No. 120

Facets of Shi'ite Islam in Contemporary Southeast Asia (I): Thailand and Indonesia

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Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies

Singapore

29 December 2006

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ABSTRACT

Recent political events surrounding the Iranian "nuclear crisis", as well as the still unsettled fate of Iraq have resulted in a renewed interest in the Shi'ite dimension of Islam among political observers. In an earlier *IDSS Working Paper*, the author has tried to address some issues pertaining to Twelver Shi'ite Islamic thought, as well as conceptual and practical aspects. The present paper on facets of Shi'ite Islam in Thailand and Indonesia is the first of two that try to address the often sharply differing situations faced by Shi'ites in contemporary Southeast Asia. Its sequel will deal with selected issues pertaining to Singapore, and Malaysia.

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Dr Marcinkowski is the author of *Religion and Politics in Iraq. Shi'ite Clerics between Quietism and Resistance* (Singapore, 2004). His eighth and latest book, *Shi'ite Islam in Southeast Asia. Basic Concepts, Cultural and Historical Aspects, Contemporary Implications*, is forthcoming at Singapore University Press. Presently, he is working on a new book on contacts between Hadramaut in southern Arabia and Southeast Asia.

Facets of Shi'ite Islam in Contemporary Southeast Asia (I): Thailand and Indonesia

Introduction

Islamic studies are still a "sunrise industry"[1] at many Southeast Asian universities. However, recent political events surrounding the Iranian "nuclear crisis", as well as the still unsettled fate of Iraq, have also in Southeast Asia resulted in a renewed interest in the Shi'ite dimension of Islam among political observers. Shi'ite seminaries in Iran, for instance, have seen since the early 1980 a steadily increasing number of Shi'ite students from Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, Thailand and the Philippines. As they are a minority among the local Muslims, Southeast Asian Shi'ites are generally more open and receptive to their respective social (often non-Muslim) environment. A better understanding of Shi'ite Islam might thus be beneficial in order to arrive at a more differentiated picture of contemporary Southeast Asian Islam.

The current events in mainly Shi'ite Iraq and Iran should thus also be of concern to policy-makers in Southeast Asia, and this not only because of the possibility of the occurrence of certain "solidarity effects" among Muslims of the region in general. The recent phenomenon of a Shi'ite revival and "conversion" from Sunnism to Shi'ism among Southeast Asian Muslims appears to warrant particular attention in this context. Solid knowledge of the basic concepts of Shi'ism (as distinguishing it from Sunnism), as well as on the nature of Islamic civilization as manifested in this part of the world, are still indispensable in order to arrive at a *fact-oriented*, less sensational evaluation of current events. The fact of the presence of

[1] I would like to thank my colleague Mr Umej Bhatia, Deputy Director of the Middle East, North Africa and Central Asia Directorate and Head of the Political Islam Study Group at Singapore's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, for conveying to me this rather ingenious expression.

Shi'ism in Southeast Asia in history has to be seen within the context of the course and circumstances of the region's process of Islamization, both of which are still the subject of heated debate among scholars.[2] To the mind of the present writer, a more holistic approach to the study of Islamic civilization in the Malay-Indonesian archipelago is needed in order to avoid the serious dangers of misinterpreting and dealing out of context with the recent phenomenon of renewed interest in Shi'ism among Muslims in contemporary Southeast Asia.

In an earlier *IDSS Working Paper*, this writer has tried to address some issues pertaining to Twelver Shi'ite Islamic thought, as well as conceptual and practical aspects.[3] The present paper on facets of Shi'ite Islam in Thailand and Indonesia is the first of two that tries to address the often sharply differing situations faced by Shi'ites in contemporary Southeast Asia. Its sequel will deal with selected issues pertaining to Singapore, and Malaysia.

On 'Schools' and 'Rites'

In order to consider the revival of Shi'ite Islam in the Archipelago within the context of Southeast Asian Islamic civilization it has to be kept in mind that the overwhelming majority of the Muslims in Southeast Asia today are Sunnites. In their

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[2] For a good summary of the prevailing (and at times conflicting) theories see Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *Preliminary Statement on a General Theory of the Islamization of the Malay-Indonesian Archipelago* (Kuala Lumpur, 1969); idem, "Indonesia. iv-History: (a) Islamic period," in: *The Encyclopedia of Islam*, new ed., vol. 2, pp. 1218-21; G. W. J. Drewes, "New Light on the Coming of Islam to Indonesia?" in: *Readings on Islam in Southeast Asia*, ed. Ahmad Ibrahim, Sharon Siddique, and Yasmin Hussain (Singapore, 1990), pp. 7-19; A. Gordon, ed., *The Propagation of Islam in the Indonesian-Malay Archipelago* (Kuala Lumpur, 2001). I have dealt with the issue of historical Shi'ism in the region in an earlier, somewhat more preliminary study, of which what follows is an extension; see C. Marcinkowski, "Shi'ites in South-East Asia," *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, New York, Columbia University, forthcoming in print, available online at http://www.iranica.com/newsite/ (accessed on May 3, 2006). See also my forthcoming *Shi'ite Islam in Southeast Asia. Basic Concepts, Cultural and Historical Aspects, Contemporary Implications*.

[3] C. Marcinkowski, "Twelver Shi'ite Islam: Conceptual and Practical Aspects," *IDSS Working Paper* no. 114, July 2006 (Singapore, Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies), forthcoming at the time of writing.

theological outlook they are overwhelmingly Ash'arites.[4] Ash'arism can well be considered as 'mainstream Sunnite theology'. It is named after its originator, Abū 'l-Hasan al-Ash'arī (d. 935 C.E.), who is a 10th-century sympathiser of Sunnite theology. It can be seen as a reaction against the extreme rationalism of *Mu'tazilite* theology, which was influential in the Middle Ages, during the classical period of Islam.[5] According to al-Ash'arī, human reason is second to divine revelation as it is supposed to be unable to distinguish independently between good and evil. It is up to Allāh alone to decide on the goodness or evil of a particular action. For mankind, the only way to receive authentic information on religious truths is through revelation. With regard to the issue of the divine attributes, Ash'arism affirmed them—although rejecting outright anthropomorphism. This is in sharp contrast to the views held by the *Mu'tazilites* (and Twelver Shi'ites, one has to add) who saw in Qur'anic references to a "Hand of God" and in other physical attributes purely metaphorical expressions. Very famous within the history of Islamic theology is the Ash'arite notion that the Qur'an –being the "Word of God—is eternal and thus *un*created. This, too, is contrary to the views of the *Mu'tazilites* and Twelver Shi'ites. Apparently, al-Ash'arī's main intention was to preserve the notion of God's omnipotence. However, the continuing tight grip of Ash'arism over Sunnite theology until this very day is often held responsible for the prevailing determinism in that denomination.

With regard to matters of Islamic law and devotional matters, most of Southeast Asia's Sunnite Muslims adhere to the Sunnite Shāfi'ite "school".[6] Perhaps

[4] For a comprehensive study see R. J. McCarthy, ed., *The Theology of al*-Ash'ari (Beirut, 1953). A more recent treatment of Ash'arite theology is D. Gimaret, *La doctrine d' Ash'ari* (Paris, 1990).

[5] For an introduction see R. C. Martin, M. R. Woodward, and D. S. Atmaja, *Defenders of Reason in Islam: Mu'tazilism from Medieval School to Modern Symbol* (Oxford, 1997).

[6] For the key text of Shāfi'ite jurisprudence see Majid Khadduri, *Islamic Jurisprudence: Shafi'i's Risāla* (Cambridge, 1987).

"legal rite" would be more in place than "school",[7] an expression which is unfortunately still dominating the pertinent literature, in particular in the West. "School" is rather misleading, as it would include also matters of theology, which is not what the Arabic technical term *madhhab* (plural: *madhāhib*) conveys. Today, aside from the Shāfi'ites, only three of those 'legal rites' are extant among the Sunnites: The Hanafite rite, usually seen as the most moderate one among the Sunnite rites, is today predominant in Central Asia, Turkey, the Balkans and on the Indian subcontinent (it had been the official rite in the Ottoman Empire, Mughal India, and other Muslim dynasties of Turkic origin); the *Mālikites*, almost exclusively in North and Northwest Africa; and the Hanbalites (commonly considered the most conservative and strict Sunnite *madhhab*), mostly on the Arabian Peninsula. Wahhābism, today dominating Saudi Arabia and certain strata of Sunni extremism elsewhere, is not a legal rite but a purist political movement that originated on the Arabian Peninsula in the mid-18th century.[8]

In terms of geographical distribution, Shāfi'ites are dominating the Malay-Indonesian world (including Singapore, southern Thailand, and the southern Philippines), Egypt, Syria, Jordan, Palestine, and Iraq (as far as the Sunnites there are concerned). Southern India, too, contains Shāfi'ite pockets. As a matter of fact, the majority of the Muslims there are Shāfi'ites, a circumstance which is highly relevant when discussing the course of the Islamisation process of Southeast Asia in history. Moreover, it is often forgotten in contemporary discourse that Iran, too, had been one

[7] For an authoritative history of those "legal rites" in Islam see Muhammad Abū Zahrā, *Ta'rīkh al-madhāhib al-fiqhiyyah* [History of the Islamic legal rites] (Cairo, n.d.) (in Arabic). See now also P. Bearman, R. Peters, and F. E. Vogel, eds., *The Islamic School of Law. Evolution, Devolution, and Progress* (Cambridge MA, 2006).

[8] For recent comprehensive treatments of Wahhabism with evaluations that differ widely from each other see Hamid Algar, *Wahhabism: A Critical Essay* (Oneonta NY, 2002), and Natana J. Delong-Bas, *Wahhabi Islam: From Revival and Reform to Global Jihad* (New York, 2004).

of the centres of Shāfi'ite Sunnite scholarship - prior to the establishment there of Twelver Shi'ism as 'religion of state' in Iran in 1501 under the Safavid dynasty.

However, it is not so much the question of 'legal matters' or 'rite' that sets Sunnites and Shi'ites apart.[9] As a matter of fact, the Shāfi'ite and *ja'farī* "schools" – the 'legal rite' of Twelver Shi'ism–are perhaps closer to each other then the Sunnite "schools" among themselves. They differ, however, in their approach towards the issue of religious and political authority, and above all - to the mind of the present author—towards the essential meaning and place of religion and spirituality in general.

Throughout Islamic history, Ash'arite theology, which now permeates and dominates Sunnite Islam, tended to be more acquiescent towards the respective political system, that is to say, the one or other dynasty of the day whose main argument had been military power. The further implications of this circumstance are beyond the scope of the present study which focuses on Shi'ite Islam. Nevertheless, it should be noted here in passing that the recent "activities" of the Al Qaeda terrorist network and its off-shots throughout the Sunni Muslim arena are also highly significant within the context of Islamic theology as they explicitly target Sunni regimes which are branded by them 'un-Islamic' or 'not Islamic enough'. From the perspective of the history of classical Sunni theology and "orthodox" Sunni political thought, however, this kind of attitude towards established political power constitutes certainly an 'innovation'.

The author would like to close this brief introduction to the issue of "legal schools" by referring to the late Mahmūd Shaltūt (1893-1963), a leading Sunni Egyptian scholar. From 1958 to 1963, Shaltūt had been the Shaykh or Grand Imām,

[9] For a good comparative study see Muhammad Jawād Mughniyyah, *Al-Fiqh 'alā 'l-madhāhib al-khamsah* [Islamic law according to the five legal rites] (Beirut, 1402 AH/1960) (in Arabic), which is, to my knowledge, still not available in English translation.

i.e. the leader, of Al-Azhar University, one of the main centers of Sunni scholarship in the world, but actually founded in the 10th century by the Fatimids—a Shi'ite Ismā'īlī dynasty. Shaltūt, as head of of Al-Azhar one of the most respected authorities in Sunni Islam, is particularly remembered for introducing the teaching of *Zaydite* and Twelver Shi'ite *fiqh* to the university alongside the jurisprudence of the four 'recognized' Sunni *maḏhāhib* or 'legal schools'.[10] He was also involved in a dialogue movement with Shi'ite Islam, known as *taqrīb al-maḏhāhib.* The leading Iraqi Shi'ite scholar Shaykh Muhammad Husayn Âl Kāshif al-Ghitā (1877-1954) was part of that movement as well. Concern for social aspects, a deeply felt conviction that sectarian conflicts are essentially a sociological phenomenon, as well as an appreciation of the value of comparative jurisprudence in the study of law, might have moved Shaltūt into the direction of a Sunni-Shi'ite rapprochement which resulted in the famous religious verdict (*fatwā*) that was issued by him in July 1959 and announced on July 6 of that year. The text of the *fatwā* is worth to be quoted here in full. It is self-explanatory and runs as follows:

> "His Excellency [Shaltūt] was asked:
>
> 'Some believe that, for a Muslim to have religiously correct worship and dealing, it is necessary to follow one of the four known [Sunnite] legal schools, whereas the Twelver Shi'ite (*al-Shī'ah al-Imāmiyyah*) school is not one of them nor the Zaydite (*al-Shī'ah al-Zaydiyyah*). Do your Excellency agree with this opinion, and prohibit following the

[10] On the issue of Shaltūt and Sunnite-Shi'ite *rapprochement* during the 1950s see also F. R. C. Bagley, "The Azhar and Shiism," *Muslim World* 50 (1960), pp. 122-29, and K. Zebiri, "Shaykh Mahmud Shaltut: Between Tradition and Modernity," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 2, no. 2 (1991), pp. 210-24.

Twelver Shi'ite (*al-Shī'ah al-Imāmiyyah al-Ithnā 'Ashariyyah*) school of thought, for example?'

His Excellency replied:

'(1) Islam does not require a Muslim to follow a particular legal school (*madhhab*). Rather, we say: every Muslim has the right to follow one of the schools of thought which has been correctly narrated and its verdicts have been compiled in its books. And, everyone who is following such *madhāhib* [legal schools] can transfer to another school, and there shall be no crime on him for doing so.

(2) The *ja'farī* legal school, which is also known as the Twelver Shi'ite (*al-Shī'ah al-Imāmiyyah al-Ithnā 'Ashariyyah*) school is a school that is religiously correct to follow in worship as are other Sunnite schools. Muslims must know this and ought to refrain from unjust prejudice to any particular school, since the religion of Allah and His Divine Law (*sharī'ah*) were never restricted to a particular legal school. Their jurists (*mujtahidūn*) are accepted by Almighty Allah, and it is permissible to the "non-*mujtahid*" to follow them and to accord with their teaching whether in acts of worship (*'ibādāt*) or [social] transactions (*mu'āmalāt*).'"[11]

[11] "Al-Azhar Verdict (Fatwa) on the Shia", available online at http://www.geocities.com/Tokyo/Spa/7220/azhar.html (accessed on July 3, 2006, transliteration and spellings of technical terms corrected and adjusted and translation upgraded by the present writer).

In the following, we shall have a look on manifestations of Twelver Shi'ite Islam in contemporary Thailand. Elsewhere, I have tried to address some aspects of the historical presence of Shi'ism in Thailand, especially in the Ayutthaya period.[12]

Thailand: A Tiny Minority with a Great History

The *CIA World Factbook*[13] on June 2006, states that Thailand's population figure was at 64,631,595 and the percentage of Muslims in the kingdom at a rather low 4.6%, *vis-à-vis* 94.6% Buddhists. Here is not the place to discuss these figures, although perhaps the actual Muslim percentage might be up to 10%. More importantly, the Muslim community of present-day Thailand, although not ethnically homogeneous, is culturally dominated by southern Thailand's Malays who adhere firmly to the Sunni Shāfi'ite legal school.[14] Their cultural and religious perspective is directed towards neighbouring Malaysia and the Arab world, rather than toward Iran or India as it was

[12] See C. Marcinkowski, *From Isfahan to Ayutthaya. Contacts between Iran and Siam in the 17th Century*, with a foreword by Professor Ehsan Yarshater, Columbia University (Singapore, 2005).

[13] Central Intelligence Agency, *The World Factbook*, available online at http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/th.html (accessed on June 27, 2006).

[14] RISEAP [Regional Islamic Da'wah Council of Southeast Asia and the Pacific] (ed.), *Muslim Almanach Asia Pacific*, pp. 206-20 (on Thailand); Farouk Omar , "The Muslims of Thailand: A Survey," in: Andrew D. W. Forbes, ed., *The Muslims of Thailand*, 2 vols, Gaya (Bihar/India), 1988, vol. 1, pp. 1-30. For general accounts of the history of Islam in Thailand see M. Gilquin (tr. M. Smithies), *The Muslims of Thailand* (Chiangmai, 2005). Important sources in Thai language are Khatchatphai Burutsaphat, *Thai mutsalim* [Thai Muslims] (Bangkok, 1976), and Kukrit Pramoj, "Khwam pen ma khong mutsalim nai prathet thai" [History of the Muslims in Thailand], *Warasan Chumchon Chula* 22, no. 3 (23 October 1970), pp. 19-40. For introductions to the "problem" of Islam in Southern Thailand, in other parts of the kingdom and on other social issues see C. Kersten, "The Predicament of Thailand's Southern Muslims," *American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 21, no. 4 (2004), pp. 1-29, W. Kraus, "Islam in Thailand. Notes on the History of Muslim Provinces, Thai Islamic Modernism and the Separatist Movement in the South," *Journal of the Institute of Muslim Minority Affairs* 5, no. 2 (July 1984), pp. 410-25, R. Scupin, "The Socio-Economic Status of Muslims in Central and North Thailand," *Journal of the Institute of Muslim Minority Affairs* 3, no. 2 (Winter 1981), pp. 162-89, idem, "Muslims in South Thailand: A Review Essay," *Journal of the Institute of Muslim Minority Affairs* 9, no. 2 (July 1988), pp. 404-19, and Arong Suthasasna, "Occupational Distribution of Muslims in Thailand: Problems and Prospects," *Journal of the Institute of Muslim Minority Affairs* 5, no. 1 (January 1984), pp. 234-42. An interesting introduction to traditional religious education among Southern Thai (Sunnite) Muslims is Hasan Madmarin. *The Pondok and Madrasah in Patani* (Bangi, Selangor/Malaysia, 2002, 2nd printing). See also W. K. Che Man, *The Administration of Islamic Institutions in Non-Muslim States: The Case of Singapore and Thailand* (Singapore, 1991) and C. Marcinkowski, "'Kidnapping' Islam? Some Thoughts on Southern Thailand's Muslim Community between Ethnocentrism and Constructive Conflict Solution," available online at http://mis-pattani.pn.psu.ac.th/registra/grade/temp/speech/20020823/Panel18%5B1%5D.htm (accessed on February 23, 2006, also forthcoming in print).

the case during the Ayutthaya period. The main historical factor behind the dominance of Sunnite Islam among the Muslims of contemporary Thailand seems to be–aside from the end of the 'Persian intermezzo' during the Ayutthaya period—the incorporation in 1902 of the four southern princely states of Narathiwat, Pattani, Yala, and Satun into the administrative framework of the kingdom, resulting in Islam becoming the country's largest minority religion.[15] The dominance of Sunnite Islam resulted also in 1945 in the appointment of a Sunnite *chularajmontri* instead of the previous Shi'ite ones who had been members of the Bunnag family and as such descendants of 'Shaykh Ahmad of Qum', the pivotal Persian immigrant scholar and merchant favoured by the Ayutthaya kings and raised by them to the highest administrative positions.[16] Despite the end of the 'Shi'ite dominance' after the end of the Ayutthaya kingdom in the middle of the 18th century, Shi'ite Muslims, mostly ethnic Pathans, but also new Thai and ethnic Malay 'converts' continue to live in the kingdom. Shi'ites are now merely an insignificant minority in metropolitan Bangkok which, perhaps, comes to a surprise to most given the great history of Shi'ism in Thailand in the Ayutthaya period. Although it is impossible to give any numbers, local sources from the Thai Shi'ite community I have spoken to put the number of Shi'ites in Thailand at "about one percent of the country's Muslim population", which would result in several ten thousands, depending on which population figures one is basing an assessment. According to the U.S. Department of State, Thailand's

[15] Imtiyaz Yusuf, "Islam and Democracy in Thailand: Reforming the Office of *Chularajmontri/Shaykh al-Islām*," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 9 (1998), p. 284.

[16] Ibid. See on the 1997 reorganization of the office of *chularajmontri* also Teerapol Arunakasikorn et. al., *The Royal Act on Islamic Organization Administration* (Bangkok, 1999), Division 1, Articles 6-10, pp. 9-12 (in Thai, unfortunately, I had no access to this work which is quoted in Chaiwat Satha-Anand, "Praying in the Rain: the Politics of Engaged Muslims in Anti-War Protest in Thai Society," *Pacifica Review: Peace, Security & Global Change* 16, no. 2 (June 2004), p. 161, n. 44).

> "[…] Religious Affairs Department (RAD) reports that there are 3,479 registered mosques in 64 provinces, with the largest number in Pattani Province. The majority of these mosques are associated with the Sunni branch of Islam. The remainders, estimated by the RAD to be from 1 to 2 percent of the total, are associated with the Shi'a branch of Islam."[17]

At any rate, Shi'ite life in modern Thailand seems to be dominated entirely by the Iranian embassy in Bangkok and its Cultural Centre, in spite of the presence of the rather quietist 'As-Sayyid Al-Khoei (Al-Sayyid al-Khū'ī) Centre'[18] in the same city. This author tried to find out more about the Al-Khū'ī Centre but have been told that it was no longer active. Ayatollah Sayyid Abū 'l-Qāsim al-Khū'ī (1899-1992) was perhaps one of the most respected Najaf-based Shi'ite quietist scholars of the 20th century. He was fervently dedicated to establishing under his name welfare, social, cultural, and educational institutions for Muslims worldwide, such as in London, New York, Lebanon, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Thailand.

The Iranian embassy (located at 602 Sukhumvit Road—between Soi 22 and 24–Klongtoey, Wattana, Bangkok 10110) tries to promote a for Iran 'favourable environment' by convening conferences and publishing Classical Persian literature in Thai translation, such as the works of the mystical poets Hāfiz, Sa'dī, Rūmī, and others. Shaykh Ahmad and the history of the long-standing historical presence of Iranians in Siam, for instance, has been the subject of several conferences in

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[17] U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, "International Religious Freedom Report 2005: Thailand," available online at http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2005/51531.htm (accessed on July 5, 2006).

[18] I would like to thank my friend Khun Adul Dantakean, Editor in the Nation Multimedia Group, Bangna, Bangkok, for forwarding this information to me.

Thailand—mostly in conjunction with several local universities. The Cultural Center of the Iranian embassy (located separately from the embassy building at 12 Sukhumvit Road, Soi 29, Klongtoey, Wattana, Bangkok 10110) houses on its compound a 'Shaykh Ahmad Qumi Library' with mostly religious books and publications on Iran and its history and culture. The Cultural Centre was always actively involved in the organization of those conferences: the first was held in 1994 at Ayutthaya's Historical Study Centre. It resulted in the publication of a proceedings volume in Thai, somewhat limited in academic and editorial quality, with selected English abstracts.[19] Another meeting, attended by the present writer and somewhat similar in character, took place on March 1, 2003, at the Asia-Pacific Institute of Bangkok's Srinakharinwirot University under the title "Conference on the Thai-Iranian Relations: Past-Present-Future".[20] A third conference that was also attended by this author, entitled "International Conference on the Effects of Persian Sufism on Southeast Asia". It was jointly organized by Bangkok's Catholic Assumption University and the Iranian embassy, and was held on February 7-8, 2004. A proceedings volume of this event was published in the course of the same year.[21] Lastly, the Iranian embassy organized the forth meeting under the headline "Conference on Shaykh Ahmad Ghomi", which took place in Bangkok from November 23-24, 2005, mainly thought as an official commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Iran and the Kingdom of Thailand in 1955. It is worth noting that Thailand was apparently the first

[19] Cultural Center of the Islamic Republic of Iran [Bangkok] (ed.), *Sheikh Ahmad Qomi and the History of Siam* (Bangkok, 1995/2538 Buddhist Era).

[20] Apparently, a proceedings volume of this conference was published by the Cultural Centre of the Iranian Embassy but I have been unable to verify this.

[21] Imtiyaz Yusuf (ed.), *Measuring the Effects of Iranian Mysticism in Southeast Asia* (Bangkok, 2004).

Southeast Asian country with which Iran re-established permanent diplomatic relations during Iran's Pahlavī period (1925-79).[22]

As witnessed by this author on various occasions during his visits to Bangkok, most of the members of the Thai staff working at the Iranian embassy appear to be former seminarians of the Twelver Shi'ite study centres in Iran, such as Qum. With some of them, the present writer was able to converse fluently with in Persian. Most of them are rather "unconditional" adherents of Iran and its current political system. Because of this, they often find themselves in isolation *vis-à-vis* their Sunni compatriots and have almost nothing in common with the Southerners and their struggle for more autonomy.

In terms of 'security concerns' from the part of the Thai government it might be stated that so far, Shi'ites have not been singled out as distinct from their Sunni brethren, as the Muslims in the kingdom are generally seen as part of the 'southern problem', i.e. ethnic Malay separatism. This might change in case of an escalation of the Iran-Iraq 'issue'—which involves the United States, Thailand's closest ally. In that scenario we might see a repetition of the events of the 1980s which saw 'the Shi'ites' worldwide portrayed and singled out as 'potential security risks' and 'walking time bombs'. This, by the way, might not only be the case with regard to Thailand. On the other hand, for the future, this author cannot foresee any changes with regard to the reliance of Thailand's Shi'ites on Iran as the funding of Shi'ite cultural and religious activities seems to depend almost entirely on that country.

Finally, it should be mentioned here only in passing that Shi'ite as well as Persian cultural influences are apparently also still detectible in neighbouring Myanmar, formerly known as Burma. Mergui and Tenasserim, located in the deep

[22] For a brief account of Thai-Iranian relations see C. Marcinkowski, "Thailand-Iranian Relations," *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, New York, Columbia University, forthcoming in print, available online at http://www.iranica.com/newsite/ (accessed on May 3, 2006).

south of that country, belonged once—from the second half of the 15th century onwards—to the Siamese Ayutthaya kingdom. Both cities had been important harbour cities which attracted in the past also Shi'ite and Persian merchants to settle down there. Apparently, their descendents are still present in Myanmar, since the author has been informed by Mr Mohammed Rosli b. Hassan, the leader of Singapore's Shi'ite community (who shall be referred to again in the sequel to this article), that Burmese Muslims once visited him at his mosque and recited supplications in Persian, although they had not been able to understand their meaning or to have a conversation in that language.

Shi'ites in Secular Indonesia

Research on Shi'ite Islam in contemporary Indonesia would certainly warrant a separate study. Some work has already been carried out, [23] and the Indonesian academic journal *Ulumul Qur'an*, for instance, even dedicated on the issue an exclusive volume to which leading Indonesian and international scholars have contributed.[24] What follows is thus just thought to stimulate some interest in further research.

[23] See, for instance, Syed Farid Alatas, "The *Tarīqat al-'Alawiyyah* and the Emergence of the Shi'i School in Indonesia and Malaysia," *Oriente Moderno* 18 (1999), pp. 323-39, Azyumardi Azra, "Syi'ah di Indonesia: Tinjauan ulang" (Shi'ism in Indonesia: A Reconsideration), *Pelita*, 11 December 1990 (in Indonesian), and B. Baried, "Le shi'isme en Indonesie," *Archipel* 15 (1978), pp. 65-84. See also A. Rahman Zainuddin (with M. Hamdan Basyar), *Syi'ah dan politik di Indonesia* (Shi'ism in Indonesia) (Bandung, 2000) (in Indonesian).

[24] *Ulumul Qur'an, Jurnal Ilmu dan Kebudayaan* (Jakarta), 6, no. 4 (1995). Of particular interest are the following articles therin (all in Indonesian): Azyumardi Azra, "Syi'ah di Indonesia: antara mitos dan reality," (Shi'ism in Indonesia: between myth and reality), pp. 4-19; idem, "Lembaga-lembaga Syi'ah di Indonesia" (Shi'ite organizations in Indonesia), pp.20-26; Shahla Haeri, "Perkahwinan mut'ah dan improvisasi budaya" (*Mut'ah* marriage and the improvisation of culture), pp.46-85; Fauzul Iman, "Posisi *marja' taqlīd* dalam Syia'ah Imamiyah," (The position of the *marja' taqlīd* in Twelver Shi'ite Islam), pp.86-91; Jalaluddin Rakhmat, "Dikotomi Sunni-Syi'ah tidak relevan lagi" (The Sunnite-Shi'ite dichotomy is not relevant anymore), pp. 92-103 (the last article consists actually of an interview which is also available online at http://media.isnet.org/islamEtc/DikotomiSS1.html, accessed on July 5, 2006).

As the author tried to show elsewhere,[25] Shi'ite Islam has also a long-standing historical footing in what is now Indonesia and 'philosophical Sufism' and the *wujūdiyyah* movement in 17th century Acheh as well as the *hikayat* genre of classical Malay literature had strong Shi'ite undercurrents. Shi'ite-inspired festivals are still encountered in the Archipelago, even if many of their mostly Sunnite participants might not be aware of their origins. As in the case of Malaysia, Thailand and Singapore, however, the recent interest in and revival of Shi'ite Islam in Indonesia from the early 1980s onwards has to be seen within the impact of the Iranian revolution of 1979 on the Muslim world at large. Shi'ite life in Indonesia appears to be mostly concentrated on Java, especially in the capital Jakarta, but also in Bandung, and Surabaya. Given the fact that Indonesia is the country with the largest number of Muslims in the world,[26] and given also the extent of opportunities for Shi'ites to organize themselves under the present political system, the number of Shi'ites in the country, too, might be much higher in proportion when compared with some other countries in the region. There are no official statistics, but Hong Kong's *Asia Times Online*, in an article on Iraq-based Grand Ayatollah Sīstānī, published on August 31, 2005, gives the figure "3 to 4 million [Shi'ites] in Southeast Asia", based one of Sīstānī's close aides in Qum.[27] Although those figures appear to be highly exaggerated and tell us nothing about the actual commitment of the followers, they seem to be somehow confirmed by the US State Department which in its annual International Religious Freedom Report for 2005 states that "there are between 1 and 3

[25] See Marcinkowski, *From Isfahan to Ayutthaya. Contacts between Iran and Siam in the 17th* Century, chapter 2.

[26] In July 2006, it was estimated that the number of Indonesia's population was approaching about 245. 5 million, of which 88% had been Muslim; see Central Intelligence Agency, *The World Factbook*, available online at http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/id.html (accessed on July 5, 2006).

[27] P. Escobar, "Waiting for the Mahdi, Part 1: Sistani, Qom: In the Wired Heart of Shi'ism," available online at http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle_East/GH31Ak03.html (accessed on July 5, 2005).

million Shi'a practitioners nationwide".[28] This would make Indonesia the spearhead of Shi'ite Islam in Southeast Asia, taking into account the persecution faced by Shi'ite Muslims in Malaysia, and their rather limited number in other parts of the region. Although there are no statistics available, one would perhaps not be too wrong to see the democratization process in post-Suharto Indonesia as the main reason for the comparatively high number of Shi'ites in that country. Consequently, we find Indonesian Shi'ite organizations often cooperating with the movement usually referred to as "Liberal Islam",[29] although not necessarily agreeing to all it s practical interpretations or its worldview.

As the present author observe when living in Iran from 1984 to 1986, Indonesian Shi'ites - in most cases neophytes – studied *en masse* at the seminaries at Qum, especially at the *Madrasah-ye Hujjatiyyah*. During a visit to Qum in early 2000, the author noticed that this school was still hosting exclusively international students. Within the Indonesian context, under the Suharto regime the country's Shi'ites had been considered as a major threat to the state. As the author was told in the 1980s during my stay in Iran, most of them were forced to practice *taqiyyah* in the face of state persecution. Their situation then might thus have been similar to that still faced by their Malaysian brethren, although for different reasons. Whereas in Malaysia the main concerns of the government of that country appear to have been in terms of 'dangers to Malay unity' and 'orthodox creed', in Indonesia Shi'ism –perceived as a 'revolutionary movement' rather than a quietist one—was seen as a threat to the stability of the Suharto regime, just as any other oppositional group. In the words of

[28] US Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, "International Religious Freedom Report 2005: Indonesia," available online at http://72.14.235.104/search?q=cache:25du1FJhRdgJ:www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2005/51512.htm+indonesia+shi%27a&hl=en&gl=sg&ct=clnk&cd=4 (accessed on July 5, 2006).

[29] See Liberal Islam Network, "About Lliberal Islam," available online at http://islamlib.com/en/aboutus.php (accessed on July 6, 2006).

Martin van Bruinessen, Professor of Islamic Studies at Utrecht University and at Leiden's International Institute for the Study of Islam in the Modern World (ISIM),

> "Shi'sm came to be singled out as a major threat from the 1980s on, when the effects of the Iranian revolution made themselves felt in Indonesia. Dozens of anti-Shi'a books and pamphlets, in which Shi'sm is frequently depicted as a Jewish invention, were printed and widely distributed".[30]

However, in the Indonesia of the post-Suharto era, the country's Shi'ites appear to benefit from the general climate of political liberalization, although only the future will reveal the extent to which they will be able to profit from it.[31] Shi'ites are now actively involved in intellectual exchange with other Indonesians. In an interesting interview with the journal *Ulumul Qur'an*, Shi'ite intellectual and perhaps currently the leading Shi'ite scholar of the country, Jalaluddin Rakhmat (also known as "Kang Jalal"),[32] defines Indonesian Shi'ism rather in terms of an intellectual movement rather than a revolutionary one.[33] Rakhmat is heading the *Ikatan Jamaah Ahlulbait Indonesia* (IJABI), a Java-based Shi'ite association with many outlets allover the country. IJABI is very active in the publications sector and the organizing

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[30] M. van Bruinessen, "Post-Soeharto Muslim Engagements with Civil Society and Democratization," paper presented at the Third International Conference and Workshop "Indonesia in Transition", organised by the Royal Dutch Academy of Sciences (Koninklijke Nederlandse Akademie van Wetenschappen, KNAW) and Labsosio, Universitas Indonesia, held at Universitas Indonesia, Depok, n. 1. The paper had only been available to me online at www.knaw.nl/indonesia/transition/workshop/2004_4.pdf (accessed on July 5, 2006).

[31] For a good introduction to Islamic politics in Indonesia during the post-Suharto period see Arskal Salim and Azyumardi Azra, eds. *Sharia and Politics in Modern Indonesia* (Singapore, 2004), and Bahtiar Effendy, *Islam and the State in Indonesia* (Singapore, 2003).

[32] For some of his publications see Ekuator. Indonesian Book Gallery, "Jalaluddin Rahmat," available online at http://www.ekuator.com/index.p?see=katalog&penulis=Jalaluddin%20Rakhmat (accessed on July 5, 2006).

[33] Jalaluddin Rakhmat, "Mayoritas Syi'ah di Indonesia adalah Syi'ah intelektual," available online at http://free.prohosting.com/~anands/jalal.htm (accessed on July 5, 2006).

of conferences as well as in dialogue and rapprochement with the Sunnites and other religious communities in the country.[34] Sunnite scholars, too, such as Professor Azyumardi Azra, a leading Indonesian scholar on Islam and Professor of History as well as Rector of the Syarif Hidayatullah State Islamic University in Jakarta, have published on Shi'ism in the same journal.[35]

Shi'ite educational life, too, appears to be thriving now.[36] Several Shi'ite organizations in the country are active in the educational sector and are currently experiencing an unprecedented flourishing. Only some of them can be referred here. Shi'ites are now able to maintain several institutions of higher learning of their own, such as *SMS Plus Muthahhari* in Bandung which was established in the1990s and named after the late Iranian Ayatollah Mutahharī.[37] Perhaps the most interesting project so far is that of the Islamic College for Advanced Studies (ICAS) in Jakarta. Currently, the college offers Bachelor Degrees in Islamic Studies as well as Masters Degrees in Islamic Philosophy and Islamic Mysticism, respectively. In the estimation of the present writer the college is supported by *khums* funds from 'quietist' clerics such as Grand Ayatollah Sīstānī, but this assertion, of course, remains to be proven. What makes it an interesting project is that is does go beyond the usual *madrasah*-like type of education. The college describes itself as a twinning program kind of

[34] IJABI's website is available at http://www.ijabi.org/ (accessed on July 5, 2006).

[35] See "Select Bibliography: Printed Sources".

[36] New information might be gleaned from Zulkifli, "The Education of Indonesian Shi'i Leaders," unpublished paper presented on Friday, 20 May, 2005, at the *Workshop on the Education of Southeast Asian Islamic Leadership*, held from May 19-20, 2005, at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS), Singapore. Unfortunately, I had no access to this paper. I am grateful to my colleague Ms Faizah bte. Abdul Samat, Research Analyst at IDSS, for this information. In another, very brief paper, Mr Zulkifli provides the interesting information that the first Indonesian students arrived at Qum as early as in 1965; see Zulkifli, " Seeking Knowledge unto Qum: The Education of Indonesian Shi'i *ustadhs*," available online at http://72.14.235.104/search?q=cache:FjapPU-RUIcJ:www.iias.nl/iias/show/id%3D51940/frameid%3D42832+zulkifli+Leiden+IIAS+PHD&hl=en&gl=sg&ct=clnk&cd=1 (accessed on July 10, 2006). Mr Zulkifli is a PhD student at the Department of Languages and Cultures of Southeast Asia and Oceania, Leiden University/IIAS, the Netherlands.

[37] For their website see "SMS Plus Muthahhari," available online at http://www.smuth.net/ (accessed on July 5, 2006).

institution that tries to address the challenges and opportunities offered to contemporary Muslims by globalization. On its website reads:

> "[The] Islamic College for Advanced Studies (ICAS) is a dynamic college providing higher Islamic education in the field of Islamic studies. Founded in 1999 in London, ICAS grew rapidly and founded three branches in New York (2000), Ghana (2001), and Jakarta (2002). The College is designed for those who desire to become soldiers in developing New Islamic Civilization. ICAS has conceived the contemporary world evolution meeting the new and deeper challenges that demand on deep concern, insights, wisdom and broad vision including profound religious thought.
>
> The college considers that philosophical and rational approaches in religious studies, especially Islamic studies, are useful for the above-mentioned aim. ICAS provides a good opportunity for those who are interested to continue their academic development to do MA. ICAS does have adequate facilities for MA degrees. It is providing higher Islamic education in the fields of: Islamic philosophy, Islamic mysticism, and religion and science. We are proud of our highly qualified lecturer and academic staff, library, computer and internet facilities, research facilities, and other technical facilities. We see ourselves as a caring, friendly but serious and well disciplined institution.
>
> […] The college strives for excellence and achievement in academic and extra academic fields. In order to obtain a more global

> insight, ICAS has established a linkage with other institutions both in Indonesia and abroad. Since its establishment, it has secured cooperation with some universities such as Middlesex University London and Baleshti University Tehran. In Indonesia, ICAS secured cooperation with Paramadina University Jakarta, Center for Religious and Cross-Cultural Studies (CRCS) of Gadjah Mada University Yogyakarta, UIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta, STF Diryarkara Jakarta, Mizan Publisher Bandung, Teraju Publisher Jakarta and others."[38]

Among the other Shi'ite educational organizations is the already earlier referred to Fatimah Islamic Organization or *Yayasan Fatimah* in Jakarta, which features a rich library of Shi'ism related books, mainly in Indonesian, Arabic and English, and many of them apparently available online through their website.[39] Another association is the Al-Jawad Foundation of Islamic Studies (*Yayasan Pendidikan Islam Al-Jawad*) in Bandung, West Java. Its head had been Husein Muhammad Al-Kaff, apparently a member of the Indonesian Hadhramī Arab community of which the Al-Kaff family is a prominent member, as can be gleaned from an appeal for help to donors for the renovation of their mosque.[40] As the website has not been updated for quite some time, it is impossible to state whether he is still charge. The Al-Jawad Foundation used to publish a religious bulletin, the back issues

[38] See Islamic College for Advanced Studies ICAS -in Jakarta, "The Scientific Centre for Islamic Philosophy and Mysticism," available online at http://www.icas-indonesia.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=section&id=4&Itemid=104&lang=iso-8859-1 (accessed on July 6, 2006).

[39] For their website see "Yayasan Fatimah (Fatimah Islamic Organization)," available online at http://www.fatimah.org/pustaka/inggris_penerbit_a.htm (accessed on March 17, 2006).

[40] For their website see Al-Jawad Foundation of Islamic Studies, "Yayasan Pendidikan Islam Al-Jawad," available at http://aljawad.tripod.com/ (accessed on July 6, 2006).

of which are available online on their website. In its political orientation, the foundation as a whole seems to be on the official line of Iran.

The Iranian embassy is located in central Jakarta and hosts a website.[41] It is surprising that, although there are several pages on it that address matters pertaining to Iranian culture, such as information on arts and architecture, tourism and economy, the usual somewhat apologetic references to the religion of Islam, so familiar with regard to Iran's other embassies in the Muslim world, are apparently entirely missing. It appears that Jakarta's Islamic Cultural Center Jakarta "Al-Huda"[42] instead is taking care of Iran's 'Islamic interests' in the country. This at least might come to one's mind after having seen its impressive building. The Center publishes also a journal in Indonesian, *Al-Huda* (Guidance). Jalaluddin Rakhmat, whom we encountered earlier, is one of the leading members of the Centers organizing committee. Moreover, from a glance at the names of the Center's officials mentioned on the website, it appears that a considerable number of them belongs Indonesian-Arab community. This is indeed remarkable when one remembers what has been said earlier in connection with the activities of Al-Sayyid Muhammad b. al-'Aqīl al-Hadhramī on persistent latent Shi'ite tendencies among parts of the Southeast Asian Arab community in the early 20th century.[43]

Interestingly, with regard to the recent developments seems to be the publication sector and numerous Shi'ite publishing houses exist in the country, the most important among them being Pustaka Hidaya, Mizan, Lentera, and YAPI Jakarta, and by February 2001, 373 books on Shi'ite-related subjects had been

[41] See "Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Jakarta," available online at http://www.iranembassy.or.id/ (accessed on July, 2006).

[42] See "Islamic Cultural Center Jakarta 'Al-Huda'", available online at http://www.icc-jakarta.com/ (accessed on July 5, 2006).

[43] The issue of Al-Sayyid Muhammad b. al-'Aqīl al-Hadhramī, a major figure of the early 20th-century, shall be referred to again in the sequel to this article.

published Indonesian language by 59 different Indonesian publishers.[44] As literature in Malay on Shi'ism published in Malaysia remains rather limited to the polemical writings of those in opposition to it, publications in Indonesian language take also the prominent place of a major source for Malay-speaking Muslims in Singapore and Malaysia. Organizations such as *Yayasan Fatimah* and others are noteworthy for their wide range of distributed Shi'ite literature, often available online. Shi'ite Indonesians are often well-educated and many of them are university graduates. However, given the vastness of the Indonesian territory and the scattered minority situation of the Shi'ites throughout the country their influence on the rest of the Muslim community remains to be seen.

[44] See M. Safwan, "Ikatan Jamaah AhlulBait Indonesia sebagai Gerakan Sosial-Keagamaan," (Ikatan Jamaah AhlulBait Indonesia as a socio-political movement) (in Indonesian), available online at http://raushanfikr.tripod.commakatul/sosio_agama.htm (accessed on July 6, 2006).

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