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SHIʿITE DOCTRINE III. IMAMITE-SUNNITE RELATIONS SINCE THE LATE 19TH CENTURY

SHIʿITE DOCTRINE

iii. Imamite-Sunnite Relations since the Late 19th Century

Since the 20th century, sectarian relations have reflected a growing number of attempts to reach, at least to some degree, an understanding and a rapprochement of each other's views (*taqrib*, rarely *taqārob*), although Sunnites and Shiʿites have confronted each other in civil war and polemical writings since the 7th century. But polemical literature and mutual anathema have by no means disappeared, and ecumenical tendencies have in many cases even instigated and reinforced theological disagreements. Since 1945 both currents have been increasingly influenced by the political circumstances in the Islamic world, and some governments have instrumentalized for their own purposes. All taqrib ("Taḳrīb," *EI²*, X, 2000, pp. 139-40) efforts are largely confined to Sunnites and Imamites (*Emāmiya*, or *Eṯnā ʿAšariya* "Twelver Shiʿism"), occasionally reaching out to the Zaydiya ("Zaydiyya," *EI²*, XI, pp. 477-80), while Ismāʿilis (*Ismaʿilism*), Druzes ("Durūz,"*EI²*, II, pp. 631-37) and

ʿAlawites (cf. Noṣayris) are excluded and for the most part, indiscriminately termed *ḡolāt*.

Before World War I.

After the takeover of the Safavids (q.v.) in Iran in 1501, their struggle with the Ottoman Empire for predominance not only quickly took on sectarian traits, but raised the hitherto predominantly theological and juridical conflict onto a quasi-governmental level, notwithstanding the 1555 Treaty of Amasya and the 1639 Treaty of Zohāb (see OTTOMAN-PERSIAN RELATIONS). The custom of publicly abusing the names of the first three caliphs (*sabb, laʿn*) was particularly offensive to the Sunnites (see CALIPHS AND THE CALIPHATE), while ulema (*ʿālem*, pl.*ʿolamāʾ* "religious scholar") on both sides continued to write polemics against each other (Brunner, 2005, pp. 319-20, 337-38; Eberhard). The first attempt following the fall of the Safavids to overcome the antagonism by means of a formal, learned dialogue did not occur at the initiative of religious scholars, but of a military leader. Nāder Shāh (r. 1736-47) pursued the goal of establishing Shiʿism as the fifth legal school (*maḏhab*) to break the influence of the Imamite clergy. In 1743 he convened a considerable number of Sunnite and Shiʿite scholars in Najaf to discuss several points of contention, notably the imamate and the Shiʿite vilification of the caliphs. The endeavour, however, failed. The Imamite clerics were insubordinate, and the Ottomans completely ignored the conference (Tucker, pp. 78-93).

Until the end of the 19th century, no further efforts were undertaken to bridge the doctrinal gap between the two groups. On the contrary. In the southern provinces of Iraq, which had become predominantly Imamite only in the 19th and early 20th centuries (Nakash, 1994), there were recurring clashes in which the sectarian affiliation proved to be an important factor. The Shiʿites' main rivals were the Ottomans, who at least formally had the suzerainty over the region, and the Wahhabites ("Wahhābiyya," *EI²* XI, pp. 39-47). The puritan Sunnite reform movement of the Wahhabites had emerged in Central Arabia in the 18th century, and at the beginning of the 19th century they repeatedly attacked the Shiʿite shrines (*ʿatabāt*), sacking Karbala and pillaging the tomb of the third Imam Ḥosayn b. ʿAli (d. 680) in 1802, and raiding Najaf in 1806 (Behrens, pp. 185-86).

The pan-Islamic movement ("Pan-Islamism," *EI²* VIII, pp. 248-50) that originated in the 1860s was also not a suitable tool for promoting a dialogue between Imamites and Sunnites. True, in the face of European colonialism the

pan-Islamic activists stressed the ties that bound all Muslims regardless of geographic or sectarian differences. But apart from general calls for unity (*waḥda*), an inner-Islamic rapprochement did not play any explicit role in the movement One of the most influential figures of Pan-Islamism, Jamāl-al-Din al-Afḡāni (d. 1897) even took great pains to conceal his Iranian-Imamite origin, portraying himself as a Sunnite Afghan throughout his life. But Imamite scholars were also reluctant to become actively involved in the movement which the Ottoman Sultan Sultan Abdülhamid II (r. 1876-1909; cf. "ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd II," *EI²*, I, pp. 63-65; *EI³*, Brill Online) used as an imperial ideology to unite all Muslims in obedience to him as caliph (Landau, pp. 9-72). This claim could not meet with Imamite approval, the less so as the Ottomans simultaneously pursued a policy of counter-propaganda in order to curb Imamite influence in Iraq (Deringil). Yet, at the very same time, the Iranian community in Istanbul, the Ottoman capital, was allowed to perform Moḥarram ceremonies (*ʿazādāri*) that even included flagellation processions (Glassen, p. 119). When in 1909 the prominent ayatollahs Aḵund Mollā Moḥammad-Kāẓem Ḵorāsāni (1839-1911) and ʿAbd-Allāh Māzandarāni (1840-1912; q.v.) addressed the Ottoman sultan Meḥmed V (r. 1876-1909; cf. "Meḥemmed V Reshād," *EI²*, VI, pp. 983-84) as "our caliph," their deference was primarily a political move to win support in their fight against the Qājār ruler Moḥammad ʿAli Šāh (r. 1907-1909; cf. "Muḥammad ʿAlī Shāh Ḳādjār," *EI²*, VII, pp. 431-32).

While civil unrest in the guise of sectarian riots flared up even in more remote parts of the Islamic world such as Bukhara (Germanov), only individual writers, like the Iranian Abu'l-Ḥasan Mirzā Šayḵ-al-Raʾis, the Syrian ʿAbd-al-Raḥmān al-Kawākebi, or the rather elusive Moḥammad-Bāqer Bavānāti, called for taqrib. They remained largely unsuccessful. The only exception was the Syro-Egyptian scholar and journalist Moḥammad Rašid Reżā (1865-1935; cf. "Rashīd Riḍā," *EI²* VIII, pp. 446-48). After he had founded his journal *al-Manār* ("Manār," *EI²* VI, pp. 360-61) in 1898, he published articles and legal decisions (sing. *fatwā*) in which he argued that Imamites should be acknowledged as Muslims equal in rank with Sunnites. In 1908/9, however, following a dispute about temporary marriage (*motʿa*), he fell out with the Imamiyya. This change of mind did not only entail a polemical refutation by the Syro-Lebanese scholar Moḥsen Amin (1867-1952), but also marked the beginning of Rašid Reżā's long-standing quarrel with the Imamiyya which culminated in his openly siding with Wahhabism in the 1920s and 1930s.

From the 1920s until the Iranian Revolution of 1979.

It was due to two historical events in the mid-1920s that a more serious dialogue between Imamite and Sunnite scholars began gradually to take shape: the formal abolition of the caliphate by the Turkish National Assembly on 3 March 1924, and the assumption of power by the Wahhabites over large parts of the Arabian Peninsula which was concluded in 1926. The abolition of the caliphate resulted in a profound crisis of orientation among the Sunnites, while the traditional anti-Shiʿite zeal of the Wahhabites posed a more concrete threat to the Imamites. Medina is of utmost spiritual importance for the Imamites because four Imams, including Jaʿfar al-Ṣādeq (d. 765) who is regarded as the founder of Imamite law, were buried there (Behrens, pp. 180-85).

The venue where representatives from both sides met for the first significant ecumenical debate in modern Islam was the General Islamic Conference in Jerusalem, in December 1931. Although this meeting focused on the issue of Palestine) , two scholars in particular also managed to draw attention to the problem of taqrib: Rašid Reżā on the Sunnite side and the Iraqi scholar Moḥammad al-Ḥosayn Āl Kāšef al-Ḡeṭāʾ (1877-1954) on the Imamite side. The latter distinguished himself by delivering an address to the congress, which may be regarded as the first call for taqrib in the 20th century, explicitly intended and understood as such. Still, mutual resentments ran high during the conference and continued to exist afterwards. In Iraq, a number of polemical disputes dealt with controversial books about early Islamic history. Kāšef al-Ḡeṭāʾ wrote his most famous work about the origins of Shiʿism (*Aṣl al-šiʿa wa-oṣuluhā*) in 1932 as a response to some critical remarks by the Egyptian historian Aḥmad Amin (d. 1954; cf. Ende, 1977, pp. 125-28, 132-47).

The initiative of the Jerusalem congress came to naught on both the institutional level and the personal level between the main protagonists. Nevertheless, the stage was set for further dialogue. In December 1936, the Iraqi scholar ʿAbd-al-Karim al-Zanjāni (1887-1968) paid an extended visit to Egypt, in particular to the Azhar University and its rector Moḥammad Moṣṭafā al-Marāḡi (1881-1945; cf. Brunner, 2009). Although the contact was an individual's initiative, for the first time an important Islamic institution became involved. The two scholars tried to tackle the question of caliphate or imamate, which is the most delicate issue between Sunnism and Shiʿism, in an innovative way by defining it as a principle of the respective school of law (*aṣl maḏhabi*). This approach implied that both Shiʿites who did not acknowledge

the caliphate and Sunnites who rejected the imamate could all the same be regarded as Muslims, as the indispensable articles of faith were limited to belief in the unity of God (*tawḥid*), the message (*resāla*) of Muḥammad and the hereafter (*maʿād*). They proposed the formation of an Islamic Scientific Legislative Committee (*Majmaʿ tašriʿi ʿelmi eslāmi*) in order to review the opinions of the jurists (*faqih*, pl. *foqahāʾ*; cf. *feqh*, q.v.) of all denominations in the light of the Qorʾan and the Sonna, and suggested to convene a general conference dedicated to the union of all legal schools. Among Iraqi Imamites, however, the echo was rather subdued. When it became clear that al-Marāḡi's ultimate goal was the restoration of the caliphate under Egyptian leadership, the correspondence between the two scholars ended and al-Marāḡi's plan of a Supreme Islamic Council (*Majles eslāmi aʿlā*) was dropped (Costet-Tardieu, pp. 141-43).

The idea of an inner-Islamic sectarian rapprochement was revived in 1947, after the Second World War and the foundation of the Arab League had effectively thwarted all dreams of reviving the caliphate, but not the longing for unity. Of the many associations calling for unity in the Arab or larger Muslim world that were founded in these years, one in particular stood out and managed, for nearly a decade and a half, to draw considerable attention to the question of taqrib: the Society for the Rapprochement of the Islamic Schools of Law *(Jamāʿat al-taqrib bayn al-maḏaheb al-eslāmiya* =JT). The JT was established in Cairo in January 1947, at the initiative of the young Iranian cleric Moḥammad-Taqi Qommi (d. 1990), who also acted as its Secretary General. His contacts to the Azhar, which predated WW II, resulted in a number of prominent reform-minded scholars of this university backing the JT and participating in its activities. Particular mention has to be made of the Azhar rectors ʿAbd-al-Majid Salim (d. 1954, rector 1950-51 and 1952) and Maḥmud Šaltut (d. 1963, rector 1958-63; cf. "Shaltūt, Maḥmūd," *EI²*, IX, pp. 260-61). Salim took over the office of the JT vice-president while Moḥammad-ʿAli ʿAlluba (d. 1956) served as its president. Neither position was immediately filled after its incumbent's death. For a short period, even the leader of the Muslim Brotherhood, Ḥasan al-Bannā (assassinated in 1949), seems to have taken part in the JT's meetings. Other prominent Sunnites, who at least temporarily sided with the JT, included Moḥammad Abu Zahra, Aḥmad Amin, Aḥmad Ḥasan al-Bāquri, Moḥammad al-Bahayy, ʿAbd-al-Motaʿāl al-Ṣaʿidi, and Moḥammad ʿAbd-Allāh Darrāz. The most prominent, although in the context of the JT very discrete, Imamite supporter of the taqrib idea was no less a person than Ayatollah Ḥosayn Borujerdi (1875-1961), the universally acknowledged

marjaʿ-e taqlid at the time, as whose envoy to Cairo Qommi can safely be regarded. Other eminent scholars, mainly from Iraq and Lebanon, included Kāšef al-Ḡeṭāʾ, Moḥammad b. Moḥammad Mahdi al-Ḵāleṣi (1890-1963; cf. Ende, 2007), ʿAbd-al-Ḥosayn Šaraf-al-Din al-Musawi (1873-1957) and Moḥammad Jawād Moḡniya (1904-79). Šaraf-al-Din's book *al-Morājaʿāt* about his alleged dialogue with the Azhar rector Salim al-Bešri in 1911/12 had first been published in 1936, and played a highly controversial role in the taqrib debate. Most of them contributed as corresponding members, and only Ḵāleṣi and Moḡniya ever visited Cairo during this period, in 1954 and 1963, respectively.

The JT was never a mass movement but remained within the scholarly circles of the ulema. It coordinated an intense publishing activity that was concentrated on two main fields: the edition of classical texts – such as the famous Qurʾan commentary *Majmaʿ al-bayān* by al-Faẓl b. al-Ḥasan al-Ṭabresi (d. 1153; cf. "Ṭabrisī," *EI²*, X, pp. 40-41) or the important legal compendium *al-Moḵtaṣar al-nāfeʿ* by Najm-al-Din Abu'l-Qasem Moḥaqqeq al-Ḥelli (d. 1277) – and its journal *Resālat al-Eslām*. The journal appeared regularly between 1949 and 1960, when Moḥammad Moḥammad al-Madani, the Azhar's dean of the Faculty of Sharia and Law (*Kolliyat al-šariʿa wa-l-qānun*) served as its editor-in-chief. After the decline of the JT at the beginning of the 1960s, only a few more issues were added, and the journal's run ended with (no. 60) in October 1972. A total of approximately 650 articles were published, including a serialized Qurʾan commentary by Šaltut. Only about 20 percent dealt with taqrib in the stricter sense, while about 80 percent was devoted to questions like Islam and the state, relations with the West, Islamic law, and Islamic philosophy. Considerable space was also allotted to articles by Imamite authors about their point of view on selected theological or legal issues.

On the whole, the JT was extremely careful in its approach to the points of contention between the Islamic sects. Any discussion of early Islamic history was more or less completely avoided in the journal, as this would have predictably led to new quarrels about the role of the companions of the Prophet (*ṣaḥāba*), judgement on whom has always been one of the most critical issues on both sides. Likewise eschewed was the question of the alleged falsification (*taḥrif*) of the Qurʾan, which outside the JT forum evolved into one of the most controversial questions in mutual polemical and apologetic literature (Brunner, 2001; 2005). Whenever it was necessary to mention delicate issues the attitude was clearly apologetic, and the matter was either declared obsolete – as in the cases of *motʿa* and *taqiya* – or depicted as a

peculiarity of the respective legal school without any negative consequences for the Islamic religion as a whole – which is the approach of al-Marāḡi and al-Zanjāni to the question of the Imamate. Much emphasis was placed on the declaration that the aim of any ecumenical activity was to achieve a rapprochement between the different schools, rather than to unify or eliminate them. Mention of the various "enemies of Islam," first and foremost Western colonialism, and their efforts at undermining Islamic unity was also an indispensable tool in the taqrib debate.

The JT proved vulnerable to anti-Shiʿite polemics and was weakened by political change. On the one hand, there was the incessant activity of anti-Shiʿite polemicists, which was certainly abetted by the reluctance of the JT to address controversial issues. Some opponents, like the Iraqi author Maḥmud al-Mallāḥ (d. 1969), acted as individuals, editing journals and writing scathing treatises against any form of an inner-Islamic rapprochement. For several years after the Egyptian Revolution of 1952, taqrib-minded Azhar scholars became marginalized, as the Azhar rectors Moḥammad al-Ḵeżr Ḥosayn (1952-54) and ʿAbd-al-Raḥmān Tāj (1954-58) remained indifferent to the question. The Azhar even temporarily turned into a stronghold against Shiʿism, when the journalist and Salafite ("Salafiyya," *EI²*, VIII, pp. 900-909) activist Moḥebb-al-Din al-Ḵaṭib (d. 1969; "Muḥibb al-Din," *EI²*, XII, p. 640), who was an ardent opponent of the JT from its inception, was entrusted with the edition of the *Majallat al-Azhar* between 1952 and 1959.

On the other hand, and notwithstanding the oft-repeated declaration by many taqrib activists that the ecumenical movement had nothing to do with politics, it was obvious that the JT's fate depended on the political situation in the Islamic world and on the attitude of the political powers. The Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser (Jamāl ʿAbd-al-Nāṣer, r. 1952-70) in particular instrumentalized the taqrib movement in his quest for regional hegemony. The famous *fatwā*, in which Šaltut, in July 1959, recognized the Imamiyya as a legal school on a par with the four Sunnite legal schools and even declared the changing of schools licit without restrictions (*mobāḥ*), is fully comprehensible only in the light of the complex political situation between Egypt, Iraq, and Iran at the time. Šaltut's fatwā has remained the central achievement of the taqrib movement, and continues to be quoted by its supporters and refuted by its critics until today (Ebn ʿAbd-al-Maqṣud, pp. 47-62).

Likewise, the actual breakdown of the JT only one year later, in summer 1960, took place against a political background: after the shah had casually

announced that Iran had already recognized Israel for a long time, Nasser immediately severed diplomatic relations between Egypt and Iran. A rapidly growing mutual estrangement among Sunnite and Shiʿite scholars was the inevitable result, while the JT became further weakened by the demise of their most devoted supporters Borujerdi and Šaltut in 1961 and 1963, respectively. During much of the following two decades, ecumenical relations in Islam were characterized by increasing restraint, and polemical voices succeeded in winning far more attention than calls for rapprochement. One of the most influential among these opponents was once more the aforementioned Moḥebb-al-Din al-Ḵaṭib, whose 1961 treatise *al-Ḵoṭuṭ al-ʿariża* was heavily propagated by Saudi Arabia. The JT continued to exist until the early 1980s, but never managed to regain its former importance.

During the 1960s and 1970s Saudi Arabia was the most active Islamic state promoting unity, solidarity, or internationalism among Muslims through initiatives such as the Muslim World League (*Rābeṭat al-ʿālam al-eslāmi*, founded in 1962) or the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (*Monaẓẓamat al-moʾtamar al-eslāmi*, founded in 1969). These initiatives were limited to politically motivated bloc building, without ever aiming at a dialogue with Shiʿite scholars or organisations. The traditional Wahhabite antagonism to Shiʿism and the Wahhabite support for anti-Shiʿite polemical writings ensured that there were practically no Imamite efforts to break the ice. At the same time, the Azhar's efforts fell largely short of expectations, too. The meetings of the Academy of Islamic Research (*Majmaʿ al-boḥuṭ al-eslāmiya*) were sporadically attended by Imamite ulema without, however, entailing any further consequences in the field of taqrib. Not even the 1971 visit of the Azhar rector Moḥammad Moḥammad al-Faḥḥām to Iran received much attention in the Islamic world. Moreover, this period also saw a broad political mobilization of Imamites throughout the Islamic world. Parties or associations with a distinctly Imamite agenda were founded in Lebanon (see SHIʿITES OF LEBANON) and Iraq (see IRAQ x. Shiʿites of Iraq); the most noteworthy are the Iraqi *Ḥezb al-daʿwa* under the leadership of Moḥammad Bāqer al-Ṣadr and the Lebanese *Amal* movement established by Musā al-Ṣadr (Nakash, 2006, pp. 72-128). This development culminated in the Iranian Revolution in 1979, which further complicated taqrib endeavours between Sunnites and Shiʿites.

After the Iranian Revolution of 1979.

The Iranian Revolution marked not only a decisive turning point in modern

Imamite intellectual and political history, but also thoroughly changed the Imamiyya's relations with Sunnite Islam. Taqrib activities were now even to a higher degree motivated by political considerations and anxieties. Although reaction among Sunnite activists and fundamentalist groups to the events in Iran remained on the whole rather subdued, the fear of an Iranian export of the revolution ran high among the region's Sunnite regimes. Iraq's attack on Iran and the ensuing first Gulf War (1980-88), as well as the geopolitical and ideological rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia, fuelled anti-Shiʿite sentiments and led to a renaissance of polemical literature on both sides. A climax was reached in July 1987, when during the annual pilgrimage (*ḥajj*) more than 400 Iranians were killed in clashes with Saudi security forces in Mecca. The Imamiyya's political mobilisation had meanwhile reached Pakistan, where in 1979 the military government of Zia ul-Haq (Moḥammad Żeyāʾ-al-Ḥaqq, 1924-88) had launched an "Islamization" program. This initiative met with widespread Shiʿite opposition, and sectarian tensions were subsequently fomented by individual activists like the anti-Shiʿite polemicist Eḥsān Elāhi Ẓahir (assassinated in 1987) and by organisations such as the Imamite*Taḥrik-e Jaʿfariya Pakestan* or the Sunnite *Sepāh-e Ṣaḥāba* (Zaman). In the Lebanese civil war the inner-Islamic sectarian component also played a considerable role, especially after the emergence of the Iran-backed Hezbollah (*Ḥezb Allāh* lit. "the party of God") in the early 1980s (Norton, pp. 27-46).

Since the early 1980s Iran has presented itself as the standard-bearer of sectarian rapprochement despite Sunnite counter-propaganda, violent clashes abroad, and an unmistakable Shiʿitization of the revolution by constitutional means (see CONSTITUTION OF THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC). Iran convened a number of conferences about the idea of Islamic unity. Following Ayatollah Khomeini's death in 1989, these efforts were intensified, and in October 1990 the establishment of an independent organization, based in Tehran, for the purpose of inner-Islamic rapprochement was announced at the instigation of his successor Ayatollah Sayyed ʿAli Ḵāmeneʾi (b. 1939). The new society followed ostentatiously the role model of the JT, as was made clear by its name *Majmaʿ al-taqrib bayn al-maḏāheb al-eslāmiya*. The association's first Secretary General was Ḥojjat-al-Eslām Vaez-Zadeh Khorasani (Moḥammad Wāʿeẓ-zāda Ḵorāsāni); it was later renamed as *al-Majmaʿ al-ʿālami le'l-taqrib bayn al-maḏāheb al-eslāmiya* (the official English name is *World Forum for Proximity of Islamic Schools of Thought*; see the detailed website www.taghrib.org) and was at the time of writing (2010) led by Āyatollāh Moḥammad-ʿAli Tasḵiri (b. 1944). Like its predecessor in the 1950s, the association is very actively

engaged with publishing which includes the journal *Resālat al-taqrib*. But unlike the JT, it is also busy organising international conferences, the 23rd of which took place in Tehran in 2010. Despite all efforts to appear as a supra-national organization with the sole aim of bridging the gap between the Muslim denominations, its closeness to the government and its services to the regime's political goal of strengthening its influence in the region are obvious.

In recent years, the Azhar University has also taken steps to regain its former standing in the field of taqrib and to establish itself once again as an important center of Islamic unity. During much of the 1980s and 1890s, the Azhar had sought proximity to Saudi institutions such as the Muslim World League, and was awarded the prestigious King Faysal Prize for Service to Islam in 2000, so that there was not much space for rapprochement with the Imamiyya. The failed attempt to revive in 1992 the JT in cooperation with Moḥammad Taqi Qommi's son, ʿAbd-Allāh, had therefore no repercussions in the Islamic world. Only in 2001 did contacts between the Azhar and Iranian Imamite dignitaries begin again to intensify, when a high-ranking delegation from Cairo attended a conference in remembrance of Maḥmud Šaltut and Ayatollah Borujerdi, organized by the Majmaʿ al-taqrib in Qom. But progress has been slow. On the one hand, diplomatic relations between Egypt and Iran, which had been severed after the revolution in 1979, have, despite several initiatives, not yet been resumed. On the other hand, there are still strong reservations about Shiʿism at the Azhar and among Egypt's political leaders. The late rector Moḥammad Sayyed Ṭanṭāwi (d. 2010) repeatedly expressed his opposition to the establishment of Shiʿite mosques; and there does not appear to be a Sunnite mosque in Teheran either. Nevertheless, a new attempt was made in March 2007, and the JT was formally reopened in the presence of former Iranian President, Moḥammad Ḵātami. Maḥmud ʿĀšur and ʿAbd-Allāh Qommi were nominated as President and Secretary General, respectively. In February 2008, the Azhar even announced its willingness to accept Imamite students, and floated the idea of opening an institute in Tehran (Brunner, "Interesting Times").

This development did not remain without critical echo in the Egyptian public. Several controversies about the Companions of the Prophet (*ṣaḥāba*) had heavily anti-Shiʿite undertones. After the war between Israel and the Lebanese Hezbollah in summer 2006, the Hezbollah leader Ḥasan Naṣr-Allāh became so popular among Egyptians that the well-known Sunnite cleric Yusof al-Qaraẓāwi warned of Imamite attempts to proselytize the Egyptian Sunnites.

Qarażāwi repeated his accusation in January 2007, on the occasion of a much-heeded international taqrib conference in Doḥa (Qaṭar), where he severely criticized Iran's allegedly missionary politics in the Middle East and demanded that the Imamites take a clear stand regarding the issue of the ṣaḥāba.

At the beginning of the 21st century, the political relations between Sunnites and Imamites, beyond the debate between religious scholars and dignitaries, are mainly characterized by tension. In 2004, the Jordanian King ʿAbd-Allāh expressed a widespread fear when he warned of a "Shiʿite crescent" in the region under Iranian influence. Especially after the fall of the regime of Ṣaddām Ḥosayn in 2003 and the Imamite takeover of the Iraqi government, the civil war in the following years and the Iranian attempts to strengthen its regional influence renewed old apprehensions of an export of the Islamic Revolution. Nearly all other countries with a substantial Imamite population – that is, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Baḥrain, and Pakistan – face grave internal sectarian problems (see the respective ICG reports). In a way, these circumstances are reminiscent of the early modern period, when the political struggle between the Ottomans and the Safavids overshadowed the theological and legal debate about Islamic ecumenism.

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