear itself to the colonial state. Throughout 1927, British intelligence officers stalking Iraq were showered with representations from the party by ‘reliable’ or ‘semi-reliable’ informants declaring their preference for a ‘purely British administration’ over the current ‘Sunni government.’ The high commissioner was apparently inundated with petitions, with some calling specifically for the ‘Lamarkaziyah [decentralized] from of government’ under British protection.<sup>48</sup> These representations were sometimes completely at odds with the party’s self-representation in the Iraqi press, where it specifically criticized the policy of decentralisation. While in the colonial archive Hizb al-Nahda comes across as exclusivist – at times chauvinistic – and concerned entirely with Shi’i uplift or secession, its self-portrayal appealed to universal nationalist issues and avoided divisive language.<sup>49</sup>

While the politics of colonial intersession proved useful for Hizb al-Nahda, it was unsustainable precisely because the Shi’a were an actual numerical majority. The ‘well-established law’ of colonial minority protection could only function if, by patronizing a

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<sup>46</sup> C. J. Edmunds, ‘Note on the Political Situation’, 27 September 1927 in *The Records of Iraq, Volume 4: 1925 – 1927* (Slough: Archive Editions, 2001), 276.

<sup>47</sup> Sluglett, *Britain in Iraq*, 97; Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, 61.

<sup>48</sup> SSO Basra, “Shi’i anti-Sunni propaganda,” 9 July 1927, AIR23/432, TNA, 4; SSO Basra, “Intelligence Report,” 30 July 1927, AIR23/432, TNA, 4; SSO Baghdad, “Intelligence Report,” 23 August 1927, AIR23/432, TNA, 2.

<sup>49</sup> For extensive British reportage on the Nahda, see AIR23/432, TNA. See the discussion in the next section for the self-representation of Hizb al-Nahda within Iraq.

minority community, the colonial state could create fissures in the colonised society and render it easier to govern. The Mandate and British influence were reliant on the cooperation of a class of elite collaborators, who needed the British as much as the British needed them.<sup>50</sup> Had this class been supplanted by a political movement whose social base and claims to legitimacy were rested on the Shi'a of Iraq, British influence would have fast dissipated. Colonial officials recognised this reality when they asserted that the Nahda's friendly stance towards them was only temporary and would not continue should their political project succeed.<sup>51</sup> Periodic calls by the Nahda for the withdrawal of British advisors from the provinces served to illustrate that an anti-colonial agenda hid underneath the occasional pro-British statement of purpose.<sup>52</sup> As the fastidious and meticulous British intelligence reportage on the party evidences, Hizb al-Nahda represented one of the most significant threats to the continuation of British influence in Iraq during the interwar period.

Hizb al-Nahda's relatively quick decline was precipitated by its perceived links with the colonial authorities, the successful delegitimising strategies of the party's opponents, and a number of political manoeuvres by the Iraqi government. Unable to earn enthusiastic support from prominent Shi'i nationalists in Baghdad, such as Abu Timman, because of its apparent sectarianism, the party never secured significant representation in parliament. The death knell came after the government banned the party's newspaper in November 1927, on the grounds it was 'promoting the spirit of discord between the people of the country' and 'exposing individuals to unjustified allegations.' In fact, it had only been robustly criticizing the 'Askari government.'<sup>53</sup> Dismayed, party leaders sought intercession from the British, who lobbied the

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<sup>50</sup> Sluglett, *Britain in Iraq*, 231.

<sup>51</sup> K. Cornwallis, 'Memorandum', 16 October 1927 in *The Records of Iraq, Volume 4: 1925 – 1927* (Slough: Archive Editions, 2001), 276.

<sup>52</sup> See SSO Baghdad, 'The Shi'i Situation', 19 December 1927, AIR23/432, TNA, 1. The programmatic commitments of the party, as articulated by al-Sharqi, will be discussed in more detail below.

<sup>53</sup> Al-Hasani, *Ta'rikh al-Wazarat al-'Iraqiyya*, Vol. 2, 103.

government to have the newspaper's license reinstated. The act of seeking British support against the government confirmed for many that the party was aligning with the colonial powers against the state, pursuing divisive minority – or majority – politics in order to win concessions for one group at the expense of the *umma*.<sup>54</sup> The fall of 'Askari's pro-conscription government led to positive reforms from the perspective of the Shi'i activists. Muhsin Sa'dun intervened in the subsequent general election to create a more representative parliament. He also made sure to offer or cajole some of the party's leading activists into government employ. Al-Sharqi, Rajib and Husayn Kamal al-Din all began the 1930s with state positions.<sup>55</sup> By 1930, Hizb al-Nahda had all but disappeared, leaving Shi'i politics without a clear means of articulation within the Iraqi party-political scene.

### *Arabism for the Euphrates*

Al-Sharqi articulated the most succinct articulation of Hizb al-Nahda's ideology in the party's newspaper between September 1927 and March 1928. He framed these influential articles, described by the British as 'illuminative, detailed and instructive', as a history of the 'Iraqi societies' (*al-nawādī al-irāqiyya*).<sup>56</sup> Read in conversation with his writings published before and after this period (between c.1925 and c.1935), these political and historical articles represent the underpinnings of a discrete articulation of Iraqi Arab nationalism, rooted in the history of the Euphrates and the distinctive cultural and political character of its people.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Al-'Umar, *al-Ahزاب al-Siyasiyya*, 90. An article expressing this position was published in *al-Irfan*. See, *al-Irfan*, 18/1, August 1929, 109.

<sup>55</sup> Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, 62; al-Sharqi, *al-Ahلام*, 183–84; Takriti, *al-Katib al-Sihafi*, 16; 'Ali al-Khaqani, *Shu'ara' al-Ghari*, Vol. 3 (Qom: Maktabat Ayat Allah al-Udhma al-Mar'asha al-Najafi, 1988), 252. Al-Sharqi and Kamal al-Din were appointed as Sharia Court judges and Rajib became a tax inspector.

<sup>56</sup> Shi'i Activities: Authorship of Petition, 14 March 1932, AIR23/385, TNA. These have been published along with several other collections of al-Sharqi's prose writing in al-Sharqi, *Mawsu'at*.

<sup>57</sup> The later material I refer to was published in the Najafi *al-I'tidal* after Hizb al-Nahda had disappeared from the political scene, although some of this work was based on al-Sharqi's earlier writings in *Lughat al-Arab* in the late 1920s. I have used this work alongside his writings for the party because, taken together, the articles present an in-depth articulation of his conception of Iraqi Arab nationalism. Although I do not attempt to seriously unpick changes in his thought overtime, some changes are discernible, such as more regular adoption



Although written in the context of the Shi'i rights activism of Hizb al-Nahda, I argue that the designation of this work as sectarian – that is, as 'Shi'i literature' and a facet only of the Shi'is' struggle for power in Iraq – is a reductive simplification of its scope and substance.<sup>58</sup> Instead of interpreting al-Sharqi as a 'sectarian entrepreneur', his ideological construction reflected a civic and regional-based articulation of nationalism emanating from the political culture of the Najafi press and *majālis* scene. Such an articulation was secular, in that it purposely avoided controversial aspects of the Islamic history and culture related to the Euphrates region. The very existence of the ideology of Hizb al-Nahda, therefore, challenges the assertion of Eric Davis that 'secular Shi'is . . . avoided the issue of historical memory altogether' by allowing it to be monopolised by the pan-Arabists.<sup>59</sup>

The Euphrates-based articulation of Iraqi Arab nationalism had its origins in Najafi print culture of the early twentieth century. Al-Sharqi himself used *al-furātī* as a pseudonym in some of his pre-war journalistic writing.<sup>60</sup> *Al-Furat* had of course been the title of the newspaper which narrated the 1920 revolution. Rajib's *al-Najaf* developed this symbolic framing further by defending the Arabism of Najaf and the Euphrates in front of a critical Baghdadi discourse. Within the newspaper, the notion of Euphrates-Arab was an epithet for genuine Iraqi patriotism, implicitly juxtaposed against Persian-ness and Turkish-ness, the former synonymous with religious conservatism and the latter with the corrupt Baghdadi elite.<sup>61</sup> When Ahmed Amin Bek, the Director General of Education in the region, was attacked by a newspaper in Baghdad for allegedly harbouring pro-Persian sympathies, the defence in *al-Najaf* not only asserted that he was 'not Persian', but that he 'he was raised in our beloved

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of the language of Arab political unity in the later material. See *Lughat al-Arab*, May 1926, 526 – 530; April 1926, 575 – 577; December 1927, 535 – 539; April 1928, 275 – 279.

<sup>58</sup> Nakash, *Reaching for Power*, 83–86.

<sup>59</sup> Davis, *Memories of State*, 36.

<sup>60</sup> Al-Mufarriji, *al-Najaf al-Ashraf*, 200.

<sup>61</sup> For instance, see *al-Najaf*, 1, 1 May 1925, 3; 36, 19 March 1926, 1; 10, 19 June 1925, 2; and 18, 21 August 1925, 3.

country and among its people before the writer [of the defamatory article] even knew the meaning of patriotism.’ The article reminded its readership that the Arab-ness of the Euphrates was ‘famous and recognised’, embedded in the region’s *majālis* through storytelling, speeches and poetry.<sup>62</sup> A subtext to the writer’s argument that Ahmed’s Arabism was an authentic expression of his regional – that is, Euphrates – upbringing, while the Baghdadi journalist had learned his nationalism after the founding of the state.

Throughout the interwar period, the Euphrates was used by Najafi poets and intellectuals as an important referent within an emerging nationalist discourse. In some of his early poetry, Muhammad Mahdi al-Jawahiri located the origins of the 1920 revolution in the ‘undeniable and memorable rebirth (*nahḍa*) of the Euphrates.’ He lamented the sacrifice of the revolutionaries of several Euphrates towns. ‘Oh revolution of the Arabs, rise up (*anḥaḍī*)’, he commanded in the imperative, ‘do not forsake what they regenerated (*la tukhliqī mā jaddadū*).’ The implication was that an Arab *nahḍa* must not waste the achievements of the martyrs from the Euphrates. The end of the poem neatly elided the Euphrates and Arab symbolism of this *nahḍa* into Iraq, a ‘renewed people . . . free from an oppressor.’ The word ‘Iraq’ broke with the classical Arabic poetic form to appear exactly between the two hemistich which formed the penultimate *bayt* of the poem.<sup>63</sup>

Over a decade later, Muhammad ‘Ali al-Ya’qubi improvised a poem which alluded to the subaltern political subjectivity of a Euphrates identity. Subsequently titled ‘The body of Iraq is the Euphrates’, it was inspired by a visit of King Faysal to the mid-Euphrates, where one of the leaders of the 1920 revolution, ‘Abd al-Wahid al-Hajj Sikkar, gifted the King a machine gun he had captured from the British during the revolution. The gesture was not a simple illustration of Sikkar’s support for the throne, because it was made soon after the King

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<sup>62</sup> *Al-Najaf*, 10, 19 June 1925, 2.

<sup>63</sup> Al-Jawahiri, *Diwan al-Jawahiri*, 57, 59-60.

announced he would be using his personal finances to buy more weapons for the Iraqi army, presumably from the British. In presenting a machine gun he had captured from the British during the 1920 revolution, rather than one he had bought from them, Sikkar was challenging the symbolic authority of the King as an anti-colonial nationalist figure.<sup>64</sup>

Ya'qubi's poem was in the genre of praise poetry, but it was ambiguous as to whether the person or entity being praised was Sikkar himself or the Euphrates as a place. 'The hope of Iraq is with you // It relies on your principles', he began, 'you represent bravery, heroism and endurance to the people.' Like al-Jawahiri, al-Ya'qubi linked the sacrifice of the Euphrates during the revolution to nationalist sentiments: 'you are the one who claims patriotism // you sowed a harvest for it // the body of Iraq is its Euphrates // And you are the spirit of the body.' A slight plot twist at the end of the poem underlined to the subaltern nature of al-Ya'qubi's nationalist imaginary. 'Positions [*manāṣib* – meaning government employment] have deceived others but not you // you remain aloof from them.' Although the line clearly referenced the pride of Euphrates leaders in not succumbing to the lure of cushy government jobs, it also alluded to the state's structural inequalities. Al-Ya'qubi was stating plainly, in a poem about the loyalty of the Euphrates to the Iraqi state, that the state was excluding his contingent.<sup>65</sup>

These discursive evocations of the Euphrates were as much a part of the pedagogical project of the Najafi Nahda as they were an exercise in uninhibited political imagination. They found their way into cultural histories of the Iraqi Nahda: Muhammad Mahdi al-Basir wrote that Arab *adab* after the Abbasid period had not disappeared but 'remained alive in the mosques and study circles, especially in the Euphrates', before moving to the rest of Iraq in the nineteenth century.<sup>66</sup> This does not mean they were somehow less innovative: hybridised or

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<sup>64</sup> *Al-I'tidal*, 1/1, February 1933, 45.

<sup>65</sup> *Al-I'tidal*, 1/1, February 1933, 46.

<sup>66</sup> Al-Basir, *Nahdat al-'Iraq al-Adabiyya*, 10.

functionalist nationalist narratives designed to buy access to the new Iraqi state institutions.<sup>67</sup> For al-Jawahiri, al-Ya'qubi, Rajib and especially al-Sharqi, imaging the Iraqi-Arab nation was anything but an exercise in compromise between faith, nation and career prospects. Al-Sharqi's historical writings reimagined space and time in the context of southern Iraq. His historical lens looked back to the era before the Islamic conquests to show how Najaf, Kufa, Basra and the rural areas of the mid- and lower-Euphrates had been populated by Arab tribes and fonts of Arab culture for centuries. His was a subaltern narrative of cultural perseverance in the face of perpetual and often detrimental historical change, of foreign intervention and injustice, of past futures lost – but not forgotten.

The Euphrates were at the centre of this discourse. Loosely defined, this territory and its inhabitants – ‘the people of the Euphrates (*al-furāṭiyyūn*)’ – had been a constant source of political power and moral and cultural authenticity. From before Islam, into ‘the Umayyad, Abbasid, Mongol, Tarad and Ottoman period, as well as during the latest Nahda, the Euphrates had proved its preparedness to facilitate the Iraqi movements.’ Al-Sharqi argued that ‘the Arab history of Iraq was found in the lands adjoining the banks of the Euphrates and the fertile crescent (*al-hilāl al-Akhḍar*) curving on the right side of the river.’ The Euphrates had been Arabised before the north of Iraq and al-Sharqi presented a number of historical precedents for its central role within the story of Arabism. This included the Kingdom of Zanoibia; the Manadhira kingdom which ruled al-Hira; and the site of the battle of Dhi Qar. ‘These Euphrates supporting structures (*al-rakā'iz al-furāṭiyya*) had established Arab Iraq’, summarised al-Sharqi in a pithy epithet: ‘from the Euphrates, through Arabism (*al-ʿuruba*), to Iraq.’<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> A somewhat functionalist interpretation of Shi'i Arab nationalism in Lebanon and Iraq is offered by Chalabi and Bashkin respectively. Chalabi, *The Shi'is of Jabal 'Amil*, 109; Bashkin, *The Other Iraq*, 172.

<sup>68</sup> Al-Sharqi, *Mawsu'at*, 96–99. *Al-I'tidal*, 3/3, August 1935, 129.

Time had brought successive challenges in the form of alien political domination and injustice. Al-Sharqi recognised that the political centre in Iraq was in continual flux: the Sumerians had Babal; the Sassanid's al-Mada'in, the Allawis' Kufa, the Umayyad's al-Wasit and the Abbasid's Baghdad.<sup>69</sup> He did not frame any of these as representing a symbolic national starting point, a golden age before decline that need to be salvaged. Instead, his narrative focused on the timeless authenticity of place – southern Iraq – and the recurrent injustice of foreign political authority.

While some centres of political authority in Iraq had engendered positive cultural and political developments, Baghdad, Mosul and Damascus were conspicuously absent from his schema. Al-Sharqi reframed the Arabist debate away from its traditional heartlands and towards the fertile planes of southern Iraq. Basra and Najaf occupied places of high importance. Basra was the 'first Iraqi city in terms of name, origin, morality, and customs. To this day we view the Arab imprint in Basra more than each Iraqi city.'<sup>70</sup> Unlike Baghdad, whose market was 'foreign more than it was national . . . and whose economic momentum favoured Europe over Iraq', Basra was the focal point of Iraqis' economic world, determining prices and driving the national economy.<sup>71</sup> What Basra represented in the economic sphere, Najaf represented in the intellectual sphere. Al-Sharqi asserted that the Baghdadi intellectual movement was tilted towards foreign ideas and mentalities. Meanwhile 'Najafi ideas were dominant . . . and Najafi articles, Najafi beliefs and Najafi opinions occupied a distinguished place with Iraqis.'<sup>72</sup>

The Ottomans were the undisputed villains of al-Sharqi's narrative. It was their influence which posed the most severe threat to the ongoing political *nahḍa* and formed the historical rationale for Hizb al-Nahda. One reason for the cultural and political superiority of

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<sup>69</sup> *Al-I'tidal*, 1/7, August 1933, 327.

<sup>70</sup> *Al-I'tidal*, 2/6, November 1934, 241, 245; 2/8, January 1935, 349.

<sup>71</sup> Al-Sharqi, *Mawsu'at*, 153.

<sup>72</sup> Al-Sharqi, 157.

the Euphrates was because the region had never been subject to more than a light touch Ottoman administration. An ‘Arab indigenous/civil administration’ (*idāra ahliyya ‘arabiyya*), based on tribal practices and their traditions, had been practiced continuously for centuries. The dual connotation of the word *ahliyya* captured both the spatial and political bent of al-Sharqi’s argument: according to him, administration in the Euphrates had been autonomous and rooted in popular sovereignty. This system favoured ‘practical knowledge’ (*al-ṭatbīqāt*) in education and administration over theoretical study, which meant that corruption and moral depravity were scarce.<sup>73</sup> The ruralism baked into this strand of al-Sharqi’s narrative mirrored a prevailing discourse in the Iraqi public sphere throughout the monarchical period which romanticised rural life as an ‘internal domain of national authenticity.’<sup>74</sup> His narrative listed all of the tribes and clans of the Euphrates, as well as where they could be found.<sup>75</sup> It was for this reason, he concluded, that the ‘people of the Euphrates were carrying more from Iraqi-ness (*al-‘irāqiyya*) than others, who bore nothing except a Turkish morality and defunct skills.’<sup>76</sup>

Al-Sharqi’s analysis of nineteenth and twentieth century developments in the history of Iraqi Arab nationalism stemmed from his overall historical framework. Modern Arab political movements, he argued, had begun with Muhammad ‘Ali’s state in Egypt and the Wahabis in the Arabian Peninsula. In a deliberate attempt to undermine the spatial dimension of nationalist political legitimacy claimed by Sharifian ruling elite, he barely mentioned Syria – usually hailed as the ideological birthplace of Arab nationalism.<sup>77</sup>

Within Iraq, al-Sharqi compared the quality of the two pre-war Arabist clubs to show how the Euphrates had played the most important role in fostering nationalism. According to al-Sharqi, Jam’iyyat al-‘Ilm, founded in Mosul by a group of army officers in 1914, had been

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<sup>73</sup> Al-Sharqi, 63–65.

<sup>74</sup> Bashkin, *The Other Iraq*, 212, 202.

<sup>75</sup> Al-Sharqi, *Mawsu’at*, 96–107.

<sup>76</sup> Al-Sharqi, 64.

<sup>77</sup> Khoury, *Urban Notables and Arab Nationalism*, 68; Khalidi, ‘Ottomanism and Arabism.’

woefully ineffective at leading the movement. This was because it had no leadership or ‘public affiliation’ and was not an ‘inclusive public society’ for all ‘the classes in Iraq.’ Conversely, Talib Pasha’s Jam’iyyat al-Basra al-Islahiyya, a quasi-political party tied to the Ottoman decentralisation movement, was the ‘true centre of the nationalist movement and the first cradle of the Iraqi issue.’ Its popularity, leadership, rootedness and authenticity made it ‘more powerful than the Jam’iyyat al-Islah al-Bayrutiyya. It was spread widely in the Euphrates and the people of the region embraced it . . . from Abu Sakhir to the Shat al-Arab.’<sup>78</sup> The implicit message of al-Sharqi’s comparison was to diminish the achievements of the nationalists from Mosul, Baghdad and Syria in a conscious effort to reappraise the Levantine and Mosuli biases of emerging Arab nationalist narratives in the wake of the Nusuli affair.

Al-Sharqi’s analysis of the important role played by Jam’iyyat al-Basra al-Islahiyya in the development of the Arab movement in Iraq showed the importance he ascribed to associational life in the development of national consciousness. His entire manifesto for Hizb al-Nahda was framed as a history – not of the Euphrates, as a British intelligence report alleged;<sup>79</sup> nor even of Iraq – but of the ‘Iraqi clubs’ (*al-nawādī al-‘irāqiyya*). It was in these clubs, the *majālis*, *dawāwīn*, cafes and societies, where Arab culture existed and nationalism grew as an idea. These spaces had been the institutional settings for the type of authentic Arab cultural and political life al-Sharqi insisted had been preserved in the Euphrates. Vividly evoking such institutions, he beckoned his readers to ‘follow him into the Iraqi clubs’ just as the ‘distinguished characters’ in Iraq do every day. His prose described their distinctive interior furnishings and atmosphere, the aroma of smoke and coffee and spirit of charged critical debate. The entire manifesto was fittingly framed as a conversation among fellow travellers on route from Basra to the north, chatting in a ‘political club’ – that is, a café – in the village of

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<sup>78</sup> Al-Sharqi, *Mawsu’at*, 32, 29.

<sup>79</sup> Shi’i Activities: Authorship of Petition, 14 March 1932, AIR23/385, TNA.

al-Kifl on the banks of the Euphrates.<sup>80</sup> By presenting his narrative in this way, al-Sharqi equated the institutions of the *majālis* and the tribal *dawāwīn* with modern notions of civil society, using them as evidence that the Euphrates could and would be able to engender a democratic Arab Iraqi Nahda.

Al-Sharqi wove these civic observations together with a narrative of national loyalty and sacrifice. In his narrative, the 1920 revolution was adjectivised as *al-thawra al-furāṭiyya* – a Euphrates revolution. An early example of the utilisation of the memory of the revolution for political ends, al-Sharqi’s narrative foretold one of the most persistent historiographical disagreements at the core of Iraqi nationalist historiography.<sup>81</sup> Al-Sharqi’s narrative juxtaposed the sacrifice of the revolution with the experience of his city and region following the constitution of the Iraqi state. The Baghdad dominated state ‘towered over the Euphrates, ruling it and putting down plans which did not align with the views of the people nor take heed of their voices for the fate of the country.’<sup>82</sup>

Meanwhile the fellahin, the embodiment of rural Arab life who had borne arms for Iraqi independence, remained drenched in poverty and crying out for land reform and improvements in the productivity of the agricultural sector. In his writings for Hizb al-Nahda, al-Sharqi presented a radical vision for land reform in Iraq, which rejected the notion of absentee ownership, or the rights to land based on the possession of the Tapu papers (*malākiyyat awrāq al-ṭābū*) alone. He instead promoted a system of ownership based on the principle that ‘the land should be for those who revive it’ and for ‘the *umma* over and above the individual.’<sup>83</sup> This led to a firm statement of policy for Hizb al-Nahda involving the role of the *sirkals*, who acted as

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<sup>80</sup> Al-Sharqi, *Mawsu’at*, 13–18.

<sup>81</sup> Amarilyo, ‘History, Memory and Commemoration’, 79; Kadhim, *Reclaiming Iraq*, 80. See Introduction, 42–43.

<sup>82</sup> Al-Sharqi, *Mawsu’at*, 52.

<sup>83</sup> Al-Sharqi, 109–17. The call for land reform was a central theme in al-Sharqi’s memoirs. Al-Sharqi, *al-Ahlam*, 270–71.



foremen and revenue collectors for the landowners or the government.<sup>84</sup> As the chief official responsible for overseeing the agriculture production of the rural nation, al-Sharqi suggested that some of the rights of ownership be given to the *sirkals* themselves, who were better placed to understand the needs of the fellahin.<sup>85</sup>

Although al-Sharqi's narrative was rooted in a sense of place, history and experience, he deliberately made sure that such territoriality was ambiguously defined. The people of the Euphrates themselves were less a sharply defined regional identity – still less so a religious one – than they were those who possessed particular mentalities, political experience and aspirations. His decision not to limit the Euphrates to particular sections – mid, lower or upper – meant that it theoretically encompassed a vast area, stretching from the Shatt al-Arab all the way into Syria. While his account of the Iraqi revolution was spatially delimited to its violent flash points – Diwaniya, Karbala, Hilla and Rumaytha – he explained the participation of people from other places on account of their Euphrates-ness. 'Individuals from Baghdad' who participated were 'people of the Euphrates in principle' (*al-furāṭiyyīn fī al-mabda'*), while the tribes of al-Gharraf had mobilised because they were 'people of the Euphrates in their clamour and distinguishing features' (*al-furāṭiyyūn fī al-na'ār wa-l-shi'ār*).<sup>86</sup> Neither of these characterisations likely applied to genealogical or religious links between the people of Baghdad and the Euphrates, but instead referenced their strong nationalist principles.

This ambiguity complemented the universal pretensions of Hizb al-Nahda's name: *nahḍa* implied rebirth, renaissance, and reform – a state of movement from the old to the new. Al-Sharqi justified the name for his party on semantic grounds. Iraq, he argued, was still plagued by conservatism, rooted in individualism and unjust governance. A *nahḍa* was

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<sup>84</sup> Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq*, 37, 92–93; Batatu, *The Old Social Classes*, 87.

<sup>85</sup> Al-Sharqi, *Mawsu'at*, 118.

<sup>86</sup> Al-Sharqi, 46, 40.

necessary to transfer the ‘individual [spirit] to the social’ and so precipitate the formation of a cohesive nation. It was only once the national subject had been constituted following the *nahḍa* that the semantic resonance of other parties – such as Hizb al-Sha’ab (The People’s Party) – would have any meaning.<sup>87</sup> The implication of this analysis transcended benign semantic musings. Al-Sharqi was arguing that Arab Iraq had not yet been constituted as a nation because its true subjects, the ‘people of the Euphrates’, remained repressed. Yet he did not conceive their emancipation as a means to secure specific rights, concessions or representation within the state, as regional or sect-based political movements tend to do. Instead, he equated the people of the Euphrates with the Iraqi nation as a whole, arguing that their political empowerment was synonymous with national development. While al-Sharqi subscribed to a differential conception of unity, which recognised that it was legitimate for political claims to be levied on the basis of collective groups, he did not envision that this could result in a fragmented national future, where discrete religious or ethnic communities enjoyed specific, individuated rights.

Such a point is borne out by the conspicuous absence of the Shi’a and Shi’ism in al-Sharqi’s writings. While al-Sharqi made 269 references to the Euphrates, adjectivised, as a collective noun and as a location in the articles he published in *al-Nahḍa al-Iraqiyya*, he only mentioned the word Shi’i seven times, in a single paragraph on religious festivals.<sup>88</sup> He made no reference at all to the Ja’fari or Imami *madhhab*. Although issues affecting the Shi’a as a religious community – such as the Nusuli affair, the Kadhimiyya violence and the marginalisation and banishment of the ulama – made their way into his narrative, they were always framed within universal nationalist terms: as representative of problems facing the whole nation. For example, al-Sharqi lamented the marginalisation of the ulama as proof of a

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<sup>87</sup> Al-Sharqi, 12–13.

<sup>88</sup> Al-Sharqi, 137–40.

government and colonial strategy to repress the people of the Euphrates. It had symbolic meaning more than anything else because al-Sharqi did not believe those same ulama possessed a sacred right to political authority.<sup>89</sup> This, in turn, reflected his vision for future government structures and civil society rooted in universal democratic institutions and processes – that is: political parties, clubs, societies, trade unions, *majālis* and *dawāwīn*, all of which would operate ‘by nomination and election without the monopolisation of [arbitrary] authority.’<sup>90</sup>

Yet while al-Sharqi’s narrative side-lined Shi’ism and broke with traditional Shi’i historical interpretations, it is easy to see how his narrative played on distinctly Shi’i subaltern themes. These involved ideas about the righteousness of the oppressed Imams and the unjust martyrdom of Imam Husayn.<sup>91</sup> Al-Sharqi’s narrative stressed the timelessness of the Euphrates’ righteous struggle in the face of tyranny and injustice and drew lines of continuity between this narrative and the current socio-economic situation in Iraq. It borrowed Shi’ism’s ‘antigovernmental motif, its preoccupation with oppression, [and] its grief-laden tales’ and inserted them into a secular political agenda.<sup>92</sup> While it refused to acknowledge this ideational influence, al-Sharqi’s narrative was very much an expression of a particular Shi’i way of being and perceiving the world.

This is one reason why al-Sharqi’s discourse does *not* prove that Hizb al-Nahda was a wholly regionalist political party, and its Shi’i imprint a fiction of the colonial archive. The ‘people of the Euphrates’ cannot be read as something completely separate from the ‘Shi’a of Iraq.’ Al-Sharqi was conforming to the ecumenical principles of Iraqi political discourse by neglecting to mention the Shi’a or the contested aspects of Shi’i history in his writing. However, my argument is that such discursive acrobatics should *not only* be seen as a means

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<sup>89</sup> Al-Sharqi, 61–62.

<sup>90</sup> Al-Sharqi, 11.

<sup>91</sup> Cole, *Sacred Space and Holy War*, 178.

<sup>92</sup> Hanna Batatu, ‘Shi’i Organizations in Iraq: al-Da’wah al-Islamiyah and al-Mujahidin’, in *Shi’ism and Social Protest*, ed. Juan Cole and Nikki R. Keddie (London: Yale University Press, 1986), 187.

to subvert the norms of acceptable political discourse. They also constituted the substance of Hizb al-Nahda's agenda, which was not ideologically vacuous, myopic, pre-national or committed to a single Shi'i 'sectarian' agenda. Rather, the ideology of Hizb al-Nahda was an articulation of emerging Iraqi Arab nationalist discourses in the interwar period, which derived its meaning from the territorial and economic marginalisation of the rural south, as much as from a totalising Shi'i political identity. Such an understanding is only possible when the party's own literature is analysed alongside the well-worn colonial sources. It reveals that Shi'i politics gained meaning and substance through the prism of nationalist, regionalist and sect-centric symbols of identity and, as such, can only be understood as the culmination of these 'intertwining registers', mutually 'forming and reinforcing' each other in the context of a national politics defined by corruption, exclusionary patronage networks and government neglect of the national periphery.<sup>93</sup>

### *Shi'i Political Activism after the Nahda*

Shi'i politics did not disappear after the demise of Hizb al-Nahda. But it did go underground, the exclusive residue of secret societies, op-eds in foreign journals and the occasional petition. Articles in *al-Irfan* on Shi'i politics in Iraq became more regular from the early 1930s onwards, just as the Nahda movement was declining. This reflected the increasing difficulties Shi'i activists faced in mobilising politically within Iraq. The anonymous pseudonyms used by Shi'i activists evidence their efforts to present themselves as the voice of the true Iraqi Arab nation. Articles appeared from names as creative as 'an Arab', 'an Iraqi Arab', 'Ibn Rafidayn' (Son of Mesopotamia), and 'Ibn Khafaja' (The Khafaja were a tribe from southern Iraq).<sup>94</sup> Their discourse was populist, in that it built a conflictual binary between the

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<sup>93</sup> Haddad, *Understanding 'Sectarianism'*, 110.

<sup>94</sup> *Al-Irfan*, 20/5, December 1930, 563 – 565; 24/9, March 1934, 973; 22/4, October 1931, 435; 22/5, November 1931, 660.

foreign ruling elite and the repressed Arab nation. It repeated the familiar tale of Shi'i sacrifice, loyalty and disenfranchisement, periodically rounded off with accusations of concerted efforts to annihilate the majority' and demands for representative government and reform.<sup>95</sup> 'Shi'i Iraq', lamented 'an Arab', was 'controlled by a clique that has not link to the country or its history . . . a true and noble Arab is rare among them.' The state, the writer concluded, was ruled by the dual evils of 'British colonialism' and 'sectarian rule.'<sup>96</sup>

The *al-Irfan* articles continued to present Shi'i grievances as synonymous with those of the Iraqi fellahin. They lauded and lamented Rustum Haydar, a Shi'i member of the Iraqi government of Lebanese origin, who had tried and failed to implement a scheme to improve fellahin agriculture on the banks of the al-Gharraf river in November 1933.<sup>97</sup> The scheme had failed to win government approval because the Sunni members of the cabinet preferred to spend the money on the Iraqi army. Haydar was effectively sacked from the cabinet and replaced by another Sunni politician. The furore caused by the incident prompted one writer in *al-Irfan* to accuse the cabinet of seeking to eliminate the fellahin as a people. A poem portrayed Haydar as a martyr for the rural inhabitants of Iraq:

A minority is ruling a majority

Unlawfully seizing its rights

[ . . . ]

If you examine them [the elite] you will not find

Anyone living luxuriously except on account of us

[ . . . ]

Oh Rustum, they banished you

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<sup>95</sup> *Al-Irfan*, 22/4, October 1931, 442.

<sup>96</sup> *Al-Irfan*, 20/5, December 1930, 564.

<sup>97</sup> For details of this crisis, see 'Abd al-Razzaq al-Hasani, *Ta'rikh al-Wizarat al-'Iraqiyya*, Vol. 4 (Saida: Matba'at al-Irfan, 1953), 11.

And with that they sought to exclude us

[ . . . ]

We want unity and they deny it

This is the only differentiation between us.<sup>98</sup>

The poem spoke to all of the dominant political themes synonymous with Shi'i rights activism since the late 1920s. It transposed the collective first-person plural – ubiquitous in the Najafi local politics of demand – from its local designation into a sect-centric one, while maintaining the rigid separation between the governing elite and the people. The background to the crisis – reminiscent of the conscription controversy of the 1920s – shows how Shi'i political concerns consistently emerged from the political trade-off between military expenditure and investment in the productive potential of the agricultural sector. Yet, as the final line of the poem reminded, the spokesmen in the name of the majority insisted that they supported national unity.

Even outside of Iraq, on the pages of *al-Irfan*, this form of campaigning was controversial. Although the journal provided a platform for 'Amili Shi'is to lobby the emerging Lebanese state, they did not do so on the basis of universal Shi'i grievances but by appealing to a local 'southern Lebanese . . . parochial identity.'<sup>99</sup> The journal's editorial team were therefore less comfortable publishing material in the name of the Shi'i 'majority' in Iraq. They apologised for making the distinction between Sunnis and Shi'is, noting that they only did so because rights were being 'stolen.'<sup>100</sup> In order to include a wide spectrum of views, the journal juxtaposed the lamentations of Haydar's dismissal with an article by an Iraqi Shi'i who disagreed with the rights activists. Authored by 'a Ja'fari' from Baghdad, it accused the activists of using Shi'i grievances as a veil for the pursuit of self-interests and affirmed that the

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<sup>98</sup> *Al-Irfan*, 24/9, March 1934, 974 – 975.

<sup>99</sup> Chalabi, *The Shi'is of Jabal 'Amil*, 117.

<sup>100</sup> *Al-Irfan*, 22/1, May 1931, 12.

Shi'a in Iraq enjoyed the same rights as all other sects.<sup>101</sup> Despite this attempt at editorial balance, *al-Irfan's* patronage of the Shi'i campaigners meant that it eventually suffered the same fate as *al-Nahda al-Iraqiyya*. In 1935, the Iraqi government banned the journal from circulating in Iraq.<sup>102</sup>

Inside Iraq, petitions and propaganda were periodically produced in an effort to reinvigorate the momentum of the Shi'i rights movement of the late 1920s. These were mainly distributed in the rural areas of the mid- and lower-Euphrates and curated in such a way to speak directly to the tribal population. Copies were also dispatched to foreign diplomatic missions and British and Iranian newspapers. One such petition, authored by a phoney organisation known as the 'Body Working for the Shi'a in Iraq' was titled 'The Voice of Iraq.'<sup>103</sup> With a particular focus on rural concerns, it described underinvestment in Shi'i areas and corrupt land purchases. Its language was strong and uncompromising – much stronger than anything al-Sharqi had published: the writers proposed that the current situation 'is making us suspect there is an arranged order to annihilate this sect [The Shi'a] and crush it.' His solution was the transfer of the 'reins of power' to the Shi'a through the appointment of Shi'i officials only.<sup>104</sup>

The timing of the petition was designed to correspond with Iraq's imminent admittance into the League of Nations, which was at that time contingent upon the government releasing guarantees concerning the rights of minorities. Kurdish, Assyrian, Turkomen and Yazidis all dispatched petitions to the League and the British, hoping to secure some sort of special international protection.<sup>105</sup> Although the activists made no demands for foreign protection of Shi'i 'majority' rights, which would have been nonsensical in any case, their mimicry of

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<sup>101</sup> *Al-Irfan*, 24/9, March 1934, 977 – 978.

<sup>102</sup> *Al-Irfan*, 25/9, March 1935, 992.

<sup>103</sup> Shi'i Activities: Authorship of Petition, 14 March 1932, AIR23/385, TNA.

<sup>104</sup> *Al-Irfan*, 23/1, May 1932, 14 - 16.

<sup>105</sup> Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, 72.

minority petition culture challenged the notion that Iraq had achieved any of the main required stipulations of the League.

It was precisely the imminence of Iraq's referral to the League of Nations and the enlivened Iraqi political situation which undermined the possibility of a renewed Shi'i party-political movement in 1933. The unpopular Anglo-Iraqi Treaty of 1930 and the subsequent economic crisis had led to an unprecedented union in the form of Hizb al-Ikha, between the two major opposition political figures in Baghdad, Yasin al-Hashemi and Abu Timman. The latter enjoyed good relations with the old Nahda politicians, who were no doubt optimistic about the possibility that their sect-centric politics could now be subsumed into a broad-based democratic opposition.<sup>106</sup> The relatively good representation of Shi'is – especially tribal Shaykhs – in the Iraqi Chamber of Deputies and Senate meant that concerns about representation were not particularly germane.

Two years after Iraq's admission into the League of Nations, one of the political conditions which had undermined the prospects of Shi'i politics since the formation of the Iraqi state came seriously unstuck for the first time. This provided a platform for the last high-profile articulation of Shi'i-centric demands in Iraq during the interwar period. The 1935 tribal insurrection saw a revival – albeit short-lived – of the political union between the ulama of Najaf and the tribal populations of the Euphrates, a defining motif of the Iraqi revolution of 1920. This represented something of a cyclical transfer of Shi'i politics out of the party-political sphere and back into the realm of rural-based tribal politics. While the myriad causes of the insurrection have been well studied by historians, I want to conclude this chapter by focusing specifically on recollections of the revolt by two men who had previously been linked to the political machinations of Hizb al-Nahda. This analysis complicates the oft-repeated

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<sup>106</sup> Tripp, 69–70.



historiographical assumption that the insurrection represented a simple amalgamation of Shi'i sectarian politics and the discrete political interests of a handful of tribal shaykhs.<sup>107</sup>

The roots of the insurrection can be found in the 1934 Iraqi general election, which broke the social contract extant between the Iraqi government and the tribes of southern Iraq since the formation of the state. Heavily rigged by the government, it resulted in a significant curtailment of tribal representation in parliament. Perturbed by this loss of influence, several of the tribes organised around the leadership of 'Abd al-Wahid al-Hajj Sikkar and the opposition in Baghdad, led by al-Hashemi and Hizb al-Ikha. Another group of tribal shaykhs – most of whom had not lost their seats – remained loyal to the governing party, Hizb al-Ahd.<sup>108</sup> Al-Ghita was in regular contact with the disgruntled shaykhs throughout this period, who wanted him to endorse their struggle against the new government. He saw in their dissatisfaction an opportunity to apply pressure on the government to win much needed political reforms. According to al-Ghita, Iraq had been beset by chaotic and dictatorial administration since the death of Faysal in 1933.<sup>109</sup> He concluded that one of the principal reasons for this chaos was the fractious party-political system. He therefore encouraged all the shaykhs to leave their political parties, to form a united block – 'one hand, working for the general good and for Iraq in its entirety' – not only against the present government, but the whole Baghdadi political class.<sup>110</sup>

Few of the shaykhs were willing to follow his advice. The anti-government shaykhs were mostly intent on using al-Ghita's influence to further the political prospects of the opposition. He obliged by authoring a petition supporting the demands of the tribes against the new government and declaring the election unconstitutional. Although al-Ghita explicitly

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<sup>107</sup> Al-Hasani, *Ta'rikh al-Wazarat al-'Iraqiyya*, Vol. 4, 120; Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, 81–82; Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq*, 124.

<sup>108</sup> Kashif al-Ghita, *'Uqud Hayati*, 171.

<sup>109</sup> Kashif al-Ghita, 169.

<sup>110</sup> Kashif al-Ghita, 174, 178.

refused to endorse the use of violence, fearing it could lead to the intervention of foreign powers in Iraq, it was not long before the tribes in support of Sikkar began to take up arms.<sup>111</sup> After the resignation of two prime ministers, Ayyubi and al-Midfa'i, al-Ghita was hopeful for meaningful reform. He envisioned a form of government based on a 'popular ministry, in which the King consulted the ulama and the leaders of the people (*sha'b*) before making political appointments.'<sup>112</sup> But to al-Ghita's dismay, the King quickly called on al-Hashemi and Hizb al-Ikha to form a government.<sup>113</sup>

The fall of the al-Midfa'i cabinet coincided with the celebration of Eid al-Ghadir. Al-Ghita used the visitations as an opportunity to spell out exactly what reforms were necessary for the realisation of his 'popular government.' Along with a group of Baghdadi lawyers he authored the Mithaq al-Sha'b, or 'The People's Pact.' The language of a national 'pact' was synonymous with the universal posturing of Shi'i politics since the days of Hizb al-Nahda. The pact's content was similarly universal. Unlike the direct language of the 'Voice of Iraq', it was unemotive, lawyerly and constitutional: a direct appeal to the Iraqi government to commit to reforms in order to avoid a violent confrontation with the tribes. Although the pact referenced the 'policy of sectarian discrimination' pursued by the government, it spoke – not in the name of the Shi'a – but of the 'majority of the people' (*akthariyyat al-sha'b*). Al-Ghita's influence meant that calls for Shi'i judges to sit on the Sharia courts in majority Shi'i areas sat high in the petition's demands. Yet these were buttressed by calls for the reform of the electoral system; 'complete freedom of the press'; just distribution of agricultural lands; the reduction in taxes hitting the rural population and the salaries of high officials; and the improvement of health services in southern Iraq.<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Kashif al-Ghita, 173.

<sup>112</sup> Kashif al-Ghita, 181–82.

<sup>113</sup> Al-Hasani, *Ta'rikh al-Wazarat al-'Iraqiyya*, Vol. 4, 45–74.

<sup>114</sup> Al-Hasani, 84–86. See also: 'Demands of the Euphrates Leaders', March 1935 in *The Records of Iraq*, Volume 7: 1932 – 1936 (Slough: Archive Editions, 2001), 410 – 414.

The petition failed to have the desired effect. Rather than uniting the Euphrates tribes against the state, the shaykhs who supported Hizb al-Ikha travelled to Baghdad and quickly expressed their support for al-Hashemi. They announced their opposition to al-Ghita on the basis that the Mithaq promoted divisions within the nation. Only those shaykhs who supported the previous government signed the Mithaq.<sup>115</sup> Al-Ghita realised he had been effectively outmanoeuvred by Sikkar and al-Hashemi and sought to deescalate the crisis by declaring his opposition to all forms of ‘partisanship’ and urging those tribes who did not support Sikkar to keep the peace.<sup>116</sup> They did not, and a new – more serious – tribal rebellion broke out in Diwaniyya and Suk al-Shuyukh. Disunited, the tribes were no match for the government, who gradually extinguished the rebellion through a mixture of aerial bombardment and mediation.<sup>117</sup>

It was not long before the tribal insurrection was being framed by Shi’i rights activists as a sectarian ‘*fitna*’, with its roots in the structural inequalities disfavoured the Shi’is in the Iraqi state. An article in *al-Irfan* explained the insurrection with direct reference to the underrepresentation of Shi’is in the Iraqi government and parliament. It accused al-Hashemi of cynically co-opting the tribes into thinking he would address these concerns. When he did not, the ‘revolution was resumed.’<sup>118</sup> Such an interpretation lacked nuance and failed to explain the party-political dynamics at play in the rebellion.

Shi’i politics came into the affair through al-Ghita’s efforts to use the tribal dissatisfaction to further a reform agenda. While al-Ghita himself would have assertively denied it, this agenda bore several similarities with the regional and socio-economic concerns

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<sup>115</sup> Al-Hasani, 83.

<sup>116</sup> Al-Hasani, 88; Kashif al-Ghita, *‘Uqud Hayati*, 185.

<sup>117</sup> Al-Hasani, *Ta’rikh al-Wazarat al-Iraqiyya*, Vol. 4, 113–17. ‘Correspondence between Sir A. Clark Kerr and Sir John Simon’, 17 June 1935 in *The Records of Iraq, Volume 7: 1932 – 1936* (Slough: Archive Editions, 2001), 427.

<sup>118</sup> *Al-Irfan*, 26/1 – 2, April/May 1935, 110 – 112

of Hizb al-Nahda. Unlike the *al-Irfan* commentary, his representation of the demands of the tribes refused to use the language of sect, favouring the universal language of nation. His whole framing of the insurrection pitted the Euphrates tribes against the corrupt political class in Baghdad. According to al-Ghita's somewhat dismissive interpretation of the shaykhs' agency, the Baghdadi elite had used the tribes as pawns in their political game. The shaykh's true political centre of gravity should have been Najaf, in the heart of the Euphrates. Scholars have been quick to point out that al-Ghita's role in the 1935 insurrection speaks to his own leadership ambitions within the Shi'i community.<sup>119</sup> Yet the resulting standoff precipitated by the Mithaq was also a regional struggle for power: 'a quarrel between Baghdad and Najaf' for the heart and soul of Iraq, in al-Ghita's parlance, in which the latter ultimately won.<sup>120</sup>

For the former Nahda politicians looking on at the insurrection, it was a raw representation of the political malaise they had been campaigning against since the late 1920s. Rajib witnessed it first-hand in his role as a tax inspector in Suk al-Shuyukh. Although a representative of the government, he felt a natural affinity to the tribes of the Euphrates who led the insurrection. Writing several years later, he described it as a revolution (*al-thawra*) against 'forms of injustice and tyranny which were overstraining everyone.' By this, he was referring to the 'shameful' administrative practices undertaken by some of his colleagues. Although Rajib was sympathetic to the revolutionaries and personal friends with several of the rebellious Shaykhs, he was evacuated with the other administrative officials to Baghdad. Once there, he hoped to be able to raise some of the tribesmen's concerns with the government himself. Yet on his arrival, he was dismayed to find that the local press was denigrating the

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<sup>119</sup> Machlis, 'A Shi'a Debate on Arabism', 107–8.

<sup>120</sup> Kashif al-Ghita, *'Uqud Hayati*, 185.

reputation of the tribes, implying that their revolution resulted from their ‘beastliness’, and deficit in religious and Arab traditions.<sup>121</sup>

Rajib’s portrayal of the insurrection in this way evoked the spatial and territorial concerns which had accompanied the ideology of Hizb al-Nahda. As a former champion of Shi’i politics and adherent to a Euphrates-based articulation of Iraqi Arab nationalism, he saw the tribes as the embodiment of chivalrous Arab customs. He romanticised their struggle as a momentous historical event and stressed the good treatment he had received from the leaders of the rebellion, despite being a representative of the government.<sup>122</sup> He even took notes of the tribe’s slogans and chants in the hope of transposing them into a useful historical record.<sup>123</sup> The Baghdadi elite, on the other hand, were scorned in his narrative as prejudiced against the rural nation. Writing for a primarily Iraqi audience in the Najafi journal *al-I’tidal*, Rajib made no reference to the sect-centric inequalities precipitating the insurrection, nor to the importance of al-Ghita’s petition. The key division was instead between two cultural spaces in Iraq – the authentic and repressed Arab Euphrates and the corrupt political centre of Baghdad. The figure of Rashid Kaylani, al-Hashemi’s Minister of the Interior, was a poignant representation of the latter. Rajib tried to impress upon Kaylani the need to censure the Baghdadi press for their fallacious reportage and respond to the complaints of the tribes with reforms. But Kaylani responded with ‘feigned sympathy’ and ‘fickle words’, believing, according to Rajib, that it was ‘ignorance which had pushed the people [the tribes] to rebellion and that, therefore, they had to be punished.’<sup>124</sup>

Rajib’s account of the insurrection and its aftermath also illustrates how the government strategy of co-optation and patronage was suppressing the resurgence of Shi’i rights activism

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<sup>121</sup> For an example of an article presenting this type of view, see al-Hasani, *Ta’rikh al-Wazarat al-Iraqiyya*, Vol. 4, 68–69. *Al-I’tidal*, 4/2, March 1937, 63 – 67.

<sup>122</sup> *Al-I’tidal*, 4/2, March 1937, 63.

<sup>123</sup> *Al-I’tidal*, 6/8, October 1946, 584.

<sup>124</sup> *Al-I’tidal*, 4/2, March 1937, 66.

by the mid-1930s. He had never aspired to be a state official. The role was essentially forced on him after he delivered a particularly stirring anti-government speech and was subsequently sacked from his job as a teacher at the Husayni School in Baghdad.<sup>125</sup> As his account in *al-I'tidal* illustrates, state employment precipitated a clash of loyalties: between aiding and abetting a corrupt state who paid his wage, on the one hand, and pursuing his political career, on the other. It also brought with it the spectre of ever more stringent state oversight and suppression. Not only were Rajib's concerns about maladministration in Suk al-Shuyukh ignored by Kaylani in 1935. They precipitated a punitive response. Days later, after being reassigned to Fallujah for respite, he was arrested on the grounds that he had been an accomplice to the rebellious tribes. Rajib's account of the arrest is awash with melodrama: he has his readers believe that it was due to his uncanny premonition of his arrest that he destroyed all his papers pertaining to the revolt and subsequently avoided persecution.<sup>126</sup> In fact, it was Abu Timman's intercession which cleared his name.<sup>127</sup>

It is impossible to know whether there was any truth in the allegations against Rajib. Yet his experience in the wake of the insurrection is a good illustration of one of the key reasons Shi'i politics was unable to regain momentum throughout the 1930s. It was not only that Iraqi institutions were becoming more representative of the diverse religious and ethnic fabric of the nation; nor only that a new generation of graduates were emerging from government schools.<sup>128</sup> State coercion and co-option were also at play. Since the first stirrings of Shi'i politics and its ideology of Euphrates based Arab nationalism in the mid-1920s, the state had used its coercive instruments to stamp out the movement. *Al-Najaf*, *al-Nahda al-Iraqiyya* and *al-Irfan* all faced

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<sup>125</sup> Takriti, *al-Katib al-Sihafi*, 16.

<sup>126</sup> *Al-I'tidal*, 6/8, October 1946, 584 – 588.

<sup>127</sup> Takriti, *al-Katib al-Sihafi*, 17.

<sup>128</sup> Adeed Darwisha, 'National Identity and Sub-State Sectarian Loyalties in Iraq', *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 4, no. 3 (2010): 243–56; Hanna Batatu, 'Iraq's Shi'i, Their Political Role, and the Process of Their Integration into Society', in *The Islamic Impulse*, ed. Barbara Freyer Stowasser (Washington: Centre for Contemporary Arab Studies, 1987), 204–16.

censorship at one time or another. Presses in Baghdad and elsewhere were explicitly banned from publishing material which promoted Shi'i political rights.<sup>129</sup> The repeated failures of Hizb al-Nahda to gain political momentum owed much to the government's uncanny ability to stage manage general elections, while the colonial state's ability to monitor its every move inspired fear and anxiety among activists.<sup>130</sup> When Shi'is such as Rajib and al-Sharqi did find their way into state employment, it did not give them the capacity to shape its executive arm. Instead, both men recounted their anxieties – and, in Rajib's case, fear – at having to represent a coercive institution that refused to implement the far-reaching reforms to which they aspired.

Two final factors extinguished the last traces of Shi'i politics in the last years before the outbreak of the Second World War. The first of these was the Bakr Sidqi coup in 1936, which furthered eroded the prospects of meaningful democratic political developments by precipitating an increasingly dominant role for the military in politics.<sup>131</sup> The second followed another coup and the subsequent British invasion of Iraq in 1941 to prevent the state from siding with Nazi Germany. The re-invasion was a stark reminder that Iraqi independence remained fragile. The spirit of unconditional unity infected the ulama and journalist intellectuals who had brought Shi'i politics into existence throughout the interwar period. On the front page of *al-Hatif*, fatwas by al-Ghita, al-Jaza'iri and Isfahani evoked a non-differential conception of unity and the obligation of jihad to defend Iraq and the Islamic world from renewed colonial subjugation.<sup>132</sup> Al-Ya'qubi remounted the Husayni minbar to preach anti-colonial resistance.<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> Shi'i Activities: Authorship of Petition, 14 March 1932, AIR23/385, TNA.

<sup>130</sup> The detrimental impact of colonial intelligence was something the activists themselves recognised. See: *al-Irfan*, 23/4-5, March – April 1933, 682; as well as Rajib's account of his arrest: *al-I'tidal*, 6/8, October 1946, 585.

<sup>131</sup> Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, 85–91.

<sup>132</sup> *Al-Hatif*, 262, 9 May 1941, 1.

<sup>133</sup> Al-Khalili, *Hakadha Araftuhum*, Vol. 2, 156.

Shi'i politics was a novel political movement when it emerged on the Iraqi political scene in the late 1920s. It was rendered possible by the structural inequalities within the Iraqi state, which – by accident or design – had left a sizable number of urban Shi'is unable to access state resources and jobs. In its articulation, Shi'i politics relied on the symbolism and idioms that defined national and international discourses in the interwar period: namely, the language of minorities and majorities and the permissibility of staking political claims based upon either; and the formulation of a discrete articulation of Iraqi Arab nationalism. The territorial dimension of this articulation of nationalism was set in the Euphrates, a loosely defined area which the Shi'i activists claim lay host the most authentic Arab populations in Iraq. This articulation of nationalism was popular and powerful, so much so that it precipitated a deluge of state attention, monitoring and, ultimately, censorship. Although Shi'i politics and its Euphrates-based articulation of nationalism never resurfaced in the same way throughout the 1930s, they remained – and, to some extent, remain – important forces within the Iraqi political psyche.



## *Conclusion – The Incomplete Najafi Nahda*

The early 1960s were a turbulent period in Iraq. The monarchy fell in 1958, following a free officers coup backed by the radical left. Many saw ‘Abd al-Karim Qasim’s revolutionary regime as the antidote to the entrenched political and socio-economic inequalities that had plagued the state throughout the monarchical period. Others, especially within the clerical establishment, became increasingly anxious about the growing popularity of communism. As pan-Arabism picked up momentum across the Middle East and the world settled into a new era of geopolitical rivalry in which the East–West dichotomy of the early twentieth century was written anew into a colossal Manichaean great power struggle, the fleeting and ambiguous Najafi modernity projects of the interwar period must have felt like distant and, perhaps, simpler days for the *shabāb* – now mostly *shuyūkh* – of the Najafi Nahda. Yet the legacy of those turbulent years in that most holy of cities was far more potent than many recognised, at the time and since.

In 1964, a year before his death, ‘Ali al-Sharqi published his memoirs. Titled *al-Ahlam*, the book interspersed biographical details of al-Sharqi’s life with historical, cultural and political musings on Najaf, Iraq and the wider Middle East. The work, especially its introduction, had a dream like quality. At one point, the soviet astronaut Andriyan Nikolayev meets Jesus on ‘the red planet’ to convince him to return to Earth now that true peace had been restored. After tough negotiations, the messiah agrees only to be sorely disappointed by humanity’s utilisation of technology for violence.<sup>1</sup> The book’s title was also an ode to al-Sharqi’s astonishment at the rate of human progress witnessed through 73 years of life. Born in a small walled city on the fringes of a vast multi-ethnic empire without either electricity or

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<sup>1</sup> Al-Sharqi, *al-Ahlam*, 22–23.

running water, he wrote *al-Ahlam* from Baghdad in the wake of a bloody Ba'athist coup, just as Russia and America were sending the first men into space.<sup>2</sup> It is hard to comprehend how anyone who followed a similar life trajectory could have reached the 1960s without a similar sense of incredulity at the chimerical rate of social, political, cultural and technological transformation.

Despite this, al-Sharqi was not satisfied with the rate of progress in Iraq. His memoirs repeated many of the implicit assumptions of the incomplete Najafi Nahda: since 1920, he contended, Iraq had been in a state of successive revolutions, periodically rearing their heads but never achieving the desired goal of complete emancipation. The repressed Iraqi fellahin remained impoverished, calling for rights and land reform, while colonialism continued to hang over Iraq 'always spinning and weaving, moving from antiquated means to news means . . . in innovative ways.'<sup>3</sup> His final will and testament, therefore, was unchanged in style and rigor from his writings of the mid-1920s. His implicit conclusion was that what Najaf had instigated in 1918, when a rag taggle group of market traders, quarter headmen and theology students tried to take on the British Empire almost by accident, was a process still essentially unresolved.<sup>4</sup>

The last section of the memoir, 'dreams of the future', spelt out al-Sharqi's ideas for liberatory transformation. These included building an indigenous constitutional framework; the radical reform of education to foster 'independence of ideas'; and full-scale land reform to increase agricultural productivity.<sup>5</sup> The programme reflected many of the same anxieties expressed by the men of the Najafi Nahda since the formation of the Iraqi state, if not before. Yet al-Sharqi presented these ideas, not in his own words, but in an imaginary *majlis* of the

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<sup>2</sup> Al-Sharqi, 5.

<sup>3</sup> Al-Sharqi, 257.

<sup>4</sup> Al-Sharqi, 138.

<sup>5</sup> Al-Sharqi, 262, 270–73.

reincarnated dead of Wadi al-Salam, where the ‘kings, leaders, ulama and literati’ were buried. The evocation of this macabre *majlis* evoked the structures and mentalities of the Najafi Nahda. The ‘skulls’ of his forefathers from Najaf, Iraq and the wider Shi’i world, brought together in a surrealist civic body, were the metaphorical saviours of the Iraqi people and its fellahin, the voices of reason and justice, who al-Sharqi deployed as discursive agents to lend his reformist ideas credibility.<sup>6</sup> Whatever his intention, al-Sharqi’s conclusion acknowledged the multidimensional discursive significance of the Najafi *majālis*. Not only had they provided the institutional foundations for the period of intellectual and political transformation discussed throughout this thesis. So too did they constitute a facet of the myth of the Najafi Nahda itself, and one of the indispensable components of a civic nationalist imaginary. Such an imaginary was incongruous with the ideology of the Ba’athist regime, which consistently sought to circumscribe nationalist ideology throughout its long and violent rule.<sup>7</sup> Such incongruence was not only – or even mainly – a corollary of pan-Arabist ideology. The regionalist, rights-based and sect-centric elements of the Najafi experience, epitomised by al-Sharqi’s ideas, cannot be pigeonholed in either a simple Iraqist or Arabist conception of state. Najaf consistently resisted both the violence of the Iraqi regimes – especially the Ba’athists – and the marginalisation of the role, symbolism and history of the Euphrates, Najaf and the Iraqi Shi’a in the national story.

Najafi resistance to authoritarianism became increasingly associated with Shi’i Islamism from the late 1950s onwards. Hizb al-Da’wa, Iraq’s first and most powerful Islamist movement, owed its intellectual and political foundations to the reformist trends in Najafi political and religious life starting at the beginning of the twentieth century. A graduate of one of Muntada al-Nashr’s elementary schools, Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr, provided the ideological scaffolding for this movement, re-envisioning the hierarchical structure of the Shi’i

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<sup>6</sup> Al-Sharqi, 258–72.

<sup>7</sup> Davis, *Memories of State*, 2.

pedagogical establishment into the ‘blueprint’ of a constitutional system.<sup>8</sup> Al-Sadr and his contemporaries were pioneers, but this thesis has tried to buttress more recent work which finds the origins of their ideas in an earlier period, when Hibat al-Din al-Shahrastani and al-Ghita made use of the constitutional public sphere to rally against colonialism and materialism in their youth. At the same time, the thesis has complicated notions of linear paths to a mid-century Shi’i political renaissance, so often premised of an implicit acceptance of reform as stemming from the binary conflict between the modern and the traditional/conservative.

The complex and dynamic architecture of *al-iṣlāḥ* was a response to changes in the political economy of the Ottoman Empire and Iraq. It reflected the transition from the imperial sphere to the national as well as the print cultural revolution and its associated mass circulation genres. While the nomenclature of reform invariably remained constant, categories of legitimate political and religious community within reformist discourse narrowed as the early twentieth century progressed, becoming successively more limited and bounded within the national polity. Analysing the institutions and genres which characterised reformist discourse helps to bridge the historiographical divide between the theory and philosophy of revolutionary or political Shi’ism and the socio-cultural conditions which made this political movement possible.

Oppositional activism became increasingly unfeasible as the twentieth century progressed. Southern Iraq bore the brunt of Ba’athist tyranny, although – initially at least – Ba’athism was a despotism meted out to all irrespective of creed or race. In 1991, following the disastrous Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, Najaf and a number of cities in southern Iraq again took up the mantle of armed resistance. There are striking parallels between this revolutionary moment and those which defined the development of Iraqi Arab nationalism in its embryonic

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<sup>8</sup> Mallat, *The Renewal of Islamic Law*, 58.

form between 1918 and 1920. Not least of all, like the earlier revolutions, that of 1991 represented the mass dissatisfaction of the south against a repressive and illegitimate regime. Chaotic and extremely violent, it again witnessed the ulama taking responsibility for the short-lived revolutionary Najafi government.<sup>9</sup> As with other cities in Iraq, the Najafi intifada of 1991 was crushed with unprecedented brutality. Thousands were murdered and realms of Shi'i culture destroyed. If any date were to denote the temporary termination of the Najafi Nahda, it was 1991, when the last vestiges of a cultural and political project begun at the dawn of the twentieth century were quite literally ripped to shreds. Even the 92-year-old *Marja'iyya*, Abu al-Qasim al-Khoei, was arrested and forcefully transferred to Baghdad.<sup>10</sup>

It was not until after the fall of the Ba'ath in 2003 that the unfinished Najafi Nahda was revitalised. The new freedoms of association and publication – tempered considerably by the severe political and security instabilities of the last twenty years – facilitated a publishing boom. Histories that were previously forbidden have finally been written, archives opened and libraries expanded. Underpinning this process is a concerted effort to reappropriate a national narrative and religious culture which was discursively and physically erased by the regime. The newly constituted al-Khoei centre in the heart of the old city of Najaf displays the burnt embers of religious books destroyed during the 1991 intifada. The Maktabat al-Haydariyya, a library dating back to the tenth century which was rebuilt in 2005, has republished almost all the journals and newspapers produced in Najaf throughout the first half of the twentieth century. Previously the treasures of a few private collections or public libraries in Iraq and the United States, these can now be bought – at very reasonable prices – in a popular book shop adjacent to Imam 'Ali's shrine.<sup>11</sup> Archival material and historical correspondence is published

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<sup>9</sup> Haddad, *Sectarianism in Iraq*, 71–72, 80.

<sup>10</sup> Eris Goldstein and Andrew Whitley, *Endless Torment: The 1991 Uprising in Iraq and Its Aftermath* (New York: Middle East Watch/Human Rights Watch, 1992). , <https://www.hrw.org/legacy/reports/1992/Iraq926.htm> [Accessed: 26 July 2022].

<sup>11</sup> For all the titles published, see: <https://www.haydarya.com/?id=20> [Accessed: 27 July 2022]

in print or online at an increasingly high rate.<sup>12</sup> What might be dubbed the new Najafi Nahda is reminiscent of the pedagogical foundations of political nationalism in the city throughout the 1920s and 1930s. Yet in its current form, this pedagogical process is less nativistic or ethnically charged than before, and more concerned with setting the historical record straight vis-à-vis a century of human experience, brimming with disputed and contested episodes of sacrifice and suffering.

While politics and pedagogy have been inseparable in Najaf since at least the start of the twentieth century, so too has the call for rights and representation. Many of the same ideological concerns of the Najafi Nahda of the 1920s – about corruption, underinvestment, foreign intervention, rural or suburban poverty, and disappointment with an imperfect parliamentary system – persist despite the formation of a government in Iraq which is not ideologically or religiously estranged from the Shi'i population of the south. In 2019, these frustrations found expression in nationwide protests, often met with lethal force. The protestors' targets included government buildings but also the Iranian consulates in Najaf and Karbala. Media pundits marvelled at the intra-sectarian nature of the unrest: this was mostly Shi'i people protesting a Shi'i government and torching the diplomatic residences of a Shi'i regional power. Progress, they concluded, from the bloody Sunni–Shi'i 'sectarianism' that defined the civil conflicts within Iraq between 2006 and 2017.<sup>13</sup> One proposition of this thesis is that the history of the Najafi Nahda complicates these conclusions, and that such a hypothesis

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<sup>12</sup> Leading in this regard, is the Markaz al-Najaf al-Ashraf li-Ta'lif wa-l-Tawthiq wa-l-Nashr (MNATTN). As well as publishing documents and photographs on a very active YouTube channel, it has published a number of collections of historical documents, organised thematically. See the series titled *al-Mawsu'a al-Watha'iqiyya al-Najafiyya*, which includes: *al-Najaf al-Ashraf wa-l-Qadiyya al-Filastiniyya*; *al-Najaf al-Ashraf wa-l-Wahda al-Islamiyya*; and *Mawqif al-Najaf al-Ashraf min Hujum al-Wahabiyya 'ala al-Madina al-Munawwara, 1925* (Najaf, Markaz al-Najaf al-Ashraf li-Ta'lif wa-l-Tawthiq wa-l-Nashr).

<sup>13</sup> Ghassan al-Attiya, 'Analyst: Iraq Protests have 'overcome sectarianism'', *al-Jazeera* (4 November 2019), <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/11/4/analyst-iraq-protests-have-overcome-sectarianism> [Accessed: 27 July 2022].

– yet again – falls into the trap of assuming that the history of nation building in the Arab world is the slow unfolding of the ‘sectarian’ into the national.

The year 2019 was not a watershed, but the re-emergence of a politics of resistance that has been synonymous with Iraqi political life since the birth of the state. Iraq has persistently witnessed the construction and reconstruction of sect-centric mobilisation in response to evolving regimes of undemocratic power, whether they be the British colonial state in the 1920s, the authoritarianism of the Ba’athist regime or the American-led occupation of Iraq after 2003. What has invariably sat beneath these manifestations, rearing its head during episodes of mass popular unrest directed at the government – both in the 1920s and in 2019 – is the call for rights, representation and democracy based on national and popular principles. In whatever name these rights are staked – the Shi’a of Iraq, the people of the Euphrates, or the Iraqi nation as a whole – the demands are frustratingly similar.

By analysing changes and continuities in a formative period of Iraqi political and cultural history, this thesis sought to shed light on political and intellectual currents in Iraq which continue to shape the political landscape of the country today. While the periodisation of the thesis was deliberately broad – straddling the transition from Ottoman to colonial and, finally, to early national rule, I hoped that this would enable the unearthing of threads and connections – in terms of institutions, ideas and personnel – which have hitherto not been recognised. However, such a scope necessarily means that the analysis is incomplete and has thrown open as many questions as it has answered. Time constraints, access to sources as well as my own linguistic limitations are the main reason for this.

In light of these defects, I propose that future studies of the Najafi Nahda might entail the following. First, there is a need for in-depth analysis of the multilingual print production of the late Ottoman period, through reading the Persian language material published in the city

alongside the Arabic material, such as *al-Ilm*. Second, further research is needed on the intellectual and political origins of communism in Najaf and how its organisation reflected pre-existing social divisions. Third, understandings of the functioning of the Iraqi and Middle Eastern public sphere will benefit from expanded analysis of the institutional role of the *majālis* in the late monarchical period, as well as a comparative analysis with the role of such institutions elsewhere in Iraq or in other Arab Shi'i contexts. And finally, there is scope for a more thorough appraisal of how the Shi'i pedagogical and intuitional reforms of the 1930s shaped the Shi'i religious establishment itself and Shi'i political movements throughout the twentieth century, or at least until 1979. Some of these questions are already being tackled by scholars of Najaf inside and outside of the city. In that respect, at least, the Najafi Nahda continues.



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