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Shi'i clerical networks and the transnational contest over sacred authority

Shi'i Clerical Networks and the Transnational Contest over Sacred Authority:

Dynamics in London's Shi'i Triangle

Abstract:

This article explores the transnational contest over sacred authority in contemporary Shi'i Islam as it plays out between contemporary *maraji'* (sources of emulation) and the Iranian Supreme Leader, and in practice between their respective networks. It engages with existing assessments of the *marja'iyya* as an institution in crisis and argues instead that the *marja'iyya* has structural capacities that help maintain its potential in the face of the power exerted by the Supreme Leader. This in turns shapes the nature and outcome of the contest, including the need for the latter to accommodate with competing religious authorities. In the first part, the article offers of a conceptualisation of the *marja'iyya'*s potential on the basis of three of its intrinsic features: its poly-cephalic nature and the broad temporal and geographical scope of a *marja'*'s authority. The second part offers a case study of the transnational contest over sacred authority in a specific locale. It maps the various (institutionalised) networks associated with Middle Eastern authorities, the Supreme Leader included, in London. Networks are however not hard-bound entities, as illustrated by the cross-networks navigation of their members. Furthermore, networks operate not only in competition but also in collaboration with each other. The contemporary contest over Shi'i authority is thus not a zero-sum game.

Keywords: contemporary Shi'i Islam; clerical authority networks; *marja'iyya*; transnational competition; London.

Word count: 9488

Every year in June, the Islamic Centre of England (ICE) in North West London holds its Imam Khomeini Conference to commemorate the death of the founder of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Each conference is organised around a specific theme related to Khomeini's character, thought or politics: "Father of the Revolution" in 2010, "Reflections on Leadership" in 2012, "The Impact of Imam Khomeini on the Politics of the 21th Century" in 2013, "Imam Khomeini and the Status of Women" in 2016, and "The Leader of Hearts" in 2017, for instance. The event features several speakers who address an audience of 200-400 people from a podium surrounded by the giant pictures of Khomeini and his successor as Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah 'Ali Khamene'i. In effect, the Imam Khomeini Conference is a typical initiative to promote transnationally the Iranian model of Shi'i clerical leadership known as *velayat-e faqih* (guardianship of the jurist). The ICE, which convenes the event, is Khamene'i's official representative institution in the United Kingdom.

A few bus stops further north-west from the ICE lies the Imam Ali Foundation. It functions as the Liaison Office of Ayatollah 'Ali Sistani. Based in Najaf, Sistani is currently the most widely followed source of emulation (*marja'*; pl. *maraji'*) for the Shi'a worldwide. His foundation is thus an institutional face in London of the model of transnational clerical authority he embodies, the *marja'iyya*.

This snapshot of the institutional scene in London's Shi'i Triangle (Bowen 2014, 135; Degli Esposti 2018, 9) or Shi'a Mile (Scharbrodt 2018, 4-7) captures the role of the networks associated with Sistani and Khamene'i to promote not only the name of these ayatullahs but also the respective models of authority they represent. The *marja'iyya* is the more conventional model. The principle of *taqlid* (emulation), which constitutes its legal basis, requires anyone not trained to derive religious laws to follow the rulings of a qualified scholar.[1] The clerics recognised as source of emulation fulfil several functions. They provide legal guidance as interpreters of Islamic law. They play the role of educators by teaching at the highest level of

the seminary curriculum. Based on their prerogative to collect and manage religious dues paid by believers, the *maraji'* also act as providers of religious, educational, and social services for the community. In addition, they can exert political influence, however to an extent that is debated. This article concentrates on the *marja'iyya* as a structure of authority regardless of the various ideological trends to which different *maraji'* belong. Nonetheless, any specific references made to the "Najafi tradition" mean here the conventional view that, although scholars might seek to advise rulers and popular constituencies with regard to political matters, they do not have the right to rule. In contrast, the power to rule is the defining feature of the *velayat-e faqih* model of clerical authority institutionalised in the Islamic Republic of Iran with the post of Supreme Leader. Although this article makes an analytical distinction between the *maraji'* and the Supreme Leader on the basis of the latter's exercise of rulership, it is worth stressing that Iran's first and current supreme leaders have also both claimed the position of *marja'*. As such they have fulfilled, in addition to their political function, the same religious, educational, charitable, and social roles as any other *marja'*.

In this article, I explore the nature and outcome of the contest over sacred authority between scholars representing the *marja'iyya* and the *velayat-e faqih* models of authority. In so doing, I engage with existing assessments of the *marja'iyya* as an institution in crisis in the face of the power held by Iran's Supreme Leader. According to Mehdi Khalaji (2006), we are about, as soon as the ageing Sistani will die, to enter a post-*marja'iyya* age. At the heart of this prognosis is Khamene'i's successful efforts to put the Shi'i seminaries of Qom under his control, through both a policy of statization and the use of coercive power. As a result, the argument continues, most of the clerical establishment has become an arm of the Iranian state. Any remaining independent scholars in Iran and abroad will find it difficult to develop strong networks and are bound to remain marginal authorities. Harith al-Qarawee (2017) holds that the weakness of Najaf's own clerical establishment is also symptomatic. It does not have in its

ranks a scholar capable of achieving comparable authority to Sistani's. Intra-clerical divisions can only be exacerbated in the future, leaving the door open for Iran's Supreme Leader to further consolidate his leadership. Without dismissing the validity of some of these points, I suggest to take another look at the perceived incapacity of the *marja'iyya* to maintain itself and resist the Supreme Leader's competing power.

The *marja'iyya* and Supreme Leader's competitive claims to authority are not, I argue, a zero-sum game. The insights of Dale Eickelman and James Piscatori (2004) on the fragmentation of sacred authority in contemporary Muslim societies are useful in this regard. Various actors, such as heads of state, traditional religious authorities, or new educated elites, often compete for sacred authority. Yet, 'several or all may exercise authority simultaneously – one individual's sacred authority is not exclusive of another's' (68). Moreover, this fragmentation can have various outcomes. Contests over sacred authority might lead to intensified conflict but also to accommodation between the contenders (ibid, 131-135). As such, one can anticipate the contest between the *marja'iyya* and the Supreme Leader to be dynamic and unlikely to follow a linear course.

This basic argument needs further elaboration. The first part of the article concentrates on the *marja'iyya*'s capacity to maintain itself in spite of the challenges posed by the Supreme Leader's competitive claim to authority. In his study, Khalaji (2006) focused primarily on the control and power exercised by Khamene'i. However, to fully grasp the dynamics and outcome of the contest over sacred authority, one should consider the competing potential of all the contenders involved. As such, shifting perspective to the *marja'iyya* complements Khalaji's approach. More precisely, I argue that the *marja'iyya* has structural capacities which allow it to maintain itself. These capacities relate to three of its intrinsic features: its 'poly-cephalic' nature (Arminjon Hachem 2013, 188) and both its broad temporal and geographical scopes. These features not only contribute to the *marja'iyya*'s continued relevance as a system of

clerical authority. They also shape the nature and outcome of the competition with the Supreme Leader, including the need for the latter to accommodate with the *marja'iyya*.

The second part of the article further demonstrates the dynamic nature and outcome of the contest over sacred authority by exploring how it plays out in a specific locale, namely London. The London-based networks associated with various *maraji'* and the Supreme Leader, on which the analysis will focus, are vectors of their transnational claims to authority. These networks are often institutionalised in the form of religious centres, such as the ICE and the Imam Ali Foundation introduced above. While Shi'i clerical authority networks also encompass less tangible constitutive elements such as ideas and symbols, I concentrate here on people. Network members include the clerics who head or staff the main Shi'i institutions in London. In addition, and to add a 'from below' perspective to the study of Shi'i clerical authority (Fibiger 2015), I also consider the Shi'i laity as an integral element of these authority networks. However, and as the empirical analysis will make clear, the networks associated with different religious authorities are far from being hard-bound entities. Network members navigate between different institutions in London. Furthermore, networks operate not only in competition but also in cooperation with each other. In effect, the dynamics at work within and between networks reflects, as well as contributes to, the fluid nature of the contest over Shi'i sacred authority.

The *marja'iyya*'s structural capacities in the contest over sacred authority

A first feature of the *marja'iyya* contributing to its capacity in the contest over sacred authority is its poly-cephalic nature. The existence of a sole, supreme, *marja'* might be an ideal, but in practice several scholars assume the post at the same time. Sistani is today the most widely followed *marja'* and Khamene'i's own following is now also far from negligible. In addition, dozens of other scholars of more or less well-established statures claim the position of *marja'*

(Wikipedia 2019, for a list). They belong to various ideological trends. Those of the Najafi tradition include Ayatollahs Ishaq Fayyad, Sa'id Hakim, and Bashir Najafi in Najaf, Husayn Vahid Khurasani in Qom, in addition to more junior and less-known scholars. There are also *maraji'* ideologically in line with the Iranian model and leadership. Others, for instance the Shirazi trend, favour the idea of a politicised clergy while being at odds with the Islamic Republic of Iran.

The multiplicity of *maraji'* might result in different outcomes. It can be a sign of fragmentation, and hence a cause of weakness for the *marja'iyya*. If no scholar of say the Najafi tradition achieves Sistani's stature after him, Iran's Supreme Leader could become the most widely followed Shi'i authority. Nonetheless he would only be the most supreme among many *maraji'*. On the other hand, one should recognise that, at a minimum, each *marja'* contributes to the total sum of the *marja'iyya*'s authority. Each helps defuse, with whatever amount of authority he has, the Supreme Leader's own authority. Therefore, any assessment of the *marja'iyya*'s capacities should not only consider the leadership of prominent scholars of Sistani's kind but also take into account the more minor, less widely followed, *maraji'*.

A second feature of the *marja'iyya* is the broad temporal scope of *marja'*'s authority. To clarify how this feature sustains the capacity of the *marja'iyya* in the contest over sacred authority, one needs to deconstruct common assumptions about both the "beginning" and the "end" of a *marja'*'s leadership. The "emergence" (Mervin 2004, 67) of a source of emulation and the consolidation of his authority is a gradual process. His recognition might be limited at first but later expand, for instance though not only if he is able to attract the support networks, associated institutions, and popular following of a former *marja'*. Sistani himself did not develop at once the wide aura that we know him today. He was eventually able to do so thanks to different support networks (Rizvi 2018, 179–82; Corboz 2015, 64-7). On this basis, the gradual consolidation of the *maraji'*'s authority can affect the ways the Iranian state will deal

with them. In the mid-1990s the pro-governmental Society of Qom Seminary Teachers issued a list of suitable *maraji'* that did not include Sistani's name. One could argue that the Society could get away with ignoring him precisely because he was not yet well-established. This stance was however not sustainable after his authority became so widespread, and Sistani eventually made it to the list. Looking ahead, scepticism that no scholar will achieve Sistani's stature immediately after him is well-founded. Yet the variables at play in the consolidation of a *marja''s* authority are too complex to exclude the possibility at some point. As already emphasised, one should not disregard the more minor *maraji'* of today, as their authority might become more full-fledged tomorrow.

Common assumptions about the "end" of the *marja'iyya* of a religious scholar should also be refined. A *marja''s* authority is not limited to his lifetime. The legacies he leaves behind are enduring. These legacies include his works and rulings, which his emulators might continue to follow;[2] the students he trained, the most eminent of whom might form the next generation of *maraji'*; and the religious and charitable institutions established with his patronage which his offspring and network keep operating (Corboz 2015; Clarke 2016). The continued influence of a deceased *marja'* cannot probably survive the passing of time in the long-term. It can have an impact in the short and medium-term, however. It helps reduce the leadership vacuum caused by his demise for at least a while. This might smoothen the succession crisis which the loss of a *marja'* of Sistani's stature might engender. More generally, deceased *maraji'* remain actual players in the contest over sacred authority, including with Iran's Supreme Leader. Illustrative of the need for latter to accommodate with their lasting influence is the website of the governmental National Centre for Answers to Religious Questions (2019) which offers users the choice to obtain the religious rulings of different *maraji'*. Among the options, the name "Khu'i" is listed, referring to the late Abu al-Qasim Khu'i (d. 1992), Sistani's own

mentor and the *marja'* who was the quintessential representative of the Najafi tradition during Khomeini's time.

A third feature of the *marja'iyya* to take into consideration is its geographical scope. The *marja'iyya*'s transnational capacity is best captured by the reach exercised by global *maraji'* of Sistani's kind, who has followers worldwide and networks to support his influence among them. More minor *maraji'* have less financial and networking capacities but they can still develop a presence in select countries. Iran's Supreme Leader also seeks to project his influence beyond Iran, an ambition supported by the large resources and infrastructure of the Iranian state. In effect, this multiplies the sites in which the contest over sacred authority is played out, leaving the possibility open for different outcomes in different locations. The situation in the Iranian and Iraqi seminaries, the main centres of Shi'i learning, is of paramount importance. While one should not oversimplify the so-called Qom-Najaf rivalry – neither seminaries are homogeneous entities – each seminary remains a particularly important sphere of influence for the Supreme Leader and the Najafi *marja'iyya* respectively. Further afield, the transnational networks associated with various *maraji'* and the Supreme Leader often exist side by side in the many parts that constitute the geography of Shi'ism. Conditions on the ground regulate the capacity of their respective networks, as well as the interactions between them. As such, the transnational dynamics of the contest over Shi'i sacred authority should be considered in specific localities, similarly to Gupta's (2014) ethnographic study of the institutions sponsored respectively by the Najafi *marja'iyya* and Iran's Supreme Leader in the Indian town of Kargil. The rest of this article will explore the situation in another locale, London.

The contest over sacred authority in London

In light of the above, this article moves to a specific case study of the contest over sacred authority as it plays out through the transnational networks representing the *marja'iyya* and

Iran's Supreme Leader in the London context. I will first map the local Shi'i institutional scene and the variety of networks associated with current and deceased religious authorities which compose it, a multiplicity that stems from the poly-cephalic nature of the Shi'i religious leadership. This initial sketch will then be refined to clarify that these authority networks should not be conceived as hardbound entities. The complex dynamics at work in the transnational contest over sacred authority will further become apparent in the subsequent analysis of the competitive but also collaborative services these networks offer to the local Shi'i community.

The case study is based on field research conducted in London on-and-off from 2012 to 2018. I interviewed the heads and some other staff members of the main institutions associated with different *maraji'* and Iran's Supreme Leader.[3] I prefer to not name the specific source(s) used for the points I elaborate in the analysis, while I also anonymise a few additional informants. I was generally able to cross-check the information between different informants. Keen to also provide the perspective of the Shi'i laity, I include some observations I made when visiting these institutions and attending their events. In addition, I tap into the rich ethnographic studies conducted by other scholars in different Shi'i centres in London.

Institutionalised authority networks in London

The development of transnational clerical authority networks in London is at least in part the natural consequence of the growth of Britain's Shi'i community. Shi'a constitute an estimated 10-15% of the total number of Muslims in the country (Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life 2009, 39-41), a percentage which translates into the figure of 270,000-400,000 people out of the 2.71 million of Muslims identified in the 2011 national census. The first important wave of Shi'i migration, coming mainly from India and Pakistan, started in the 1960s (Bowen 2014, 146; Dogra 2017, 168-9). The early 1970s also saw the arrival of contingents of the small, yet influential, Khoja Twelver Shi'i community. Of South Asian origin, the Khojas established

communities in East Africa in the 19th century, until the 1972 expulsions of Asians from Uganda paved the way for a further wave of immigration to Europe (especially the UK) and to North America (Bowen 2014, 150-1). Iranians started to migrate from the 1950s, first for educational purposes and then, after the Iranian revolution, in larger numbers for also political and economic reasons (Spellman and Gholami 2018, 97-98). Middle Eastern conflicts, such as the Lebanese Civil War (1975–1990) and Iraq's consecutive wars (1980–1988, 1990–91, and 2003), also contributed their share of Arab Shi'i migrants and refugees. Smaller numbers also came from Shi'i-majority but Sunni-ruled Bahrain. The Soviet occupation of Afghanistan (1980–1989), the subsequent Taliban rule (1996–2001), as well as the turmoil of regime change led to influxes of Afghan Hazara Shi'i refugees.

The early institutionalisation of Shi'ism in London initially developed out of local grassroots initiatives rather than by the transnational impetus of Middle East-based religious authorities. The first Shi'i Islamic centres, located in South London, were established in the late 1960s by Pakistani Shi'a (Bowen 2014, 146). Twelver Shi'i Khojas founded the London-headquartered World Federation of Khoja Shia Ithna-Asheri Muslim Communities in 1976 and opened other community centres in the capital and elsewhere in the country.

The institutionalisation of the *marja'iyya* proper started with the establishment in 1974 of the Islamic Universal Association – commonly known as the Majma – with the aim to cater for London's growing Shi'i community. The *marja'* behind the establishment of this religious centre was Muhammad Reza Gulpaygani (d. 1994) of Qom. When he died in 1994, the institutions previously established and administered in his name – the Majma included – were placed, in accordance with his will, under the supervision of Lutfallah Safi Gulpaygani of Qom (Gulpaygani 1993). The Majma nonetheless remains popularly associated with its deceased founder. It is his picture, not Safi Gulpaygani's, which is put on display on the homepage of the association's website (Islamic Universal Association of London 2019a), along the picture

of Shaykh 'Alemi, its director in London since the mid-1980s. The Majma thus provides a first case in point for taking into account the long-lasting institutional legacies of deceased *maraji'* in the transnational contest over sacred authority.

The *marja'iyya* of Najaf, past and present, also has major institutionalised networks in London. In 1989, Ayatollah Khu'i sponsored the creation of the Al-Khoei Foundation with the mission to help him fulfil the charitable function associated with his position as the most widely followed *marja'* of his time. The foundation administers religious, educational, and charitable projects in London, such as its adjacent Al-Khoei Islamic Centre, and across the world. Like in the case of the Majma, its founder and first patron is now long deceased. The Foundation is still administered by Khu'i's family and his former network of representatives (Corboz 2015, 57-64). At the same time, it maintains a connection to a living *marja'*. According to its bylaws, it should always be supervised by the supreme source of emulation of the time (ibid, 64). After Khu'i's death, Muhammad Reza Gulpaygani and then Sistani were offered the rather ceremonial position of the foundation's patron (Walbridge 2014, 57, 99-102; Corboz 2015, 66-70). Crucially, the foundation has Sistani's permission to use for its projects half of the religious dues collected in his name.

The Al-Khoei Foundation initially offered a ready-made institution for Sistani's *marja'iyya* to develop a presence in London at a time when he was still consolidating his authority. Sistani then established new institutions of his own. Shaykh Kashmiri, his son-in-law and main representative for Europe and North America, opened the Imam Ali Foundation in 1994 to act as Sistani's Liaison Office. Also affiliated to Sistani, the Alulbayt Foundation is a community centre established in 2000 by Sayyid Shahrestani, another of Sistani's sons-in-law and his main representative in Iran where he is based (Khalaji 2006, 8-11). Other centres in London and the UK benefit from Sistani's patronage, but the levels of contact they have with his Liaison Office vary.

The so-called Shirazi *marjaʿiyya*, which originated in and then transnationalised out of the Iraqi shrine city of Karbala, also has an institutionalised presence in London. This label refers to the leadership of the late Ayatollah Muhammad Shirazi (d. 2001) whose mantle was then passed onto his younger brother Ayatollah Sadiq Shirazi. It was with the former's patronage that the Centre for Islamic Enlightening and its affiliated Hussainiyat Al-Rasool Al-Adham were established in 1986. Shaykh Ha'iri has been in charge of these institutions since he moved to London in 1998.

London is also home to the institutionalised authority networks associated with Iran's Supreme Leader. During his time, Khomeini did not establish an institution in the country. Khamenei made this step with the creation of the ICE in 1994, precisely at a time when he was starting to make a bid to the position of *marjaʿ* along his role as Supreme Leader. Incidentally or probably not, the ICE and Sistani's Imam Ali Foundation opened their doors the very same year. Four Iranian clerics have successively headed the ICE: Shaykh Araki, Shaykh Moezzi, then Shaykh Dr Shomali who resigned from the post in June 2019 and has been replaced by Sayyid Hashem Mousavi. Other institutions in the country also identify with, and receive support from, Khamenei. One is the Ahlulbayt Islamic Mission (AIM), a youth-led and youth-oriented organisation which aims to 'empowe[r] communities through education, political awareness, and recreational activities' (Ahlulbayt Islamic Mission 2019). The AIM, which does not have premises of its own, used to organise many events in the ICE until a rift emerged between these two institutions in 2016, a rift which the recent change in leadership at the ICE might help mend.

Not all *maraji*ʿ have an institution affiliated with their name in London. Yet, several of them have individual representatives. It is worth noting that these individuals are often no one else than the clerics in charge of, or those staffing, the above mentioned institutions. Although the Al-Khoei Foundation is officially under Sistani's patronage, it maintains particularly close

ties with Ishaq Fayyad of Najaf. Its General-Secretary, 'Abd al-Sahib Khu'i, is also Fayyad's representative in the country. Sayyid Kashmiri of the Imam Ali Foundation does not represent anyone else than Sistani. However, his right-hand Sa'id Khalkhali holds licences of representation from Sistani, Sa'id Hakim, Ishaq Fayyad, and Bashir Najafi in Najaf and from Vahid Khurasani and Shobeiri Zanjani in Qum. Similarly, Shaykh 'Alemi of the Majma represents not only the patron of his institution but also Khamenei and a number of Qum-based *maraji'*, among them Makarem Shirazi. Besides representing Sadiq Shirazi, Shaykh Ha'iri has a licence to represent Sadiq Ruhani, known to be an anti-Iranian government *marja'*, as well as Lutfallah Safi Gulpaygani. These representations might be more symbolic than actual – some of the *maraji'* reportedly have no or just a few emulators in London. Yet, they constitute ready-made networks to be activated by these more minor *maraji'* in support of any further consolidation of their *marja'iyya*, for instance in the event of the passing away of more established religious authorities.

There are an estimated 100 Shi'i places of worship in the UK (Bowen 2014, 137), and many more in the capital than the few introduced above. Not all of them are affiliated with a religious authority. For instance, Dar al-Islam, which is a religious centre and also the base of the Iraqi Da'wa Party, insists that it has no relation with a *marja'*.[4] Furthermore, and as documented by Sufyan Abid Dogra (2017) in his study of South Asian communities in London, the Shi'i grassroots might make efforts to challenge the transnational influence of Middle Eastern authorities. One should also note that lay men and women accord more or less importance to *maraji'* in their lives (Shanneik 2013; Tajri 2016). The above overview of the institutions in London's Shi'i Triangle is however useful to confirm that any assessment of the *marja'iyya*'s capacity needs to take into account its poly-cephalic nature. Sistani and Khamenei do not have the exclusive preserve over the Shi'i institutional scene. Other *maraji'*, including deceased ones, also have authority networks in London.

Crossing over the institutional divides

The above introduction to the institutions associated with past and current religious authorities is too schematic and should be further refined. The networks that compose and sustain the authority of these religious scholars are not as rigid as they might appear. Their boundaries are porous. This section examines how and why network members navigate between various institutions in London. The same is true both of the clerics and other individuals who head or staff them, and of the laity these institutions aim to serve.

The *marjaʿiyya* is an informal, network-based, institution. A *marjaʿ* surrounds himself with aides and representatives who help him operate both locally and transnationally his functions. Classic accounts of the *marjaʿiyya*'s tend to consider these networks as hard-bound entities firmly tied to the *marjaʿ* they are associated with, especially given that these networks are often based on familial, teacher-student or other long-standing relations (Corboz 2015, chs 1-2). Some representatives, generally the main ones, indeed assume their function for just one *marjaʿ*. However, and as already pointed out in the previous section, many represent several *marajiʿ* (Walbridge 2014, 37). The same seems true when their representation has become institutionalised, as is the case with London's various centres and foundations. Furthermore, someone's clear affiliation with a particular *marjaʿ* or with an institution in charge of representing him does not necessarily mean that he will remain only within his institution's remit. Network members cross institutional boundaries.

In London, there is overlap between the networks associated with the institutions representing the *marjaʿiyya* of Najaf, specifically the Al-Khoei Foundation and Sistani's foundations. The case of Saʿid and Muhsin Khalkhali – two brothers – provides an illustration. The former used to be the resident scholar of the Al-Khoei Islamic Centre in the city of Swansea and he now serves as the cleric number 2 in the Imam Ali Foundation. Muhsin Khalkhali is a

layman who works both as financial director of the Al-Khoei Foundation and as director of the Alulbayt Foundation. Such overlap between the staff of these institutions is not surprising given that Sistani is considered Khu'i's successor.

More instructively, the clerical members of the networks associated with the Najafi *marja'iyya* and Iran's Supreme Leader also cross the institutional divide. They operate in institutions which are not necessarily their own when fulfilling the multifaceted activities related to their roles as London's local community leaders, such as teaching and preaching. A high-profile example is Fadil Milani, the head of the Al-Khoei Islamic Centre. Milani is clearly associated with Khu'i's and Sistani's *marja'iyya*. He studied in Najaf with the former and then acted as his representative in Iran, Syria, and finally London where he helped establish the Al-Khoei Foundation (Corboz 2015, 59/61). After Khu'i passed away, Milani became Sistani's representative. Milani's association with the *marja'iyya* of Najaf has not prevented him from moving beyond its networks for the purpose of his teaching activities. In addition to his own independent study circles, he teaches at the Islamic College (Bowen 2014, 142-3), the London branch of the Qum-based and government-sponsored Mustafa International University (Van den Bos 2015; Sakurai 2015, 56). Milani explained to me why he took the post: "I was not interested in knowing whether there was a link with Tehran or not. For me, what was important was to elevate the status of our youth through such education." Sa'id Khalkhali from the Imam Ali Foundation also used to teach at the Islamic College. As this suggests, clerics belonging to the Najafi tradition have no problem serving an institution considered the transnational educational arm of the Islamic Republic of Iran. By the same token, the Islamic College does not strictly employ advocates of the *velayat-e faqih*.

London's clerics also navigate between different centres as guest preachers. Shaykh Muhammad Bahmanpour, who is the cleric number 2 in the ICE, regularly gives lectures, and also acts as a religious advisor, in a Khoja centre known for its inclination towards Sistani's

marjaʿiyya. While he generally seems more mindful of keeping away from political controversies in front of such an audience, he did at least in one instance use the pulpit to criticise harshly this Khoja centre for inviting so-called Zionist supporters in an interfaith *iftar* (Bahmanpour 2016). Clerics associated with the Khu'i and Sistani networks also occasionally speak at events organised by the institutions affiliated with Khamenei. Particularly noteworthy, the programme of the ICE's 2018 Imam Khomeini Conference featured two of them. When I asked Saʿid Khalkhali from the Imam Ali Foundation about his participation, he said: "The *velayat-e faqih*, some *'ulama'* accept it and others don't. But this does not mean that you don't talk to each other." He further explained that he was invited to talk about the memories he had of Khomeini when he was a student in Najaf and Khomeini was exiled there and that he did not address Khomeini's ideology or politics. He however acknowledged that there were people in the audience shouting the "Rahbar Imam Khomeini [Imam Khomeini the Leader] slogan". Muhammad Musawi, the head of the London-based World Ahl al-Bayt Islamic League and a former representative of Khu'i, also participated in this conference. At the start of his talk, he clarified: "No one can blame me that I am talking about Imam Khomeini because of politics. No politics, at all." (Al Mosawi 2018) As these examples suggest, guest preachers do not feel bound by the ideological orientation of the centre in which they come and speak.

If the members of the different authority networks cross institutional boundaries, so does the laity, and even more so. Attending a centre does not necessarily mean emulating the religious authority to which the centre is affiliated. The heads of all the centres confirmed to me that their congregation follow a number of different *maraji'* (see also Bowen 2014, 138). For instance, most of the regulars in the ICE follow either Khamenei or Sistani. The followers of Sistani who nonetheless decide to attend a centre associated with Khamenei might belong to the category of Shi'a who have a compartmentalised allegiance to both clerics. They might follow the *marjaʿiyya* of Najaf in religious matters and, at the same time, adhere more to the

political vision of Iran's Supreme Leader (Mervin 2004, 67).[5] Being attracted by the Iranian political agenda is however not the sole explanation for the presence of Sistani's followers in the ICE.

In general terms, people choose a centre for various and often practical reasons. In a large city congested with traffic and with a public transportation system experiencing much disruptions, such as London, proximity from home or the workplace motivates the choice of a centre. Another important criterion is the language(s) of the religious programmes on offer, be it English, Arabic, Persian or Urdu. The nature of a centre's congregation also matters, such as its social class profile (Spellman 2004, 88) or whether it includes one's familial and social circles (ibid, passim; Degli Esposti, passim). The quality of the food distributed on religious occasions is also attractive (personal observations; Degli Esposti 2018, 12). All in all, while one cannot dismiss altogether that allegiance to a religious authority or to a specific ideology matters, other criteria also guide the choice of a centre over another.

Furthermore, the Shi'i laity might be regulars of one centre and, at the same time, attend events elsewhere. In her fieldwork, Emanuelle Degli Esposti (2018, 12-13) witnessed Iraqi Shi'a attending different centres on different nights of the 10-day commemoration of the Ashura, or even during the same night. I myself met, at one of the ICE's annual Imam Khomeini conference, a middle-aged woman who was a regular member of a Khoja centre leaning towards Sistani's *marja'iyya*. This woman seemed to keep up to date with London's Shi'i scene and used to send me, whenever I came for fieldwork in the capital, messages about 'what's on' in different centres, including in the ICE. According to various informants, the practice of navigating between different centres is more common among the younger generations. A key motivation for their decision to attend such or such event in this or that centre is the fame of the preacher(s) "entertaining" it. The centres might in turn need to take this in consideration, especially given the large offer of events on London's Shi'i market, and the readiness of the

community to cross over institutional divides. This can explain why the Al-Khoei Islamic Centre has not shunned away from inviting famous religious singers belonging to the Shirazi trend to perform in its religious gatherings. To quote one informant, "At the end of the day, they are not coming to spread ideology but to sing some poems!"

The categorisation of Shiʻi institutions in terms of affiliation to a specific religious authority (Degli Esposti 2018, 10) is helpful to capture the heterogeneity of Shiʻism in London (Scharbrodt 2018). At the same time, it hides the internal diversity of these institutions as well as the porous boundaries between them, as illustrated in the above. This complicates the view of the contest over Shiʻi sacred authority as a zero-sum game. To clarify, it is not a contest played out by completely separate authority networks. Its nature and outcome are thus likely to be affected, and to reflect more than a deep-seated antagonism. The contest over service provision by London's various institutions, which is analysed next, will provide an illustration.

Overlapping, complementary and collaborative services.

This section examines the dynamics at play in the provision of services and activities by the main centres associated with Middle Eastern religious authorities in London. Three main patterns emerge. The first pattern is the provision of similar and hence possibly competitive services by several or all institutions. Second and at the same time, there might be a de facto or mutually agreed repartition of tasks with one institution offering activities not provided by others, and vice-versa. The third pattern refers to cooperation between the institutions.

The *raison d'être* of London's Shiʻi institutions is to provide for the needs of the communities they serve. All offer typical services pertaining to religious practice. They hold prayers, special programmes during the months of Ramadan and Muharram and for the birth and death anniversaries of holy Shiʻi figures.[6] The scholars heading or staffing the institutions also offer guidance to people seeking their advice and often help mediate family and other

kinds of disputes. One can also obtain from them a religio-legal marriage and sometimes a divorce, but only the ICE and the Al-Khoei Foundation have permission to issue British civil marriage certificates.

Most of these services are general religious services rather than the tasks specifically entailed in the representation of a particular religious authority. The heads of the various institutions however also fulfil the key responsibilities commonly performed by a *marja'*'s representative. One such responsibility is the collection and redistribution of religious dues, which can only be performed by those holding a letter of authorisation from the religious authority whose money is collected. Another duty of representation is to answer the legal enquiries of a *marja'*'s followers in accordance with his juristic opinions. As discussed previously, no centre has a homogenous congregation of emulators. This raises the question of whether the centres accommodate all enquiries. I have noticed different practices among their clerics. Fadil Milani from the Al-Khoei Islamic Centre prefers to answer only those asking for the opinions of the two *maraji'* he is authorised to represent, namely Khu'i and Sistani. "I say 'I don't know', if people ask me the opinion of [Ayatollah Xxx]", he told me. In contrast, the majority of clerics readily answer questions in accordance with the views of different *maraji'*, including those they do not represent. One of them showed me a mobile app he uses which provides the legal opinions of many scholars. Interestingly, 'Ali Shomali of the ICE decided, on the occasion of his Ramadan lectures in 2017, to present the rules on fasting according to the opinions of not only Khamenei but also Sistani. The clerics who deliver the opinions of a range of *maraji'* nonetheless refrain from doing so if the question is "complicated" or if it relates to a new issue. In such instances, they redirect the questioner to the official representative institution of the religious authority whose opinion is sought. Such practices provide yet another demonstration of the porosity of authority networks boundaries, in spite of the need for each institution to remain competitive on the dense Shi'i religious market.

There is a second pattern related to service provision. Rather than compete over the same types of services they all provide, the institutions also distinguish themselves from one another, and gain an advantage over others, by delivering services not on offer elsewhere. I call this pattern the provision of complementary services, whether religious, educational or of another nature. As the following examples will make clear, one institution might stand out with a service in one sphere of activity, another in another sphere, and so forth. In other words, no single institution has the upper hand in overall service provision. The outcome is rather a de facto or a mutually agreed repartition of tasks between them.

While the different institutions all hold religious programmes, their range and scope vary. For instance, the ICE prides itself for offering them in four languages, namely English, Persian, Arabic, and also Urdu on some occasions. So does, reportedly, the Hussainiyat Al-Rasool Al-Adham. In contrast, most of the Majma's programmes are in Persian. Arabic has been the dominant language at the Al-Khoei Islamic Centre, although the centre has tried in recent years to (re)launch programmes in Persian and in English. While the Alulbayt Foundation serves a congregation of Iraqis, Iranians, Pakistani and Khoja, it limits its programme to English in order to specifically target the younger generations.

There is also variation between the centres with regard to the frequency and type of congregational prayers being offered. While most centres hold one or a couple of (generally evening) prayers every week, the ICE stands out as the only centre offering both mid-day and evening prayers on a daily basis. The case of the congregational Friday prayer is different and particularly instructive. It is with this activity that the Majma distinguishes itself from the ICE, the Al-Khoei Islamic Centre, and Sistani's foundations. Shi'i law forbids the simultaneous holding of Friday prayers if the locations where prayers are held are less than 5.5km afar from one another. In effect, this legal requirement reduces the number of centres that can legally propose this religious service in the condensed urban geography of London's Shi'i Triangle. As

one of the oldest Shiʻi centre in London, the Majma had a long tradition of holding the prayer. However, there was some initial confusion, potentially motivated by competition, when new centres were established in the late 1980s and 1990s. The Al-Khoei Islamic Centre held the Friday prayer in parallel to the Majma for a brief period until Ayatollah Khu'i himself advised against this. Similarly, the first head of the ICE, Shaykh Araki, instituted the Friday prayer for a couple of years. His successor, Shaykh Moezzi, however cancelled it. I discussed this with Shaykh Shomali when he was still the head of the ICE, and he justified that these decisions were based on the calculation of two different routes between the ICE and the Majma, one below and one above 5.5km. A detractor of the ICE suspects that Araki simply wanted to assert the right of the centre representing Iran's Supreme Leader to own the prayer. Be that as it may, the Majma's prerogative to hold it has been long secured.[7] The Majma does not fail to publicise this activity, for instance on its website where it uploads the text of the sermons delivered every Friday (Islamic Universal Association of London 2019b).

At the same time, the Friday prayer at the Majma is an avenue for cross-network navigation and engagement. When Shaykh ʻAlemi is unable to lead the prayer, he asks one of his peers, generally Fadil Milani of the Al-Khoei Islamic Centre, to replace him. When I attended the prayer during the pilgrimage season in 2017, it was led by yet another cleric, Shaykh Bahmanpour of the ICE, because both Alemi and Milani were abroad. The congregation attending the Friday prayer is also larger and more ethnically diverse than the Majma's community of regulars which consists in majority of Iranians. The sermon is delivered in Persian but includes an English and Arabic summary.

The provision of educational services for the laity is another key role assumed by Shiʻi institutions. While most centres offer Saturday and/or Sunday religious schools for children, the Al-Khoei Foundation stands out as the main carer of the educational needs of the younger generation. Its two private schools, Al-Sadiq School for Boys and the Al-Zahra School for girls,

opened their doors in 1991 and currently cater for more than 350 pupils until the age of 16. There is also an Iranian government-sponsored school in London (Spellman, 84), but its enrolment numbers are lower, in spite of cheaper fees, than the schools operated by the Al-Khoei Foundation. Higher education in the Islamic sciences is offered by several Shi'i institutions (Van den Bos 2015). Already introduced above, the Islamic College, which is associated with the Iranian leadership, is now particularly well-established. It however does not have the monopoly over this sphere of activity. In London, one can mention the International Colleges of Islamic Science, established in the 1980s with Ayatollah Khu'i's blessing and of which Fadil Milani is the Dean. Furthermore, seminary education does not only take place in institutionalised settings. Most of London's clerics have study circles in the traditional informal style.

One could provide more examples to illustrate the pattern of complementary service provision and how such complementary services also sustain the navigation of the Shi'i laity between different institutions. As to what accounts for an institution's capacity to develop more activities than others, different factors come into play. Financial and human resources certainly matter. The location and size of a centre also do. The Imam Ali Foundation is located in a small residential house and has tried for years to purchase a larger building but without success. Its quest is becoming particularly pressing now that it had to put its religious gatherings on hold because of neighbours' complaints and other legal considerations. Incidentally, the Centre for Islamic Enlightening associated with the Shirazi *marja'iyya* managed a couple of years ago to acquire a large and well-located building – a former music hall. Furthermore, older institutions seem to be able to capitalise on their long-established presence in London, as illustrated by the above examples of the Friday prayer at the Majma and the schools run by the Al-Khoei Foundation.

Another key, here external, factor that can impact on the institutions' capacity to operate is their relationship with the British authorities. Since its creation, the Al-Khoei Foundation has actively nourished privileged ties with the government, allowing it to become the Shi'a's representative in the public arena (Corboz 2015, 115-116; Scharbrodt 2018, 8). Given its association with the Islamic Republic of Iran, the ICE seems also careful about its public image. For instance, one interlocutor explained that the themes chosen for the annual Imam Khomeini Conference are intentionally not too much focused on the ayatollah's politics in order to avoid the "risk that this aspect of Khomeini becomes stereotyped into contemporary Iranian politics." The way the ICE handled the "Muharram 2016 crisis" is also illustrative. The guest preacher of the 10-day commemoration organised by the AIM (another institution associated with the Iranian Supreme Leader) in partnership with the ICE became the attention of a controversy in the British press because of his views on homosexuality. As a result, 'Ali Shomali who used to head the ICE decided to cancel his lectures. What had started as a media-driven controversy created deep internal divisions between Shomali and those, such as the AIM, who sided with the preacher. Khamenei even intervened with a statement thanking Shomali for his "unreserved efforts and valued accomplishments in running and managing the [Muharram] program admirably" (Islamic Centre of England 2016).

In the above, the similar or at times complementary services provided by different institutions point more to the competitive nature of their efforts to cater for the needs of the local Shi'i community. The third pattern related to service provision entails a collaborative dimension. The institutions do cooperate or at least coordinate on matters of common concern. For now almost ten years, the heads of the Majma, the Al-Khoei Islamic Centre, the Imam Ali Foundation, the ICE, as well as a couple of other community leaders, have been holding a meeting every couple of months or so to "talk about the situation of the Shi'a" in the country.

They have also occasionally taken a common stance to condemn reprehensible acts committed by or against the Muslim (or Shiʻa) community.

A concrete achievement of such collaborations has been the common prayer timetable adopted by the four institutions. Three of the participating clerics told me about various night expeditions they made to some fields away from the lights of London in order to measure the coming of dawn. One of them was laughing at how funny the sight of this group of turbaned and robed clerics wandering around in the dark would have been for any passer-by. A common prayer timetable facilitates religious practice among the Shiʻa community. There are differences which cannot be homogenised, however. Because Sistani on the one side and other past and present religious authorities on the other side have different legal interpretations about moon sighting, their followers do not generally end the Ramadan on the same day.

The annual ʻAshura procession in Hyde Park further illustrates how what was at first an initiative in the hands of the Majma has become in recent years a collaborative venture between the Majma, the Al-Khoei Foundation, and the ICE. Kathryn Spellman-Poots (2012) has documented the evolution of this event from a small and inward-looking communal religious experience in the 1990s to a thousand-strong procession with a strong outreach objective. The growing visibility of this event might have prompted cooperation. In practical terms, the three institutions work together on the schedule of the procession. They discuss the type of public message they want to convey and prepare an "official" leaflet for distribution, although they are unable to prevent the circulation of other types of slogans or leaflets during the procession (ibid, 43-45). The costs for permits and security (about GBP 5,000-6000) are also shared. In line with its privileged relationship with the British authorities, the Al-Khoei Foundation reportedly coordinates with them any matter that needs to be coordinated in order to hold the procession.[8]

Levels of contact and cooperation between the different institutions vary from time to time. People obviously matter, and a change of leadership in a centre can affect dynamics depending on their interest and interpersonal skills. Furthermore, not all institutions have amicable or cooperative relations. The collaborative initiatives between the Majma, the Al-Khoei Foundation, Sistani's institutions, and the ICE do not include the institutions associated with the Shirazi *marja'iyya*. The deep cleavage between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Shirazi *marja'iyya* does not dissipate in the London context. There are however bilateral contacts between the latter and the institutions associated with the *marja'iyya* of Najaf. As an illustration, one informant mentioned a Muharram programme in 2016 organised by the Al-Khoei Islamic Centre to which "everybody was invited", and which Khamenei's and Shirazi's representatives attended.

All in all, the study of service provision captures both the competition and the cooperation at play between London's institutions. Empirically, it is not always easy to distinguish between these seemingly contradictory dynamics. To give one last example, the ICE started years ago to convene on a bi-annually basis a gathering of UK-based Shi'i scholars and preachers aimed to discuss themes to be tackled on the pulpit during the holy months of Ramadan and Muharram. The Imam Ali Foundation and the Imam Khoei Islamic Centre eventually followed suit and also organise similar gatherings, though more or less regularly. Their decision to launch an activity already proposed by the ICE suggests an attempt to compete. At the same time, these gatherings provide room for cooperation, since the heads of the different centres regularly act as keynote speakers in the gatherings organised in counterpart institutions. Categorising this and other examples as competition or cooperation is a matter of perspective.

Conclusion

Since the establishment of the Islamic Republic, assumptions have been made about Iran's overarching transnational influence among Shi'i communities. Yet scholars have successfully deconstructed the "export of the revolution" or "Shi'i crescent" paradigms. Shi'i national communities are heterogeneous and their transnational ties to Iran multifaceted. Works on Shi'i Islamism have also shown that Iran's model of clerical leadership, the *velayat-e faqih*, is contested by many Islamist groups, and that even the most pro-Iranian ones do not necessarily intend to replicate it. By exploring the complex dynamics behind the transnational contest over sacred authority between Shi'i scholars recognised as *marja'* and the Iranian Supreme Leader, this article also contributes to challenging assumptions that the latter's influence is uncontested.

I have argued that the *marja'iyya* has, as a structure of authority, capacities that sustain its potential in the contest over sacred authority with Iran's Supreme Leader. The *marja'iyya*'s capacities stem from its poly-cephalic nature, the temporal scope of a *marja'*'s authority – which consolidates over time and also survives his death – as well as its transnational reach. My focus on the *marja'iyya*'s capacities is not meant to dismiss those of the Supreme Leader, whose authority also has a broad temporal and geographical scope. The intention is rather to temper the view of the *velayat-e faqih* as the only relevant model of clerical authority in today and tomorrow's Shi'i worlds. Adding to this, the case study of London's Shi'i Triangle represents a typical situation where the authority networks associated with the *marja'iyya*, including those of long-deceased *maraji'*, and with the Supreme Leader operate side by side. There are many variables that shape the respective capacity of these networks. Variables are both internal – for instance a network's material resources or a long-established presence in a given locality – and external, such as relations with state and society. Because of the complex dynamics at work, the contest over sacred authority does not result in a zero-sum game outcome across time and place.

Furthermore, the article also helps reconsider the nature of the so-called rivalry between the *marjaʻiyya* and the Iranian leadership. The *marjaʻiyya*'s structural capacities do not only contribute to maintaining its competing potential in the contest over sacred authority. They also affect the nature of the competition with Iran's Supreme Leader and can explain his need to accommodate with the authority of other *marajiʻ*. The ambivalent nature of the competition over sacred authority is even more evident in light of the London case study. Different authority networks, such as the main institutions under study, cannot be simply described as antagonistic entities. Network boundaries are porous, as illustrated by the navigation of people between them. Although I have barely scratched the surface of how the Shiʻi laity positions itself within the contest over sacred authority, it is clear that following one or another religious scholar does not necessarily translate into strict adherence to his network and institutions. The analysis of service provision by the institutions sheds further light on the extent to which networks play a role in sustaining clerical rivalries. There is no doubt that the institutions seek to actively promote the claim to authority of the scholars they represent, including through the dissemination of their views and ideologies. However, this is not their only *raison d'être*. Many of their activities are rather more generally aimed at serving the multifaceted religious, educational, and social needs of the Shiʻa. Good performance might well be the most efficient way to support claims to sacred authority. In addition, service provision is not just characterised by competition, but it also offers avenues for cooperation between the different institutions. All in all, because of their fluid nature, roles, and interactions with each other, networks can as much nourish or defuse and (re)shape competing claims to sacred authority.

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[1] Instead of following a *marja'*, Shi'a can alternatively act on such precaution which would assure them that they have fulfilled their religious duties.

[2] Long forbidden, the principle of "emulation of the deceased" has become increasingly accepted among jurists and practised by the laity (Mottahedeh 2011, 11-13, 17; Clarke 2016, 164-168; Shanneik 2013, 63-64).

[3] Those include interviews with Sayyid Murtada Kashimiri (4 June 2015) and Sayyid Sa'id Khalkhali (31 July 2012, 2 August 2012, 21 January 2015, and 27 June 2018) at the Imam Ali Foundation; Mr Sayyid Muhsin Khalkhali (25 June 2018) at the Alulbayt Foundation; Shaykh 'Abd al-Husayn Moezzi (1 August 2012), Shaykh 'Ali Shomali (21 January 2015, 19 December 2016, and 25 January 2018), and Shaykh Muhammad Bahmanpour (14 December 2012, 21 January 2015, 8 February 2016, 20 December 2016, and 31 August 2018) at the Islamic Centre of England; Sayyid 'Abd al-Sahib Khu'i (24 March 2016 and 31 August 2017) and Mr Sayyid Mohsen Khu'i (series of informal conversations, 2016–2018) at the Al-Khoei Foundation, as well as Sayyid Fadil Milani (19 January 2015 and 21 December 2016) at the Al-Khoei Islamic Centre; Shaykh 'Ali Alemi (15 April 2017 and 27 June 2018) at the Islamic Universal Association (Majma); and Shaykh 'Abd al-Rahman Ha'iri (16 August 2016) at the Hussainiyat Al-Rasool Al-Adham, an interview also attended by another cleric who offered a few comments. I also draw on interviews conducted in other institutions: Mr Falah Sharif (28 June 2018) at the Dar al-Islam Foundation and Shaykh Hasan Turayki (29 June 2018) who leads the prayer at this centre; Samir Haydari of the Ahl al-Bayt Islamic Mission (4 June 2015); Shaykh Isa Jahangir (11 April 2017) at the Islamic College; and Dr Ibrahim 'Ati at the International Colleges of Islamic Studies (1 August 2012).

[4] Accounts alternatively associate Dar al-Islam with the late Ayatollah Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah (Von den Bos 2011, 6) because the cleric who leads its Friday prayer was one of his representatives, or with [Muhammad Baqir] Sadr (Degli Esposti 2018, 10).

[5] Shi'i emulators also increasingly tend to pick-and-choose from the legal opinions of different scholars, an option allowed by Sistani himself (Mottahedeh 2011, 13-14; Shanneik 2013, 64).

[6] The Imam Ali Foundation put on hold its religious programmes in 2018.

[7] Dar al-Islam, which is located far enough from the Majma, also holds the Friday prayer. The sermon is delivered in Arabic and followed by a summary in English.

[8] Another informant says the Majma, not the Al-Khoei Foundation, is in charge of getting the necessary permissions from the authorities.