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SHIA-SUNNI INTERACTIONS IN GREATER CENTRAL ASIA: RETROSPECTIVE AND CURRENT STATES

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This paper analyzes the Shia-Sunni interactions in northeastern Iran (Khorasan) and Central Asia. The Shia-Sunni disputes in the region date back to the Middle Ages after the establishment of the Safavids (1501 – 1722) in Iran and the Shibanids (1501 – 1601) in Mawara al-nahr at the beginning of the 16th century. This paper, based on narrative sources, attempts to find the true reasons of this phenomenon and to estimate its influence on history and the future of the region. An overview of both the Sunni and Shi'ite religious community status in Iran, in Mawara al-Nahr, has become particularly important when discussing this issue.

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Over the last decade, the global community has witnessed conflicts between the Shias and the Sunnis in different parts of the Middle East and Central Asia (such as Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Syria, Lebanon, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Tajikistan). Just as many centuries before, Shiites, who are a minority in the Islamic world in general, and in many Muslim countries in particular (aside from in Iran, Iraq and Bahrain) still need to fight for their political and economic interests. The Shia and Ismaili communities of Tajikistan and Afghanistan were particularly active during the Civil War in Tajikistan in 1992–1996 and in the Afghan conflict, especially when the Talibs attempted to take control of the Hazarajat, Char Vilayat and Badakhshan provinces.

The Shia-Sunni disputes in Central Asia date back to the Middle Ages. The clashes were the most violent during the 16th and 17th centuries, during the confrontation between the Khanates of Bukhara and Balkh the Safavid State of Iran. This was part of a larger conflict, with practically all the large European and Middle Eastern states involved in it. A series of wars that broke out in Europe after the Reformation had an indirect influence on the Ottoman Empire and Iran. The establishment of the Imami Shiite Safavid State in north-western Iran (1501) and its expansion to the rest of the country drove a wedge between the Sunni west and east, which the famous American Iranologist Robert McChesney called a “barrier of heterodoxy” [McChesney, 1996].

In this article, we will address the issues of the origin of Shia communities in Iran and Central Asia, as well as providing a retrospective of history of the interaction between Shia and Sunni in these regions.

To deal with these issues, we need to consult a wide range of written sources from Iran and Central Asia. One of the problems here is that official historiography of the 16th-17th centuries, when the clashes were most intense, offers scarce information on the Sunni communities in Iran and the Shia communities in Bukhara, Balkh and Khiva. Although most sources from Safavid Iran and Shaibanid-Ashtakhanid Central Asia have been well studied, it is worth revising certain texts such as *Tarikh-i ‘Alamara-i ‘Abbasi* or *Ahsan at-tawarikh* with regard to religious policy and religious communities. Another relevant source is the anonymous treatise *Muqaddima dar aswala-i wajiba-i dar radd-i rafidza li-ba‘dz-i muhaqqiqin rahimat Allah ‘alayhim ajma‘in* composed of questions and answers. This Central Asian document from a convolute manuscript of the FAAS has a clear anti-Shia stance. Further citations from this source are presented below.

Along with well-known compositions in Persian, we use some newly published and investigated sources. Of the latter, *Nujum as-sama‘ fi tarajim al-‘ulama* provides important information on the development of the *Usuli* school of the *Imami mazhab*, in Iran. Also valuable for this is *Tarikh-i inqilob-I fikri dar Bukhara* by Sadr al-Din Ayni, a famous Tajik scholar and representative of the *Jadid* movement, devoted to the intellectual revolution in the Emirate of

Bukhara. It describes the nature of Shia-Sunni rivalry in Bukhara at the turn of the 20th century [Ayni, 2005].

Yet we should emphasize the importance of research by Bartold, Petroshevsky, Miklouho-Maclay in Russia and Brown, Savory and McChesney in the West. Among the most recent Iranian studies are the two enormous works by Rasul Jafariyan; *Tarikh-i tashayyu'in Iran* (1390/2011 – 2012) (History of Shia in Iran) and *Jariyanha wa sazmanha-i mazhabi – siyasi- i Iran az ru-i kar amadan-i Muhammad Riza shah ta piruzi-i Inqilab-i Islami* (Religious and political movements and organizations in Iran from Muhammad Riza-shah's ascent to power, to the Islamic revolution). These two last works are interesting not only because of the information they contain, but also because of the author's personal position as a Shia, on the religious history of his mazhab. The works of 'Abd al-Karim al-'Alawji *Azma al-qiyada al-Shii'a as-Sunniya ba'd ihtilal al-Amriki li-l-'Iraq* (The Crisis of Shia and Sunni relations after the American occupation of Iraq) [al-Alawji, 2010] and the work of Ishaq Naqqash *Shiat al-'Iraq* (The Shiites of Iraq) [Naqqash, 1995] are interesting for much the same reasons. These two areas of research, which we used in our own research, reflect both the insider and outsider perspectives on the issue.

Mawara al-Nahr, where the Chenghizid descendants of the Shiban (Syban) dynasty came to power simultaneously with the Safavids of Iran in 1501, tried to establish reliable ties and a political-military alliance with the Ottoman Empire, in order to weaken the Safavids and to maintain control over the Khorasan province. Khorasan remained central to religious wars between Iran and Central Asian Khanates for more than two centuries. Before the *Safavids*, when Iran was a mainly Sunni state, Shia communities had a long history in the province of Khorasan. The same can be observed in Central Asia; while the majority of local Muslims belong to the *Hanafi* and *Shafii* schools (*mazhab*), there were a large number of Shia *Imami* and *Ismaili* communities in the cities of Bukhara and Samarkand

Many officials in these khanates belonged to the Shia *mazhab*, with some posts in the Bukharan administration traditionally held by Shia representatives. According to tradition, slaves captured in military campaigns or bought in slave markets were first converted to Shia Islam, as a local custom, supported by the Sunni clergy of the Khanate of Bukhara, meant that the Shia were treated like non-Muslims. Cut off from their roots and native land, newly converted Muslims needed to serve the Khans as best they could in order maintain their position, property or even stay alive [Alexeev, 2006].

The issue of killing and plundering of the representatives of other *mazhabs* was a subject of a heated debate between the Sunni and the Shia clergy, presented in *Tarikh-I 'alamara-i 'Abbasi*. The Sunni perception is clearly expressed in a *fetwa* cited by Iskandar Munshi Turkaman: killing

Shiites and plundering their property was obligatory and commendable, and was considered to be *jihad*. Unfortunately we do not have the classic translation of ‘*Alamara-i ‘Abbasi* in English at our disposal, which was written by the famous iranologist Roger Savory, and so we have offered our own translation of this part of the book: “It must not be concealed from any Muslim in the world, that an attack on the life and property of people who say the Holy words, that Allah is the Only God and Muhammad is His Messenger, till the obvious actions or speeches of these people clarify that they became infidels (*kufara*), is absolutely forbidden, because it does not suit the way of ancestors (*salaf*) and Imams, may Allah have mercy on Them. But when they are saying such Holy words and completely forget the speeches of the ‘*ulama*, and do not put their personal belief (*iman*) first and follow the accursed way of Shia, and damn the respectful enlightened *shaykhs* and those pure people who are in the Paradise of Allah, the Almighty...not only the Islamic ruler, but all the people (*anam*) are obliged to kill and hate them, following the Faith of Truth (*Din al-Haqq*). And the plundering of their belongings and destruction of their trade is necessary”. The following text of the letter calls the religious ruler to do *jihad* against infidels, meaning the Shia [Iskandar Munshi Turkaman, 1378: 390].

On the other hand, the same source cited the Shia ‘*ulamas*’ answer: «Let it be the results of ideas and of splashes of quills (*rashahat al-aqlam*) on the clever persons from Mawara al-nahr, let Allah Bless them in the way of perfection, and let Allah the Almighty protect them. All the things that should be said must not be concealed from the respectful people, that the Muster of Prophets (*sayyad al-mursilin*) wrote in the books for the Sunni and the Shia, that *umma* must follow the Book of Allah and (His?) pure qualities. When Imam Sultan Abu-l-Hasan ‘Ali b. Musa al-Rida, may God bless him, came to the country of ‘Ajam (Iran), Muhammad Khadim, who is writing these pages, expressed his respect [to this person] and received grace, which came from this pure person and was selected from the other gentlemen for serving him, and he did not quarrel nor with the Qizilbashis nor with the Uzbeks. He drew conclusions after studying all the necessary things in *hadith* and *Quran* and presented things, which correlated to the order of the Holy Master. Some words ought to be said on this issue. If it there is a willingness [to listen] for the expressions of the writings of saint (*hazrat*), please, but if not...

Poem (*shi‘r*): “I shall say you what needs to be said, caused by official address, you can gain something by taking advice from my words, or [continue] to be unhappy”.

A person who has a profound understanding and is conscientious can gain something from these words. The words which were heard from the students (*talaba*) of Mawara al-Nahr, who passed through this region (Khorasan), indicate that His Majesty *Khaqan* possesses these good qualities and that his *amirs* Kukiltash Bahadur and some other people also possess these abilities.

But the arguments, which came from them about the stories of the ‘ulamas of Mawara al-Nahr, were based on the famous proverb: “It is not good, when you go only to *qadzi* (judge) in order to achieve satisfaction” That is why the scientist of *Imami mazhab* does not attend their meetings (*majalis*), and the *Sunni ‘ulama* concluded that followers of the *Imami mazhab* are adherents of blameworthy innovations (*mubaddi‘*), and that they have no roots (*usul*)...In short, many books of *hadiths* were written about the ways of the Shia and Sunni.

However, there are many *hadith* which are equal for both groups (*firqa*), and caution is necessary not to spoil this equality by citing diversities, since the people of Islam (*ahl al-Islam*) only belong to these two groups. If these people adopt Abu-Bakr al-Sadiq as a genuine *Khalif* (*Khalif bi-l-haqq*) after the Prophet, may God bless Him, they are Sunnis, if they adopt ‘Ali b. Abi-Talib, may God bless Him, they are Shia, and there is no third way”. [Iskandar Munshi Turkaman, 1378: 392 – 393].

The Shi‘a ‘*ulama* tended to try and reunite the *umma*, by finding common ideas and rules for both branches.

As a result of the constant Uzbek and Turkmen raids on Iran, many Iranian Shia became slaves and were subsequently sold to Bukhara and Khiva. Ransom money for prisoners captured in those raids was an important source of income for Turkmen. However, the Turkmen attacked Sunnis only for vengeance and did not take any prisoners [Botyakov, 2002: 95].

The core of the Kokand khans’ army was recruited from amongst the Ismailis of Badakhshan, and so the Ismailis played an important role in this khanate as well.

The first topic to address is how the Shia ideas spread in Central Asia. As a global transit zone, Central Asia was a territory where diverse cultures and practices blended together. Before Islam became a leading faith there, the region was home to the ancient belief systems of Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Oriental varieties of Christianity and a number of religious sects and group, such as Manichean. Religious syncretism was therefore a key element of culture. Unfortunately, little is known about the religious traditions of the Sogd and Mawara al-nahr population of that period. Archaeological data suggest that the Sogdian faith was a complicated fusion of cults [Alexeev, 2009].

In neighboring Khorasan, Zoroastrianism was stronger, with the majority of the population retaining their ancient creed under the Umayyads. It was only after the Abbasids’ triumph that the nobility of Eastern Iran began to convert to Islam in its Sunni form, with laymen following their example. Iranization (*isti‘jam*) changed the image of the Caliphate, but the coalition of the Abbasids with different Shia groups (*firqa*, *pl. firaq*) fell apart shortly after the Umayyads were overthrown,. While Sunni Islam was professed by the nobility and majority of the layman population, Shia sects

“became the ideological form of political and in some cases social opposition” [Petrushevskiy, 2007, 68].

At that time, Muslims were not a united community. The uncompromising clashes between different sects of Shiites, *Kharijits* and *Sunni mazhabs* gradually spread to the periphery of the Caliphate. The idea of redirecting the people’s efforts, from clashes within the *‘umma* towards the Holy War (*jihad*) on the frontier, may have been mooted in the Umayyad administration. However, it was crucial for the Islamization of Central Asia, and all the aforementioned divisions of Islam were involved. Many islamized Persians (*mawla*, pl. *mawali*) were squeezed out of Iran during the *gazawat* campaigns. These Iranians brought elements of their own culture into Islam. Abd al-Husain Zarrinkub, in his *Du qarn-I sukut (Two Centuries of Silence)* writes that Iranians imparted their skills of political and economic administration to the Caliphate. However, relations between the *mawali* and the native Arab tribes were tense. The new Muslims’ cultural and economic traditions were much more complex than those of the Arabs. The *mawali* sought equality with the conquerors, but were suppressed both politically and economically. As a result, they aligned themselves with different movements against the Umayyads in eastern and northeastern Iran and in Mawara al-nahr. It was there that the New Persian culture came into being and the Iranian Renaissance began [Fray, 2002, 333 – 334, 341 – 343; Zarrinkub, 1336, 73 – 90].

Therefore, from a political perspective, Shia ideas were introduced to the eastern periphery of the Caliphate (eastern Iran, Mawara al-Nahr and part of Turkestan) by the opposition movements. From a religious perspective, some Shia ideas were close to local religious syncretism. The perception of ‘Ali and his son Husayn as the chieftains of heroes (*Shah-i mardan, amir al-shuhada*) who fight for justice gained considerable popularity among common people. The cult of ‘Ali remains very popular in many parts of Central Asia today, and plays an important role in the tradition of the *mazar* pilgrimage. It has also influenced local forms of Sunnism [Abashin, 2003, 105 – 107. One of the most famous shrines of Imam ‘Ali in northern Afghanistan lent its name to the city of Mazar-i Sharif (“Holy Shrine”). According to Shihab al-Din Ahmad al-Gharnati’s *Kitab tuhfat al-albab*, this Holy Shrine of Imam Ali was discovered by righteous men, who had seen the imam’s grave site in a dream [Garnati, 1898: 21]. There are, however, historical testimonies stating that after his assassination, Imam ‘Ali was buried in Najaf, which became one of the main places of pilgrimage for Shia Muslims. In Iran, a special organization coordinates pilgrimages to Najaf. Anyway, having such a holy place was certainly an advantage for local rulers, as *mazars* often have an urban function. The Shrine of Ali in Mazar-i Sharif is venerated by both Sunni and Shia supporters of Hanafi and Jafari mazhabs who maintain the practice of pilgrimage [Grigor’yev, 2011, 48].

It ought to be noted that eastern Iran developed its own Shia tradition, with Muhammad b. Mas‘ud al-‘Ayyashi as one of its prominent figures. The Shiites of Samarkand maintained ties with their coreligionists in Qom for centuries [Jafariyyan, 1390, 277 – 279]. All these facts provide evidence that, despite constant persecution, the Shias’ position was relatively stable.

The ‘Abbasid movement consolidated different parties against the Umayyads, and the Shiites of Central Asia and Khorasan led this movement. Despite several uprisings after the murder of ‘Abd al-Rahman b. Muslim (755), the Abbasids managed to consolidate the state. They also killed several representatives of the ‘Alids which weakened them [Prozorov, 2004, 240]. Although Shia groups remained in Bukhara and Samarkand during the Abbasid period, a number of independent dynasties appeared in the eastern regions of the Caliphate such as the Tahirids (821 – 873), the Saffarids (861 – 903), the Samanids (875 – 999), the Ghaznavids (962 – 1186) and the Il-Khanids (c.932 – c.1165). While the religious policy of the Tahirids, Saffarids and Samanids was relatively soft - Tahir b. Husayn, the founder of the Tahirid state, is even said to have shared Shia ideas and ‘Amr b. Lays Saffarid was suspected of links with Batinitis (the author of famous *Tarikh-i guzida* Hamdallah Qazwini blames Saffarids as *rafizi*) -, Mahmud Ghaznavi (998 – 1030) persecuted the Shiites and Ismailis in his state [Jafariyyan, 1390, 270]. An-Najashi, the author of the famous *Kitab al-rijal*, wrote that “people said that there was no *Shia literature*”, which meant that only a limited number of people were informed about it [Prozorov, 2004, 248].

The Shia became stronger under the Mongol Il-Khanid dynasty. In spite of the Mongols’ indifference to other people’s religion, one of prominent Il-Khanid rulers, Ghazan-khan (1295 – 1304), embraced Shia Islam and adopted the Muslim name of Muhammad [Petrushevskiy et.al , 1958, 199]. From the Mongol period until the establishment of the Safavids in 1501, Iran nevertheless remained a Sunni state with only a few Shia and Ismaili enclaves in Sabzevar, Mazandaran and Central Iran.

Unfortunately, information on Shia communities in Central Asia during this period is very scarce. According to the official Timurid chronicles, Timur (1370 – 1405) used the clashes between the Sunni and the Shia to his advantage, although he strongly suppressed any group that could endanger his political interests. He destroyed the Sarbadar states in Samarkand and Sabzevar and occupied the so-called Sayyed State of Mazandaran. Despite this, there were local Shia communities in Timurid sultanates in both Iran and Central Asia. In his memoirs, Zayn al-Din Wasifi mentions different episodes from the life of the Herat laypeople, which included a considerable Shiite community [Vasifi, 1947, 323, 330].

There is insufficient time to dwell on all the struggles between the Genghisid dynasties of Shibanids (1501 – 1601) and Ashtarkhanids (1601 – 1785), and the Iranian states of Safavids and

Afsharids who raided each other almost every year (K istorii politicheskikh vzaimootnosheniy Irana so Sredney Aziey 1952: 11 – 18). The expansion of the Shia mazhab in Iran under the Safavids on the one hand, and continuous wars on the other, stimulated mass migrations from Iran. Moreover, many prisoners were taken from Iran to Central Asia. These groups formed the so called Irani/Ironi community in Bukhara and Samarkand. For example, the mother of Nadir-Muhammad-khan (1642 – 1645), an Ashtarkhanid ruler of Balkh and Bukhara, came from the Sayyad family, who were the hereditary custodians of Imam Muhammad Reza's tomb in Mashhad (*Haram-i muttahir-I Rizawi*). She was captured in 1590 or 1591, during the raid of 'Abd al-Mumin-khan of Bukhara, and taken to the Khorasan province, where she was sent to Mawara al-Nahr, along with other prisoners [Alexeev, 2006:90].

During the rule of Nadir-shah Afshar (1736 – 1747), when Iran and the Khanates of Central Asia were united as one empire, the Shia and Sunni communities were forced to leave their confrontation. Nadir-shah even started a religious reform aimed at diminishing the Safavid religious influence. His idea was to resolve confrontations in the border provinces of his state [Cambridge history of Iran 35 – 36].

Representatives of the Irani began to play an important role in state administration and to run different offices. By the Mangit dynasty (1753 – 1920), practically all civil administration and some military posts were in the hands of the local Shia community. There is no doubt that this situation provoked jealousy from amongst the Sunni clergy. The Shia were not only involved in state governance, but also in trade and crafts. In Bukhara and Samarkand, they had their own quarters and the fact that they could freely perform their rituals during the sacred month of Muharram (*'azadari, sinekubi, zanjirkubi.*) proved that they coexisted peacefully with Sunnis. The Sunnis sometimes even attended these ceremonies. According to Sadr al-Din Ayni, clashes between the communities were caused by some individual's aspirations, and had mostly economic and political, rather than religious, roots. The bloody clash between the Bukharan Sunnis and Shias in 1909 was resolved with the help of the Amir's army [Ayni, 2005, 88 – 89, 91; Alexeev, 2013, 93 – 95].

Ayni explains the reasons of this revolt through the ideas of the *Jadid* movement. Therefore, in his opinion, the fanaticism of the Bukhara's *talabas*; the unawareness of local population about the current situation and the neglect of social and religious issues are the main causes of the clash. As he states: "From the aforementioned details, the reasons for the Shia-Sunni rivalry became rather evident, but in order to be succinct and reach a conclusion, I have said the following:

1. Arrogance of the Kushbegi's servants (the Kushbegi is the head of the court and during the Mangit period was the highest post in Bukhara's administration), who have accumulated great wealth and absolute power in their hands

2. Abhorrence of power held by the Kushbegi

3. Strong influence of the Irani/Ironi group representatives in Bukhara and their control of the treasury and all the high positions in Bukhara administration. According to this:

4. Enmity of the Sipahi estate representatives from both Uzbeks and Tajiks to Irani, and especially to the Kushbegi

5. Long-lasting enmity between Burhan al-Din rais (one of the leaders of the local Muslim clergy) and the Kushbegi

6. Incitements of *'ulama* and commoners against Kushbegi, made by Burhan al-Din rais and reasonable usage of this negative relation of laymen to the Administration

7. Extreme fanaticism (*muta'asib budan*) of the Shia and Sunni *talaba*, [studied] which was learnt at the madrasas of Bukhara

8. **Main reason:** the local population's ignorance and unawareness of the current situation in the world, other countries' foreign policies and **details of religious issues**". [Ayni, 2005, 88 – 89]. According to Ayni, after this revolt the Shia and Sunni continued their fraternal life in Bukhara. Taking this into consideration, the last point should be ranked as the most important. This meant that in everyday life, differences amongst the mazhabs were not particularly important. However, according to Ayni, the level of religious education in Bukhara at that time was rather low, and even for ordinary mullahs, minute details were not especially clear. The following citation illustrates the situation: "In the times of 'Abd al-Ahad-khan (ruled in Bukhara as *amir* 1885 – 1910) and after him there were many theological foundations and the quantity of *vaqfs* increased. In order to get *vaqfs*, the *'Ulama* appealed to the authorities (*hukumat*) and forgot their essential duties. Therefore, step by step, Islamic law (*fiqh*) and Arabic [religious] literature was excluded from the [educational] program [of the madrasas]. Finally, commentaries [on sacred texts] were also excluded. Reading and the commentary in famous books such as *Sharh-i Mulla*, *Sharh-i aqa'id-i Nasafi*, *Sharh-i aq'aid-i Azudi*, *Sharh-i tahzib*, *Sharh-i hikmatulayin* were all removed, and for 18 – 20 years students were engaged [only] in discussing and praising these books [read by themselves]. Nowadays, these books have disappeared, and only the compilation of some *hutba* and comments were published. The *Talaba* were content to study these compilations, analyzing them for 18 – 20 years (!). Those who became *mufti* or *rais* had given a cursory glance to these anthologies and made their decision (*fatawi*) regarding occasions. Some of them relied on the writings of secretaries to the *muftis*, and put their seals on these documents. Some of them, who were braver, signed blank papers

and gave them to the secretaries. Secretaries transcribed the decisions according their own will...” [Ayni, 2005: 54 - 55]. This citation illustrates the clergy’s level of religious knowledge and responsibility, and so we can imagine the position of the laypeople. The ‘*ulama* used bigotry of a part of the population to their advantage , calling on them to oppose their competitors from other religious schools.

The tradition of rivalry among different mazhabs survived. Upon observing the recent news in the Middle East, we can see the rather aggressive behavior of the Sunni majority towards the Shia ceremonies of ‘*azadari*. For example, in November 2014, in the so-called Eastern province of Saudi Arabia, a group of Sunnis attacked the Shia ‘*azadari* ceremony, and several members of procession were killed and wounded [‘*Azadaran-i Husayni dar ‘Arabistan ba khun-u khak kashida shudand*, 11.11.2014]. ‘Abd al-Karim al-Alawji in his book blames the Sunni ‘*ulama* of Saudi Arabia in their ideological and financial support of the Sunni militant groups in Iraq, and criticized their calling, which instructed “their members to kill the Shia, because they are a danger to Sunnis (*abna al-Sunna*) in Iraq” [al-Alawji, 2010: 192].

In fact, there was active discussion both in Sunni *mazhabs* and in Shia Islam about some elements of the ‘*azadari* ceremonies and its adoption. In the Bukhara Shia-Sunni clash, it was one of reasons to incite the Sunni against the local Shia. However, customs such as flagellation and castigation, which are used to show empathy towards the murdered Imam Husayn during the month of Muharram (which is sacred for the Shia), are known as *Shahsay-Vahsay* (the Persian phrase translated into Azeri: Shah Husayn, wa Husayn) and were even forbidden as un-Islamic during the reign of Nasir al-Din shah Qajar (who ruled in Iran from 1848 – 1896). The emergence of this tradition is discussed in detail in an important source on the history of the Qajar dynasty, *Tarikh-i زندگانی-i man*, which was written in Persian by ‘Abdallah Mustawfi (d.1950). The author links this tradition to the name of mulla-akhund Darbandi, who wrote a significant book about this. This religious leader’s ideas were heavily criticized by the Shi’a ‘*ulama*, but were very popular among the lay population, particularly the Azeri Turks: “This hapless *akhund* was sincerely faithful to the Family of the Prophet, and tried to do good things for people (*thawab*). He used the *rawdzhakhani* ceremonies and [appealing to the religious principle] “*possible negligence in evidences*” (*tasamuh dar adalla-i sunan*) created an opportunity for himself to bring some weak legends (*akhbar*) and incorrect ideas to the *rawdzhakhani* ceremony. Castigation by knives (*tigzani*) over the ‘Ashura Day is one of the traditions, which was introduced by this *akhund*. This tradition became popular, and this forbidden issue (*haram*) [by commoners] was understood to be a good thing (*thawab*). Lay people from Turks adopted the ‘*azadari* ceremony’s tradition. The words “*Shahsin-Wa-Hsin*” were said before the *tigzani* which was the Turk’s remembrance of Allah (*zikr*), and the Turks thought

that by this [castigation] they conducted a [real] ‘*azadari*. And people from Iraq, if they took part in such a ceremony, were strictly disdained by [their] countrymen”. [Mustawfi, 1381:272 – 273]. On the same page of the source, in the footnotes, the author regrets that from Muharram 1337/October 1918, this ritual returned. [Mustawfi, 1381: 273, footnote 1].

The rituals of Muharram (‘*azadari* and *sinekubi*) in early Islam had not only religious, but also political meaning. As ‘Abdallah Mustawfi mentioned in his composition; “One of the ceremonies of ‘*azadari* conducted by ,laypeople, especially *dashes* (a specific group of a settled, mostly urban population), was a ritual of striking oneself on the chest (*sinezani*). A group of representatives from each quarter gathered in a square or at a *takiya* (specific religious room) and one of them began the ritual of singing religious mourning songs (*nuhazani*), while others hit themselves in wrest according to the rhythm of the song. Arabs brought this tradition to Iran, and the Shia kings used these ceremonies for political purposes such as political demonstrations, to protest against and destroy the [Sunni] Caliphate. These meetings became very popular, from the time of ‘Adzud ad-Dawla, who ruled in Iraq from 978 to 983. From the Daylamite dynasty, these meetings of Ashura spread throughout Iran and became the ‘*azadari* ceremony” [Mustawfi, 1381: 379]. These traditions were expressed as entirely un-Islamic by the majority of Sunni adherents.

Despite this, there were a series of compositions directed against the Shia, such as an anonymous treatise in Persian entitled *Muqaddima dar aswala wa ajwaba dar rafadha li-b‘adha-l-muhaqqiqin* (*Introduction to questions and answers about the renegades for [religious] researchers*). This, along with a damnation of the Shia and the *rafadha*, gives some advice to Sunnis; “If a Muslim meets a Shia in his way, he must immediately change direction” , “God will reward with true faith the heart of everybody who damns the Shia and rafadha”, “the fasting (*ruza*), praying (*namaz*), charity (*sadaqa*), pilgrimage during Ramadan (*hajj*), small pilgrimage (‘*umra*) and endeavour (*jihad*) of a Shia will not be accepted by God”, and so on. These proclamations treat the Shia in the same way as the Mubaddi‘, or the supporters of blameworthy innovation [Muqaddima dar aswala wa ajwaba dar rafadha li-b‘adha-l-muhaqqiqin, M.o.267, ff.208 (164b) – 209 (165a)].

During the Soviet period, differences in faith were not of much importance, since due to the fear of persecution, everyday religious practices were not overtly displayed. The Communist Party’s ideology officials controlled people’s religious life through the SADUM and local communists (Islam i Sovetskoye gosudarstvo 2011: 19 – 25). In Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, where the clan system was established, all political and economic functions were divided among the clans. For example, in Tajikistan, political power was concentrated in the hands of the “*Notherners*” or descendants from Sogd (the former Leninabad province), while education and culture were controlled by the representatives of Badakhshan [Alexeev, 2011, 17]. “*Northerners*’ mostly

belonged to the Sunni Hanafi mazhab, while the Badakhshan population are mostly Ismailies from the *Nizarit* branch.

In contemporary times, the Ismaili communities of Badakhshan in Tajikistan have become increasingly anxious about their political and cultural rights. They use financial support from the Aga-khan Foundation and remain active in preserving their identity, despite being isolated from other Ismaili regions. The attempts of Tajikistan's Central Government to take control over the Pamir in 2012, despite the nominal acceptance of power, were all unsuccessful. Rahmon's rating as President of Tajikistan is very low in Badakhshan. In spite of the bilateral antipathy between the Tajiks and Ismailies of Badakhshan, they must collaborate due to the external challenges from neighboring Afghanistan, where the situation is highly unstable. According to fieldwork in the region, the Ismailies of Afghanistan live in constant fear of elimination. When the ISAF operation is over and international troops leave Faizabad, the situation in the region is likely to worsen. .

It is noteworthy that, over the last few decades, anti-Shia movements have become more active in the area of the Iranian-Pakistani border (Sistan and Baluchistan province of I.R. Iran), where detachments of ethnic Baluchies from *Jaish al-'adl* captured several Iranian Border Guards. This group conducts its operations against Iranian officials, Islamic Revolution Protectors Corps and Iranian Army officers from Pakistani territory, and fights for the rights of Iranian Sunnis. The issue of Sunni rights in modern Iran dates back to the first Constitution, which was adopted as a result of the Constitutional revolution (1906 – 1911). It proclaims that the Imami mazhab is the only state religion, and only the Shia can take up ministry positions [Abrahamian, 2008, 48]. Article 12 of the Constitution of 1979, however, declares the priority of the Imami mazhab but also gives respect to four Sunni mazhabs. However, the Sunnis of underdeveloped regions remain dissatisfied with this. Their discontent is supported from abroad and is a destabilizing factor, which required the special attention of newly-elected President Hasan Rouhani, during his visit to the southern provinces. In his speech he said that the new Government does not distinguish between the Shia and Sunni in protecting the rights of Iranian citizens (Rouhani: *farq-i bayn-I huquq-I shaharwand-I Shia wa sunni wujud nadarad*).

It seems that Pakistan is forced by its western allies to turn a blind eye on the attacks on Iranian territory. Iran directly blames the West for supporting the Baluchi detachments of Jund Allah and *Jaish al-'adl* (*Intishar-I mustanadat-i jadid dar bara-yi Rigi tawassut-i vazarat-i Ittila'at – hamshahrionline.ir/details/250724; Gahshumari-yi tahawwalut-i muhimm-i amniyat-i ostan-i Sistan wa Baluchistan – bbc.co.uk/Persian/iran/2013/10/131026_sistan_baluch_timeline_iran.shtml*).

Iran experiences problems not only with the Sunni movements in the east and south-east of the country. Two representatives from the Arab movement of Iran, Hadi Rashidi and Hashim

Sha‘bani, were recently executed (Sazman-i Milal: I‘damha dar Iran bala rafta-ast – bbc.co.uk/Persian/interactivity/2014/02/140208_145_un_iran_execution.shtml). Although the majority of the Iranian Arab population belongs to Shia Islam, this conflict could be used by other Arab countries, especially the Gulf States, to support Iranian Arabs in response to Iran’s support of Assad’s regime in Syria and Shiite uprisings in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia.

In conclusion, it could be said that Shia-Sunni disputes throughout Greater Central Asia and neighboring areas are becoming more intense. The pockets of violence in Pakistan and the Shia uprising in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia form a part of this process. Iran’s idea of consolidating all Muslim people, as declared from the middle of the 20th century, seems to have been ignored.

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