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A minority within a minority?: the complexity and multilocality of transnational Twelver Shia networks in Britain

Oliver Scharbrodt[1]

Abstract

Academic scholarship on Shia Muslim minorities in the West has described them as 'a minority within a minority' (Sachedina 1994: 3) or as 'the other within the other' (Takim 2009: 143), referring to a certain sense of double-marginalization of Shia Muslims in non-Muslim societal contexts. They need to undertake particular efforts to maintain both an Islamic as well as particular Shia identity in terms of communal activities and practices and public perception and recognition, responding to the rise of Islamophobia more generally and anti-Shia sectarianism more specifically. This article problematizes this notion of a double-marginalization of Shia minorities in the West as too simplistic. The article investigates the dynamics around the creation of transnational Shia communal spaces in north-west London, the public representation of Shia Muslim identities by networks and organizations based there to illustrate their multilocal connectivities and internal heterogeneity. The article is based on research in the borough of Brent, north-west London, and presents novel insights into Shia spaces in Britain and thereby makes an important contribution to complexifying academic discourse on Muslims in Britain which has focussed on Sunni Muslims almost exclusively. The ethnographic data is contextualized by providing background information on the historical and social formations of the networks and the centres examined in the article. To analyze the multilocal spatial manifestations and connections of these network, the article utilizes Werbner's notion of 'complex diasporas' (2002, 2004, 2010) and recent contributions to the development of a spatial methodology in Religious Studies (Knott 2005; Vásquez 2010; Tweed 2006; McLoughlin and Zavos 2014). The article thereby constitutes the very first attempt to apply recent contributions on the nature of diasporic religions and their spatial multilocality to the case study of Twelver Shia networks based in London.

Keywords Muslims in Britain · Shia Islam · Diaspora · Transnationalism · Multilocality · Religion and space

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Introduction

Academic scholarship on Shia Muslim minorities in the West has described them as 'a minority within a minority' (Sachedina 1994: 3) or as 'the other within the other' (Takim 2009: 143), referring to a certain sense of double-marginalization of Shia Muslims in non-Muslim societal contexts. They need to undertake particular efforts to maintain both an Islamic as well as particular Shia identity in terms of communal activities and practices and public perception and recognition, responding to the rise of Islamophobia more generally and anti-Shia sectarianism more specifically. This article problematizes this notion of a double-marginalization of Shia minorities in the West as too simplistic. The article investigates the dynamics around the creation of transnational Shia communal spaces in north-west London, the public representation of Shia Muslim identities by networks and organizations based there to illustrate their multilocal connectivities and internal heterogeneity.

The article is based on research in the borough of Brent, north-west London, between September 2014 and November 2016 as a part of a larger research project investigating transnational Twelver Shia networks operating between Britain and the Middle East.[1] Ethnographic research was undertaken in Arabic, Persian and English at numerous religious gatherings in twelve community centres and five private homes, mostly located in Brent. As part of the research, 32 semi- and unstructured interviews and seven focus group discussions were conducted, primarily with the male elites within networks and community centres. As such, the article presents novel insights into Shia spaces in Britain which have been overlooked in academic research with some exceptions (Spellman 2004; Flynn 2013; Corboz 2015; Gholami 2014, 2015; Dogra 2017; Gholami and Sreberny 2018; Degli Esposti 2018a, 2018b) and thereby makes an important contribution to complexifying academic discourse on Muslims in Britain which has focussed on Sunni Muslims almost exclusively. The ethnographic data is contextualized by providing background information on the historical and social formations of the networks and the centres examined in the article.

The transnational and diasporic Shia networks in London, examined in the article, are situated in a 'diaspora space' (Brah 1996) marked by complexity and heterogeneity. Therefore, Werbner's notion of 'complex diasporas' (Werbner 2002; Werbner 2004; Werbner 2010) will be used. To analyze the multilocal spatial manifestations and connections of these network, the article engages with recent contributions to the development of a spatial methodology in Religious Studies (Knott 2005; Vásquez 2010; Tweed 2006). It utilizes in particular McLoughlin and Zavos' (2014) reflections on the place of religion in British Asian diasporas as part of which they develop different spatial scales 'to analyse changing patterns of diasporic consciousness and practice' (2014: 160). The article thereby constitutes the very first attempt to apply recent contributions on the nature of diasporic religions and their spatial multilocality to the case study of Twelver Shia networks based in London.

From diaspora[2] to multilocality

Werbner (2002, 2004, 2010) develops the notion of 'complex diasporas' to articulate the '*social heterogeneity* (2010: 74, original emphasis) of diasporas, the convergence and co-existence of different, often mutually exclusive, discourses in diasporic communities, and the dynamic and chaordic processes involved in their formation.[3] Diasporas share a certain sense of 'co-responsibility' (Werbner 2002: 121) with other members of their diaspora, as 'deterritorialised imagined communities' (Werbner 2002: 121) shaped by a shared collective memory. The '*dual* orientation (Werbner 2010: 74, original emphasis) of diasporas is articulated in their efforts to represent their communities and to be recognised as such in the new diasporic context while at the same time maintaining transnational links and the community's diasporic identity; diasporas are involved in the developments of their countries of origin, reflecting, influencing and responding to them. Based on this double-character of diasporas, Werbner describes them as 'both ethnic-parochial *and* cosmopolitan' (2010: 75, original emphasis). Despite their sense of co-responsibility, diasporas are complex or 'segmented because members of such diasporas may unite together in some contexts and oppose each other in other contexts. Their members' identities, in other words, are not fixed but situationally determined' (Werbner 2004: 900). As such, 'diasporic groups are characterised by multiple discourses, internal dissent, and competition for members between numerous sectarian, gendered or political groups, all identifying themselves with the same diaspora' (Werbner 2002: 123).

In order to illustrate the segmentation of the Iraqi and Iranian Twelver Shia diaspora in Brent, the article employs McLoughlin and Zavos' (2014) reflections on the multi-spatial dimensions of British Asian diasporas. Both suggest a discursive shift from diaspora to multilocality in writing about the place of religion in British Asian diasporas. Both propose a spatial multilocal configuration of diasporic communities that unfold on four spatial scales:

– On the very local level, immigration has led to the formation of ethnically, culturally and religiously diverse neighbourhood communities in urban areas. Therefore, the physicality of urban landscapes has changed as a result of demographic transformations leading to 'the formation of neighbourhood congregations and "communities" in the context of urban resettlement' (McLoughlin and Zavos 2014: 160).

– On both the local and the national level, religious communities interact with state and society, particularly in terms of the politics of recognition and participation in the context of British multiculturalism. Diaspora religious communities seek to be

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[2] Steven Vertovec (2009) demarcates transnationalism and diaspora in particular. He defines transnationalism as referring to the networks and interactions occurring between the homeland and the diaspora. Diaspora, however, is understood as 'an imagined connection' (Vertovec 2009: 136) with the place of origin or a wider community which can be real but is also imagined in the sense that it purports strong emotive connotations and is based on collective memory.

[3] Werbner (2002: 123) develops the concept of 'chaordic' as fusion of 'chaotic' and 'orderly': diasporic formations are chaotic by not being directly shaped and guided by central authorities in their countries of origin and orderly by adhering to set cultural, ideological and doctrinal frameworks that create a certain sense of co-responsibility across different diasporic communities.

recognised by the state and other stakeholders in society as representing 'their' community.

– On a global level, religious organizations are characterised by trans- and multilocal networking and activism with their countries of origin or other diaspora communities across the world.

– On a personal level, diaspora communities contain 'demotic' (lit. 'of the people') processes and discourses (Baumann 1996) of individual and collective religiosities: 'the informal and negotiated utterances and performativity of individuals and non-institutionalized collectives' (McLoughlin and Zavos 2014: 161) that challenge normative discourses and practices promulgated within organized communities.

McLoughlin and Zavos follow recent scholarship on space and religion, in particular applied to the study of diasporic religion. In order to apply their scheme of the four spatial scales in which diasporic religions operate to Twelver Shia networks in Brent, other variables which impact on these processes and unfold within these four spatial scales need to be included; the ethnic, linguistic and national diversity of these networks and how they relate to and identify with a transnational Shia community, a 'Shi'i International' (Mallat 1998). Issues around social class are crucial to identify cleavages within the various Shia networks present in London. Networks also form around particular senior clerical authorities based in Iraq and Iran (*marja' al-taqlid*)[4] and political movements associated with them and exhibit different positions towards the Islamic Republic of Iran and Khomeini's political reading of the mandate of the legal scholar (*wilayat al-faqih*).[5]

The local context: Brent as 'The Shia Mile of London'

McLoughlin and Zavos identify one of the spatial scales in which diasporic communities operate as urban neighbourhoods that have been transformed as a result of immigration. The local context in which the Shia communities and networks are based is the London borough of Brent, in the north-west of the city. In the last 30 years, Brent has become one of the global hubs of transnational Shia Islam. There are at least 20 Shia community centres located in Brent representing different national backgrounds but also different religious and political factions within contemporary Shia Islam. These community centres, referred to as *husayniyya* in Arabic and Persian or *imambarga* in the South Asian context, are not mosques but congregational halls used for Shia commemoration ceremonies, in particular those associated with 'Ashura', the first ten days of the Islamic month of Muharram when Shiis worldwide remember and mourn the death of Prophet Muhammad's grandson and third Imam Husayn on the plains of Karbala, in southern Iraq, in 680 CE.

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[4] Twelver Shii Islam possesses more formalised structures of religious authority. Every lay Shii needs to follow the religious guidance of a senior cleric and emulate his edicts. These clerics are referred to as grand ayatollah (*ayat allah al-'uzma*) or 'source of emulation' (*marja'al-taqlid*) (Walbridge 2001: 3–13). The majority of them a based in the major shrine cities of Iraq and Iran, Najaf and Qom.
[5] Khomeini developed the argument that the most learned Shia cleric is not only the ultimate source of religious guidance but ought to become the head of an Islamic state. On his concept see Calder (1982).

The vast majority of these centres are run and frequented by Iraqi Shiis who began to arrive in Brent in the 1970s and have continued to settle in the area as a result of their oppression under the regime of Saddam Hussein and of the most recent sectarian violence post-2003 (Degli Esposti 2018a, 2018b). With Iraqis being dominant, other ethnic and national groups likewise frequent and run various community centres, including Gulf Arab, Iranian, Afghan and South Asian Shiis. Brent hosts two offices representing the most influential senior cleric in contemporary Shiism, Najaf-based Ali Al-Sistani (b. 1930). These offices are run by two of his sons in law, the Imam Ali Foundation by London-based Murtadha Kashmiri and the Al Al-Bayt Foundation by Jawad Shahrestani who heads Sistani's office in Qom, Iran. The Islamic Centre of England acts of the official representation of the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Ali Khamenei (b. 1939). Other senior clerical offices run offices representing them in the area as well. The Najaf-based cleric Muhammad Al-Fayyadh (b. 1930) has an office in the Al-Khoei Foundation, for example.

Apart from representing different clerical authorities, various educational initiatives have been established. The Al Sadiq and Al Zahra schools are independent boy and girl schools run by the Al-Khoei Foundation. The Islamic College offers both traditional Shia seminarian courses as well as academic programmes in Islamic Studies with the latter being validated by Middlesex University. The Islamic College is part of the global network of institutions affiliated and supported by the Al-Mustafa International University which has its headquarters in Qom (Sakurai 2015). The International College of Islamic Sciences (*Al-jami'a al-'alamiyya lil-'ulum al-islamiyya*) is a private institution that runs postgraduate research programmes in Arabic primarily. Two community centres run academic outreach activities inviting academics of various backgrounds to lectures, seminars and workshops and publishing academic work; the Centre for Academic Shi'a Studies, based at the Al-Khoei Foundation, and the Centre for Shi'a Islamic Studies at the Imam Jawad Centre.

Brent is one of the most multicultural areas in London with a long history of immigration, initially of Jews and Irish in the late nineteenth century. Due to the later arrival of Afro-Caribbean, South Asian and Eastern European immigrants the majority of the population in Brent come from ethnic minority groups (Borough of Brent 2013: 19). As a result, the strong presence of Shia institutions, centres and networks blends into the normality of the wider multicultural urban landscape of Brent. One does not notice the prominence of Shia religious and educational institutions in Brent in particular as they are not necessarily visible as Shia institutions but as Islamic centres located next to Sunni mosques, Buddhist and Hindu temples or synagogues. Within the spatial *imaginaire* of Shiis living in London, however, Brent is known as the 'Shia mile of London', or as a pun on Brent's designation as 'People's Republic of Brent' due to its history of leftist politics in the 1970s and 80s, as the 'Islamic Republic of Brent'.

Several factors account for the concentration of Shiis, particularly but not exclusively from Iraq. One has to do with the urban geography of Brent and its connection to central London. Kilburn, Cricklewood and other areas of Brent are located around the main road connecting the north-west of London with Edgware Road in central London. Edgware Road is one of the first destinations of Arabs arriving in London as the 'Arab quarter' of the city with various Arab restaurants, businesses and cultural and religious institutions. Given rising house prices and rents in central London, Brent as the northern extension of Edgware Road became a location for Arabs, Iraqis and Gulf

Arabs in particular, to settle in more affordable housing. Furthermore, Brent had experienced different waves of immigration before and therefore provided an urban environment used to the settlement of diverse migrant communities.

The settlement of Shia Muslims in Brent is also a good example of chain migration. In the early 1970s, an Iranian cleric moved to London for missionary purposes and to cater for the religious needs of the city's growing Iranian Shia population. He decided to move with his family to Willesden Green in Brent because the area was home to two of the few secondary schools in London that were both non-denominational and gender-segregated. His home also became a centre for religious activities, catering for the then small Iraqi and Iranian Shia communities in London. The move of an affluent Afghan Shia family to Brent which held religious gatherings at their home in Brent for Persian-speaking Shiis from Iran and Afghanistan contributed to the emergence of a nascent Shia religious infrastructure in Brent attracting other Shiis to settle in the borough as well. Given the rising number and increasing concentration of Shiis in the area as part of chain migration, centres catering for the religious and educational needs of the growing community were also established in or moved to the area in order to part of the nascent Shia hub in Brent from the mid-1980s onwards. In the late 1980s, Shiis living in Brent approached the then most senior Shia cleric in Iraq at that time, Abu Al-Qaism Al-Khoei (1899–1992) to sponsor the construction of an Islamic school. A site was chosen by local Shiis leading to the establishment of the Al-Khoei Foundation next to the school in 1989, run by one of Al-Khoei's son and acting at his official representation and financial centre until his demise in 1992 (Corboz 2012, 2015: 57–64). Other organisations and institutions followed suit. The Islamic Centre of England was established in 1995 and opened its premises in Maida Vale in 1998, south of Brent, at a location close to Shia communities in the area. Other centres and groups also moved from more central locations in London to Brent in the 1990s. Rasool Al-Adham, an Iraqi Shii community centre established in 1986 and affiliated with the Shirazi clerical network, moved from Edgware Road to Cricklewood in 1998 (Youtube 2012).

Brent's 'Shia mile of London' is a good example of the urban concentration of diasporic communities in a particular locality. Within the fairly small diasporic space of Brent the current diversity of contemporary Shia Islam, in terms of clerical allegiance, ideological orientation, ethnic and national background and socio-economic status becomes visible. As such, Brent as the diasporic locality of various Shia networks occupies a unique space among other Shia Muslim communities in Britain and Western countries more generally. The spatial vicinity of various Shia congregations and centres creates opportunities for collaboration among them and with other civil society actors but also exposes various cleavages based on politics, factional identity and class which are not necessarily apparent within other Shia diasporic communities. In addition, the role of Brent as a global hub of transnational Twelver Shiism demarcates it from other Shia diasporic spaces: the concentration of an Iraqi Shia population in the area provides further opportunities for the spatial segregation of Iraqi Shiis with minimal engagement with Shiis from other ethnic groups, other Muslims or wider British society (Degli Esposti 2018b). As one of the centres of Iraqi Shia diasporic politics until the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003, Brent has played a significant role in organising the Iraqi Shia opposition in exile (Rahe 1996). The article will focus on a number of Iraqi and Iranian centres, organisations and groups, some of which have their own facilities, while others organise their communal religious activities outside of major centres. All

of them provide good case studies of the diverse dynamics involved in the formation of these networks, their relationship and interaction with one another, their transnational connectivity and activism and their interactions with wider British society.

The politics of recognition: Interaction with state and society

McLoughlin and Zavos refer to the wider political and societal space in which religious communities are embedded and with which they interact in various ways. The politics of multicultural recognition has increasingly emphasised religion as a major site of communal identities and public representation in the British context with the state being 'a key force in constructions of religion as the main site for legitimate identity' (McLoughlin and Zavos 2014: 165). In the institutional field of Shia Islam in Britain the Al-Khoei Foundation, based in Brent, has been the major Shia actor in the politics of multicultural recognition, being the quasi-official representative of Twelver Shia Muslims in Britain. The Al-Khoei Foundation in London, being the centre of a global network of different institutions, operates locally, nationally and internationally in its various outreach activities. Internationally, it is well-connected to international organisations such as the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva, making regular interventions in its sessions, the Jordanian Royal Institute for Inter-Faith Studies, established by Hasan ibn Talal, and Ali Al-Hashimi, the judicial and religious advisor to the President of the United Arab Emirates. These two latter relations have resulted in the Al-Khoei Foundation being involved in high-profile international interfaith and Sunni-Shia intrafaith dialogue events.

Nationally, the Al-Khoei Foundation is usually approached by the British government and its various departments for advice on issues affecting Shia Muslims in Britain. The Al-Khoie Foundation is also a member of the Religious Education Council of England and Wales, a lobby group to promote the school subject of RE nationally that includes various religious organisations, interfaith initiatives and other relevant stakeholders. On a local level, the Al-Khoei Foundation is involved in various interfaith and civic initiatives such as the London Interfaith Centre, the Three Faiths Forum, the Faiths Forum London or the Brent Interfaith Network and other civic society actors such as the North London branch of Citizens UK (Al-Khoie Foundation n.d.).

In representing Shia Islam in the British public arena, the Al-Khoei Foundation has been extremely successful and conceives itself as an organisation that seeks to achieve 'community cohesion' (Al-Khoie Foundation [n.d.]) and to represent Shia Muslims as an integrated part of British society. It thereby is also willing to push the boundaries of intercommunal relations locally. In October 2016, under the umbrella of the Faiths Forum London, the Al-Khoei Foundation hosted the Jewish sukkot festival in partnership with the neighbouring Brondesbury Park United Synagogue, with volunteers from both communities building a wooden booth on the premises of the Al-Khoei Foundation (repeated again in 2017). The event was presented in the media as 'a historic first in the UK' (Cohen 2016), an 'unprecedented partnership between a British mosque and synagogue' (Anonymous 2016), as 'a London mosque has played host for a local synagogue's succah' (Cohen 2016). This highly symbolic gesture to articulate the commitment of the Al-Khoei Foundation to break down barriers between Jews and Muslims in Britain was inspired by the rise of anti-Semitic and Islamophobic hate crimes following the Brexit

referendum in June 2016. It was also meant to further buttress the moderate credentials of the Al-Khoei Foundation in a multicultural context in which 'faith is projected as "bridging" capital – a common denominator of the universal signifiers of respect for difference and spirituality' (McLoughlin and Zavos 2014: 175).

The effectiveness of the Al-Khoei Foundation in representing Shia Islam in the British public is also evident when it lobbies for a decidedly Shia stance. In November 2014, the UK Department of Education launched a consultation process to revise the curriculum for Religious Studies at secondary schools in England and Wales to acquire the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) and the Advanced Level General Certificate of Education (A-levels) in this subject. The public consultation included various stakeholders such as religious organisations. Among the three Muslim organisations consulted in the development of the subject content were the more Sunni-oriented Muslim Council of Britain, The Oxford Foundation - a Muslim educational trust that promotes interfaith understanding - and the Al-Khoei Foundation (Department of Education 2014: 16). The new curriculum, developed after the consultation process, introduces significant changes to the way of how Islam is approached and covered in secondary schools and gives equal weighting to Sunni and Shia perspectives on Islam. The new GCSE curriculum covers 'the six articles of faith in Sunni Islam and five roots of 'Usul ad-Din in Shi'a Islam' (Ofqual 2015: 17). In terms of the basic practices of Islam, it presents both 'the Five Pillars of Sunni Islam and Ten Obligatory Acts of Shi'a Islam' (Ofqual 2015: 18) and 'the origins and meaning of festivals and commemorations: such as Id-ul-Adha, Id-ul-Fitr, Id-ul-Ghadeer and Ashura' (Ofqual 2015: 18), with the latter two being explicitly Shia holidays not observed by Sunni Muslims.

While details about the consultation process are not published, the strong Shia imprint on the revised curriculum results from the input of the Al-Khoei Foundation at very early stages. Its involvement in various interfaith networks at national level such as the Three Faiths Forum and in the RE Council of England and Wales laid the groundwork for the Foundation's strong impact in the consultation process. The explicit inclusion of Shia Islam in the new curriculum was also driven by the RE Council of England and Wales which was eager to arrive at a more balanced RE provision on Islam that would sufficiently recognize its internal diversity. Following the implementation of the revised curriculum, the Al-Khoei Foundation has also been instrumental in providing expertise on Shia Islam. It has run a series of workshops including Muslim (Shia and Sunni) and non-Muslim presenters and also developed a teacher's manual on Shia Islam (Bdaiwi and Hussain 2017) to provide teachers with the expertise to implement the revised curriculum.

The various outreach activities of the Al-Khoei Foundation illustrate its 'cosmopolitan' character. Its transformation from a clerical network representing Grand Ayatollah Al-Khoei in Britain to a transnational NGO with vast array of religious, educational and charitable activities help to buttress the Foundation's credentials as a 'moderate voice' within British Islam. While the Al-Khoei Foundation as part of a transnational network is connected to Iraq, various other countries in the Middle East and its different branches across the globe, in the British context it has been the main interlocutor for the public and the government in matters pertaining to Shia Islam. In this sense, the Al-Khoie Foundation is quite unique among the more established centres in Brent being the most outward looking as compared to most other networks present in the area which

are run by first generation immigrants from Iraq or Iran and reveal a strong diasporic consciousness attempting to recreate their homeland in the religious congregations they frequent. Political lobbying and public relations activities of the Al-Khoie Foundation began in the early 1990s in response to the persecution of Iraqi Shiis following their failed uprising against Saddam Hussein in 1991 (Rahe 1996: 125–128). Given the international pressure and isolation of Iraq at that time, the Al-Khoie Foundation framed their support for Shiis as an international human rights issue to win support of political stakeholders and eschewed any association with Shia opposition groups supported by Iran. Abu Al-Qasim Al-Khoie's own political stance helped to buttress further the 'apolitical' credentials of the Foundation: his clerical leadership is often portrayed as remaining aloof from politics and opposed to Khomeini's understanding of *wilayat al-faqih* (Corboz 2015: 168–172). Avoiding any involvement in party politics, whether in the British diaspora or in Iraq, and retaining distance to Iran have allowed the Al-Khoie Foundation to become a legitimate representative of Shia Islam within the British public.

At the same time, the Al-Khoie Foundation runs a religious congregation and community centre (*husayniyya*) that holds religious events central to the Shia calendar such as commemorations during 'Ashura'. These events, held in the main hall of the community centre in Arabic, primarily attract middle-aged middle- and upper-class Iraqis. The gathering (*majlis*) consists of a lecture by a religious scholar, the recitation of poetry combined with rhythmic self-beating (*latmiyya*). These quite traditional gatherings show that the Al-Khoei Foundation also caters to a significant extent for the religious and spiritual needs of a specific segment of the Iraqi Shia diaspora in London, upward mobile Iraqi Shiis who identify themselves with the clerical authorities in Najaf, southern Iraq (*najafi marja'iyya*). In this respect, the Al-Khoie Foundation is a good example of the multivocality of diasporic religions being quite 'ethnic-parochial' in terms of its religious activities directed towards a particular segment of their own community while appearing as a progressive and 'cosmopolitan' voice in its public representation in the British context. These two sides of the Foundation are also visible in the spatial separation between the offices of the Foundation on one side of its compound and the actual congregation hall located on the other side in a former synagogue. The resident scholar and imam of the congregation, Fadhil Milani, while being centrally involved in various interfaith activities of the Foundation, serves also as an important source for the religious legitimacy of the Foundation within the Iraqi Shia community, by being one of the students of Grand Ayatollah Al-Khoie and personal link to the clerical authorities in Najaf.

Diasporic politics: 'Long-distance nationalism'

The various Shia congregations and institutions based in Brent, as the example of the Al-Khoie Foundation illustrates, are a good example of 'the construction of a wide range of networks and religioscapes which extend beyond, and arguably sometimes transcend, the spatial scales of both the local and the national' (McLoughlin and Zavos 2014: 168). Many centres are also involved in 'long-distance nationalism' (Anderson 1992) engaging with, responding to and shaping national politics in their countries of origin. This is particularly the case of the Iraqi Shia diaspora in Brent, many of whom

were political dissidents in Iraq and forced to exile as a result of state oppression against Shiis during Saddam Hussein's regime.

A prime example of an institution engaged in 'long-distance nationalism' in Brent is Dar al-Islam, a Shia congregation and community centre that acts as the London base of the Hizb Al-Da'wa, the main Shia Islamist party in Iraq that has led the government from 2005 to 2018. The centre was established in 1991 and moved to its current premises in 1993. Similar to the Al-Khoie Foundation the Dar Al-Islam centre serves several purposes. It is a community centre running religious events according to the Shia calendar and attracts primarily middle- and upper-class Iraqis, secular educated professionals who have achieved a certain socio-economic status.

Being the official base of the Hizb Al-Da'wa, it was the main site of diasporic politics of Iraqi Shia Islamists in exile and still retains an important role as conduit between the party in Iraq and the Iraqi diaspora in London. The 1992 programme of the party, entitled 'Our Programme (*barnamijuna*)', was written by party leaders in London. In the programme, the party commits itself for the first time to supporting a pluralistic democratic system in Iraq post-Saddam Hussein (Rahe 1996: 69). Following the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003, many members and attendees of Dar Al-Islam have returned to Iraq and assumed important political, economic or cultural roles. Two post-2003 prime ministers of Iraq, Ibrahim Al-Jaafari (b. 1947) and Haider Al-Abadi (b. 1952), were affiliated to the centre. Its former resident scholar and imam Husayn Al-Shami Al-Musawi returned to Iraq to establish a private university and other members now hold senior positions in government departments in Iraq. From the setup of the centre it is not visible that this congregation is affiliated to Hizb Al-Da'wa; it does not exhibit any Iraqi flags or other symbols of Iraqi national identity nor any images, slogans or logos of the party as such. One can only observe indirect signs suggesting a connection to the main Iraqi Shia Islamist party. On the office walls of the director of the congregation are photographs of Muhammad Baqir Al-Sadr (1935–1980) who was the founder of the party and of Muhammad Fadlallah (1935–2010) who was the clerical reference point (*marja' al-taqlid*) for many members of Hizb Al-Da'wa (Abd Al-Jabbar 2003).

While the affiliation with Hizb Al-Da'wa is not very apparent and the Dar Al-Islam serves as a conventional *husayniyya*, differences to other centres can be observed. During major Shia events and their celebration or commemoration in the centre, the actual commemorative gathering with a sermon and devotional practices is not that well attended. The majority of male attendees roam around in the lobby or move from the main hall to the lobby to engage in conversations and socializing. For many attendees, the role of Dar Al-Islam as the London base for Iraq's former governing party makes it an important site for political, business-related or cultural networking. On certain occasions, the affiliation of Dar al-Islam to Hizb Al-Da'wa becomes more apparent. When Mohammad Mehdi Al-Asefi[6] (1938/9–2015), former spokesperson of the party and representative of the Supreme Leader of Iran in Iraq, passed away in June 2015, a memorial gathering was held in the centre. Standing posters with the logo of the Hizb Al-Da'wa were erected while a speaker gave an outline of his biography and political achievements for the party and for 'the Islamic movement (*al-haraka al-islamiyya*)'

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[6] As official representative of the Supreme Leader of Iran, Ali Khamenei, in Iraq, Al-Asefi entertained close relations with central figures within the Iranian regime. Al-Asefi collected Khomeini's lectures in Najaf in the late 1960s in which the latter outlined his vision of an Islamic state (Al-Siyyad 2017/8: 53).

more generally. The gathering expressed respect for the life of a former high-profile member of the Hizb Al-Da'wa and his role in its formation; equally, it signalled a certain closeness of the party's base in London to Iran by honouring Khamenei's representative in Iraq – a rapport often denounced by Iraqi Shiis in London opposed to the Iranian regime.

For McLoughlin and Zavos, the transnational networking of diasporic communities can entail and articulate various modes of 'religious resistance to globalized modernity' (2014: 170). As an Islamist party (albeit of Shia provenance), Hizb Al-Da'wa shares similar ideological roots with Sunni Islamist movements and retains the pan-Islamic appeal of political Islam to a certain extent. In June 2015, the centre hosted a conference organized by the Islamic Unity Forum *(muntada al-wahda al-islamiyya)*, a London-based organization bringing Shia and Sunni Islamist activists together. Shia Islamists from the Gulf, Iraq, Yemen and Iran were equally present as Sunni Islamists from Egypt and other North African countries. A recurring theme of the conference was the need for unified Muslim resistance against Western imperialism and its 'politics of division *(siyasat al-taqsim)*', evident historically in the division of the Middle East following the Sykes-Picot agreement of 1916, the creation of Israel and the Saudi-led war against Yemen. In an effort to overcome sectarian fault lines so prominent in the Middle East post-Arab Spring, speakers of Sunni and Shia backgrounds repudiated the rise of sectarianism on either side and promoted Islamic unity to counter Western geopolitical hegemony. Zionism, in particular, was blamed as 'the reason for the divisions among Muslims *(sabab ikhtilaf bayna al-muslimin)*' and 'among the Shia in particular *(wa-bayna al-shi'a khassatan)*'.

The discourses during this annual gathering of Islamists of both backgrounds reflect the pan-Islamic and anti-imperialist orientation of political Islam more generally. They are, however, equally illustrative of the particular ideological position of Hizb Al-Da'wa's London base. The presence of Shia Islamist activists from Iran, the Gulf and Houthis from Yemen with close political and ideological ties to Iran signifies that Dar Al-Islam as Hizb Al-Da'wa's London branch retains links to individuals and movements that are close to Iran. The inclusion of Sunni Islamists in the conference equally reflects the official discourse of the Iranian regime emphasising Islamic unity as resistance to Western imperialism and rejecting any sectarianization of current geopolitical conflicts in the Middle East (Akbarzadeh 2015). Such discourses equally stand in contrast to the sectarian politics attributed to the Hizb Al-Da'wa in Iraq, suggesting that the position of its rank-and-file members in London towards Iran and Sunni Islamism is more complex than often assumed in the Iraqi context (Al-Qarawee 2014).

Dar Al-Islam exhibits a strong sense of 'long-distance nationalism' among the Brent Shia congregations and oscillates in its activities between the promotion of sectarian discourses and politics within an Iraqi context and a sense of pan-Islamic anti-imperialist resistance to Western hegemony. Other congregations promote an Iraqi Shia diasporic consciousness by using religio-cultural activities to forge distinct Shia sectarian identities. The Al-Hussaini Association *(al-majlis al-husayni)*, referred to in the community as Balaghiyyeh, emphasises a particular style of Iraqi Shia folklore that places ritual activities as its centre to articulate an Iraqi Shia identity in the diaspora. The Association, established in 1985, is run by the prominent Balaghi family from Najaf and organizes commemorative gatherings during 'Ashura' in particular. The Balaghiyyeh is a good example of the spatial 'extension' (Knott 2009: 156) religious

diasporas undertake. In its religious gatherings, the Balaghiyyeh connects Brent with southern Iraq by recreating the rituals, discourses and overall atmosphere of a commemorative gathering in the homeland; speakers are invited from either Iraq or other countries in the Gulf, and there is a strong emphasis on the role Shia rituals play in maintaining the emotional and imagined link with the homeland (Shanneik 2018).

The Balaghiyyeh encourages in particular the inclusion of elements of Iraqi Shia folklore. During the last five nights of 'Ashura', male members of the congregation carry the *mash'al* (lit. 'torch'), a thick iron bar in the shape of a crescent held by wooden carriers with belts attached to it. It can be up to three metres long and is decorated with lanterns in different shapes and colours and other glass decorations that reflect the light from the lanterns. The *mash'al* symbolises the torch on the camel seat that carried the women and children from the family of the Prophet who survived Karbala and were taken to Damascus (Haydari 2015: 107–108). Other rituals include holding a mock wedding procession for Qasim, the son of Husayn's brother, on the ninth night of 'Ashura'. A little boy is dressed up as Qasim with a multi-layered tablet, decorated with lanterns and flowers and a miniature dome-structure on top (*qubbat al-qasim*), carried around. The procession is accompanied by drums and trumpets and flags being waved. The inclusion of Iraqi Shia material culture in the ritual activities give these gatherings a particular sense of authenticity and originality.

While such efforts to recreate an Iraqi Shia homeland which involves specific elements of Shia ritual culture suggests an understanding of Iraqi Shia identity defined in religio-cultural terms, background information on the Balaghi family on the website of the Al-Hussaini Association illustrates that such Shia ritual practices are imbued with political meaning. Information is provided on one of the ancestors of the Balaghi family, a prominent Shia cleric from Najaf, Grand Ayatollah Muhammad Jawad Al-Balaghi (1865/6–1933/4) who participated in the 1920 Shia uprising against British mandate rule (Tripp 2007:39–44). Further information is provided on the late 'Abd Al-Rasul Al-Balaghi, the founder of the Balaghiyyeh in London, by highlighting his participation in a major demonstration against Saddam Hussein in 1977. After a general clampdown on the public performance of Shia ritual activities in Iraq in the 1970s, the march from Najaf to the shrine of Imam Husayn in Karbala on the occasion of Arba'in, 40 days after the commemoration of his martyrdom, was banned by the Iraqi authorities in 1977. Shia pilgrims went on their march defying the ban and turned it into a major demonstration against Saddam Hussein's regime (Aziz 1993: 213–214). The biographical sketch on Balaghi does not provide much information on him but re-narrates the 1977 demonstration during the march to Karbala (The Hussaini Association 2017). Hence, the accounts demonstrate the role of ritual activities as a tool to articulate a distinct Shia identity and to counter political oppression. By highlighting the anti-regime activities of prominent members of Balaghi family in Iraq, the political credentials of the Balaghiyyeh as a place where this ritual heritage is kept alive in the diaspora are further advanced.

The organisers of the Balaghiyyeh, as natives of Najaf, follow the clerical leadership of Grand Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani, and his London representative and son-in-law Murtadha Kashmiri regularly attends and speaks at the gatherings. The spatial extension occurring in this particular Shia space in London also leads to certain discursive dissonances. In one of his talks, given during 'Ashura' in 2015, Kashmiri was critical of young Iraqis leaving their country, 'the country of the Commander of the Faithful

(*balad amir al-mu'minin* [Imam 'Ali]).' This statement was most likely motivated by the migrant and refugee crisis Europe experienced in the summer of 2015 which also included the influx of Iraqis fleeing ISIS. At the same time, Kashmiri also acknowledged the particular challenges of raising Shiis in the diaspora, stressing the importance of learning Arabic as 'the language of our creed (*lughat 'aqidatuna*).' In 2016, in one of first nights of 'Ashura' of that season, Kashmiri emphasised the role young Shiis in the West play as representatives of Islam and as role-models for Shia Islam who should aspire to the highest moral standards and follow the laws of Islam while at the same time adhering to the laws of the country in which they live. In these statements, that appear contradictory, the 'dual orientation' of diasporic communities comes to the fore: the Balaghiyyeh recreates an Iraqi Shia ritual universe in the diaspora and invites representatives of clerical authorities in Iraq to communicate its perspectives on current affairs (such as a reprimand to young Iraqis leaving their country). At the same time, it is also used as a space to remind young Shiis (and their parents) living in London of the core elements of their religion and their responsibilities as a minority community in the West. In the age of ISIS, a particular responsibility falls on Shiis living as a minority in the West to represent a different image of Islam and to ensure that Shia Muslims and their distinct sectarian identity are visible in the public and demarcated from violent expression of Sunni Islam.

Being 'apolitical' and Shii: The demotic potential of Shia religious folk culture

The Al-Khoie Foundation, Dar Al-Islam and Balaghiyyeh are all connected with the Iraqi centres of Shia Islam, whether the clerical authorities based on Najaf or Shia Islamist politics as embodied by Hizb Al-Da'wa. Other congregations make efforts to demarcate themselves from both the clerical leadership in Najaf and various expressions of political Islam in Shiism. Demotic processes and discourses to promote 'alternative' understandings of Shia religiosity to 'resist their marginalization and disciplining by secular nation-states, neo-orthodox movements and consumer capitalism' (McLoughlin and Zavos 2014: 172) can also be observed. Within the Shia field of Brent, the so-called Shiraziyyin are a prominent example of a movement within contemporary Shia Islam that stands outside the clerical establishment of Najaf and 'neo-orthodox' discourses stemming both from Hizb Al-Da'wa and the Islamic Republic of Iran.

The Shiraziyyin constitute a global network of clerical families, their followers and political groups who adhere to the religious and socio-political teachings of Muhammad Al-Shirazi (1928–2001) and his younger brothers. Stemming from a prominent clerical family in Karbala, Shirazi challenged the pre-eminence and political quietism of the clerical establishment in Najaf in the 1960s. Initially with close ideological ties to Khomeini, Shirazi settled in Qom, Iran, in 1979 and facilitated the export of Khomeini's ideology to Shia communities in the Gulf region (Louër 2008: 88–99). However, Muhammad Al-Shirazi grew increasingly disillusioned by the Iranian regime and articulated his opposition to Khomeini. He was placed under house arrest and died in 2001. His younger brother Sadiq Al-Shirazi (b. 1942) has acted as clerical leader of the Shiraziyyin since then.

In Brent, the Rasool Al-Adham has been the community centre congregating Shiraziyyin based in London since 1986. When examining the demographics of the Rasool Al-Adham congregation social class and regional identity markers are visible separating this congregation from other Iraqi Shia centres. Rasool Al-Adham primarily attracts a lower middle- and working-class congregation in contradistinction to the middle- and upper-class attendees of Al-Khoie and Dar Al-Islam. Regional identity markers are equally important. Being the followers of a prominent clerical family that originally hailed from Karbala, the Shiraziyyin in London primarily come from the Iraqi shrine city in which the third Shia Imam Husayn is buried.[7]

The role of Shia rituals in forging diasporic identities in Brent and as part of 'long-distance nationalism' has already been highlighted in relation to the Balaghiyyeh community centre. In the context of Rasool Al-Adham, the emphasis on the performance of Shia rituals is not only intended to recreate a Shia Iraqi space but serves further political purposes and is also used to give the Shiraziyyin in London a niche position within the 'market-place' of different Shia community centres in the area. Comparing the performance Shia rituals in the different congregations in Brent during the period of 'Ashura', the author was struck by their emotional intensity in Rasool Al-Adham. While in other community centres, efforts were made to control and subdue the passionate display of emotions during the ritual performances, those leading and involved in their performance in Rasool Al-Adham encouraged the congregations to express their devotion to the family of the Prophet in their strongest possible terms. The author observed the most intense rhythmic self-beating (*latmiyya*) in London in Rasool Al-Adham.

The material culture of Iraqi Shia folklore also plays a prominent role in the centre's ritual practice. The main wall of the *husayniyya* is decorated with a *takiyya*, a display of dozens of lambs in different colours which is an Iranian cultural tradition; such lamb displays are usually placed in front of houses in which the loss of a family member is mourned. Other ritual practices are performed in Rasool Al-Adham that are outwardly rejected by other Iraqi Shia congregations in Brent. Rasool Al-Adham is one of the few congregations in London that performs Shia passion plays (*tashabih*). The march of the survivors of the massacre in Karbala, in particular of Husayn's sister Zaynab, his daughter Ruqayya and his son and fourth Imam 'Ali Zayn Al-'Abidin, to Damascus as captives and their humiliation in front of the Umayyad caliph Yazid are re-enacted in the *husayniyya*. Other more controversial practices, performed in Rasool Al-Adham on the day of 'Ashura' itself, include self-flagellation, hitting the forehead with a sword to cause bleeding (*tatbir*), and walking on hot coal (*mashy 'ala al-jamr*). The latter practice illustrate the syncretic nature of Shia ritual practices; the Shiraziyyin in Karbala adopted walking on hot coal from South Asian Shiis when they performed a pilgrimage to the shrine of Imam Husayn in the 1960s.

All these elements create a particular 'aesthetic style' (Meyer 2009: 9) in Rasool Al-Adham that positions the Shiraziyyin uniquely within the Shia field in Brent and also delivers a political message. The Shiraziyyin and their clerical leaders have entertained difficult relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran, following the estrangement of Muhammad Al-Shirazi from Khomeini and when 'Ali Khamenei became Supreme Leader of Iran. Khamenei is one of the few senior clerics in contemporary Shia Islam who, in 1994, explicitly declared the performance of self-flagellation unlawful (*haram*).

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[7] The majority of Shiis living in Karbala are followers of Muhammad and Sadiq Al-Shirazi.

As a consequence, congregations affiliated to Iran or close to it have shunned this practice. Maintaining its performance by the Shiraziyyin is therefore also an act of political defiance, rejecting the hegemonic ambitions of the political establishment in Iran to exercise transnational control over Shia Islam. The Shiraziyyin also reject initiatives by the Islamic Republic and its clerical representatives to tone down the emotional intensity of Shia rituals and their sectarian message (such as cursing some of the Companions of the Prophet or the early Umayyad caliphs) to avoid antagonising and alienating Sunni Muslims. For the Shiraziyyin in London, this is an effort by the Iranian regime to deprive Shia Islam of its authentic identity by ridding it of those features that most significantly separate it from Sunni Islam (Dogra 2017). The Shiraziyyin in London accuse in particular the two community centres affiliated with political Shiism, Dar Al-Islam and the Iranian-sponsored Islamic Centre of England, of undermining the significance of Shia ritual practices to appease Sunni Muslims.

Another example of 'demotic processes' occurring in Brent is a small initiative of Iranian Shiis to create their own ritual space outside of the Islamic Centre of England, the community centre representing the Supreme Leader of Iran. Since 2012, a group of lay Iranian Shiis has organised religious activities according to the Shia religious calendar. Without a physical space of their own, the group has used different facilities across Brent. The attendees of the events are devout middle- and upper-class Iranian Shiis and also include a number of second-generation Iranians living in London. While the majority of the Iranian diaspora in Britain is secular, if not explicitly, anti-Islamic (Gholami 2014, 2015; Gholami and Sreberny 2018), this group consists of Iranians who identify as Shia and seek alternative spaces to practice their religious identity.

While not articulating an oppositional stance to the Islamic Republic and its spatial manifestation in the Islamic Centre in London, the organisers characterise themselves as 'non-political' in their approach. Their choice to run a Persian-speaking programme outside of the Islamic Centre provides them with more freedom in terms of speakers they can invite, the performance of rituals as well as their outreach to segments of the Iranian Shia diaspora who are not secular but would not feel comfortable attending religious events run by organizations associated with the Iranian regime. In 2015 and 2016, the group invited a religious speaker from Iran coming from a prominent family of preachers. The speaker's father was a popular preacher in Iran before the Islamic Revolution and part of the so-called *velayatis*, a group of scholars and preachers (*vo'az*) who emphasised the adherence to the authority and leadership (Arabic: *wilaya*, Persian: *velayat*) of the Twelve Imams. The *velayatis* opposed in particular the activities and discourses of 'Ali Shari'ati (1933–1977), an important ideologue of the Islamic Revolution (Rahnema 1998: 266–276).

At the religious gatherings in London, the preacher's lectures mostly focused on spiritual topics or the proper performance of rituals. In one of his lectures, the speaker emphasised the central authority of the Mahdi whose sovereignty (*velayat*) over-shadows any other authority. Taking this point even further, the speaker stated that all the writings and scholarship of the clerics are obliterated in the presence of the Mahdi. Such statements are prima facie common iterations of fundamental precepts of Twelver Shiism; upon his appearance, any religious and secular authority will be made redundant. However, such an emphasis on the absolute sovereignty of the Mahdi, even during the time of his occultation, could be understood as a veiled critique of the political system in Iran in which the country's Supreme Leader is invested with almost all spiritual and secular prerogatives of the Hidden Imam.

The performance of mourning rituals by this group of Iranian Shiis also differed from those performed in the Islamic Centre of England. While in the official London representation of the Supreme Leader, rituals are performed in a subdued manner, the Iranian group exhibited a much stronger emotional intensity when performing rhythmic self-beating (*sine zani* in Persian). The room was completely darkened while recordings of recited devotional poetry were played, accompanied by intense and passionate self-beating and crying. The reciters whose recordings were played are part of the *heyyati* movement in contemporary Iran, a group of lay reciters who represent a contemporary example of Iranian Shia religious folk culture. Their public performances during Shia holidays attract large young crowds and are viewed with disdain by the clerical establishment in the country (Thurfjell 2015).

The demotic Shia spaces created by the Shiraziyyin in Rasool Al-Adham and the Iranian group in London create 'the idea of an alternative, utopian, as well as potentially millenarian and apocalyptic, moral space exceeding the limits of their diasporic location and minority status' (McLoughlin and Zavos 2014: 170–171). For the Shiraziyyin this minority status unfolds and is experienced in three layers: as part of the Muslim minority in Britain, the Shia minority status within Islam and their marginalized position within mainstream Shia Islam and its 'neo-orthodox' discourses. The Shiraziyyin counter this sense of marginalization by claiming a unique access to and representation of authentic Shia Islam. For the older attendees of the small group of Iranian Shiis organizing their own events outside of the Islamic Centre of England, the commemorative lectures and subsequent mourning rituals are reminiscent of their childhood and youth experiences in Iran (see Dabashi 2011: 1–7; Shanneik 2018) and articulate a certain nostalgia for the homeland in the diaspora. The activities of this group allow them – as well as young attendees born in Britain – to reconnect with a part of their identity outside of the more politicized framework of religio-political institutions associated with the Islamic Republic. The particular 'aesthetic style' of this group emphasises aspects of Iranian Shia folklore independent of state control and also different to the more rationalizing and moralizing 'aesthetic styles' of Shia rituals promoted by movements within political Shiism and their spatial manifestations in London such as the Islamic Centre of England and Dar Al-Islam. An emphasis on 'spirituality' and experienced emotional intensity in the performance of rituals is shared by both the Shiraziyyin and the Iranian group while both would assess the political significance of their 'aesthetic styles' differently.

Conclusion

The urban concentration of different Shia community centres and organizations in Brent and their transnational connections with different clerical and political networks in contemporary Iraqi Shiism in particular allows for a close examination of their multilocality and complexity. They also reveal their segmented nature: the existence of different discursive and identitarian layers which are defined by class, clerical allegiance and ideological orientation and also strategically employed in their multilocal emplacement. Their segmentation defies the notion of a single British 'Shia diaspora', as 'a minority within a minority', whether Iraqi, Iranian or otherwise and cautions against generalized accounts of the particular political, ideological or doctrinal stances

of Iranian, Iraqi and other Shia groups in Britain. A differentiated perspective on these networks reveals their internal complexity and the simultaneity of divergent discourses, even within the same network.

On a local and national level, an organization like the Al-Khoie Foundation supports progressive agendas in its public outreach activities while adhering to traditional conceptions of religious authority and maintaining a strong diasporic consciousness among its own constituency in Brent. Transnational connectivities also reveal different dimensions: they can retain a prima facie religio-cultural emphasis, as the example of the Balaghiyyeh illustrates, or purport more politicized notions of 'long-distance nationalism', as illustrated by Dar Al-Islam. Yet, even such a delineation does not do justice to complex discursive layers evident in these centres: with its use of elements of Iraqi Shia folklore and its explicit connections to the clerical establishment in Najaf, the Balaghiyyeh maintains diasporic links to the homeland (Werbner 2010: 74) while also politicizing the memory of such ritual practices as an anti-regime act in the Iraq of Saddam Hussein to further its credentials within the network of communities in Brent. Similarly, Dar Al-Islam engages in different types of politics: from an identification and advancement of sectarian politics in Iraq post-2003 to more pan-Islamic notions of global Muslim solidarity against Western hegemony, a rejection of sectarian politics after the Arab Spring and an alignment with religio-political discourses of the Iranian regime. The co-existence of these different discursive layers within Dar Al-Islam challenges assumptions of a complete sectarianization of Shia identities in the diaspora or a clear cleavage between Iraqi and Iranian Shiis in London (Degli Esposti 2018a).

Demotic processes observed within some networks equally reveal different ideological positions. Cultivating a particular 'aesthetic style' of Shia ritual practices can articulate a clear and deliberate dissociation from the Islamic Republic of Iran, as the case of the Shiraziyyin suggests. The Shiraziyyin promote more controversial aspects of Shia ritual practices to defy their ban by the Iranian leadership. At the same time, they include in their ritual space aspects of Iranian Shia culture such as the *takiyye* to mark the community space as a place of mourning or the recitation of Shia devotional poetry in Persian. A dissociation from Iranian political control of Shia spaces in the diaspora can be more implicit and involuntary, when considering the group of Iranian Shiis in Brent. The orientation of their activities is triggered by nostalgia for aspects of Iranian Shia folklore lost in the diaspora or by the desire to carve out apolitical spaces of Shia religiosity outside state control.

A sense of double-marginalization is certainly purported in the public relations activities of the Al-Khoie Foundation or in other public manifestations of Shia communal identities such as the annual 'Ashura' and Arba'in processions in central London. During such activities discourses emerge that intend to position Shia Muslims in Britain as representatives of 'moderate' Islam and the victims of 'radical' versions of Sunni Islam (Degli Esposti 2018a; Scharbrodt 2011). However, such a strategically employed discursive positioning conceals the actual cleavages that exist between different communities and networks. Cleavages do not primarily manifest around ethnic (Iraqi/Iranian) or sectarian (Shia/Sunni) lines but are more pronounced in terms of the clerical allegiance and ideological orientation of the discussed networks. Hence, Twelver Shia Muslims in Brent, their community centres and organisations and the transnational networks they are part of constitute multilocal and complex 'social fields' marked by internal diversity, heterogeneity and power relations: these networks

delimitate trajectories of actions and discourses and serve as spaces that provide meaning to their members through shared *and* contested practices, discourses, symbols and rituals. Their power relations manifest in conflicting claims to authority and status within these networks and in political and ideological competitions with other networks. They also serve as alternative social spheres outside of state and society challenging 'dominant secular readings of civil society and citizenship' (Vásquez 2010: 302) or the rationalizing and politicizing tendencies of 'neo-orthodox movements' (McLoughlin and Zavos 2014: 176).

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