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Shi'ism and Conversion to  
Shi'ism in Syria: Prevalence,  
Circumstances and Causes

The Sunni-Shiite Rift

- First Draft -

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## Introduction

Shiism in Syria can be traced back to the first century AH, although it became prevalent there only in the fourth century, after the country had come under the rule of the ĀmdĀnd dynasty from Aleppo in 904 CE. The Shiite creed continued to spread during the ascendancy of the Isma'ili Shiite Fatimid dynasty (969-1172 CE), which ruled over Egypt and extended its control to Syria as well during the fifth century AH.

Subsequently Shiism in Syria was on the wane, due to the animosity of the Ayyūbid dynasty (1171-1250 CE) and later of the Ottomans (1517-1798 CE), so that by early modern times the adherents of Twelver Shiism in Syria had become a small minority.

Although the Alawites, known also as Nusayris, are a sect that grew out of Shiism, they differ in fundamental ways from Twelver Shiites and in fact cannot be considered Shiites at all.

The small number of Shiites in Syria may explain in part why they have not developed the kind of sectarian particularism seen in other countries in the region. In addition, Syria for over thirty years has been ruled by a regime which belongs to the Alawite sect, which has affinities to Shiism. Twelver Shiites in Syria have thus lived under the protection of the Alawites. The ruling Baath Party, which has been in power since 1963, has always realized its precarious position, and its predominant Alawite membership has always tried to maintain a precarious balance between their need to have their claim of belonging to Twelver Shiism recognized, and their desire not to lose their ethnic and cultural identity and their secret religious doctrines. This explains why the Alawites, as the mainstay of the Party, have pursued policies aimed at legitimizing the Alawite creed and, for that reason, have played a significant role in formulating Syrian policy. One outcome of this has been the importance which Syria attaches to its relations with the Shiites of Lebanon and Iran. These relations have from time to time been strengthened thanks to close personal ties with Shiite leaders in Lebanon. This was especially true of Musa al-Nader at the beginning of the 1970s. Syria also gave special concessions to leaders of the Iranian opposition.<sup>1</sup>

Yet another important factor which must be taken into account is the autocratic Syrian regime's insistence on keeping religion out of politics (as the Muslim Brotherhood found out to its great consternation). The Shiites as a group have therefore have kept their distance from politics and restricted themselves to religious matters, to the regime's satisfaction. Shiite religious rights are maintained, and despite the regime's secular ideology it takes care to ensure the loyalty of the country's various religious establishments, perhaps as compensation for the dearth of popular support for it.

## The Demographical and Religious Situation in Syria

Accurate statistics about the various religious groupings in Syria are not easy to come by, because of the regime's sensitivity in matters of this kind. Still, the *International Religious Freedom Report* for 2006, published by the American State Department, notes that Alawites, Isma'ilis and other Shiites constitute thirteen percent of Syria's population; put another way, this means that Shiites of all kinds number about 2.2 million people out of a total population of 18 million.<sup>2</sup>

Another report, *Religious Communities, Creeds and Ethnic Groups*, published in 2005 by the Ibn Khaldūn Center for Developmental Studies in Cairo, states that Shiites constitute one percent of Syria's population,<sup>3</sup> while the percentage of Alawites is between eight and nine. Shiite internet websites claim that Syria's Shiites are two percent of that country's population.<sup>4</sup>

In addition to local Shiites, Syria also hosts a community of Iranian Shiite émigrés which resides mainly in Damascus, as well as a large number of Iraqi Shiites who came over during the 1970s and 1970s as a result of the oppressive

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<sup>1</sup> The Syrian President Hafez al-Asad and the Lebanese Shiite leader Mūsā al-Nadr were close personal friends. In September 1973 the latter published a legal ruling (*fatwa*) which recognized the Alawites living in Lebanon as Shiites. The purpose of the ruling was to promote relations with Syria. That country did indeed express its great satisfaction with the ruling. For more details on this issue see: Ahmad Khaled and Hussein J. Agha, *Suriya wa-Iran tunafisu wa-tu'awinu (Syria and Iran: Competition and Cooperation)*, trans. 'Adnan Hasan, Beirut: Dar al-kunuzal-adabiyya, 1997, pp. 12-13.

<sup>2</sup> See: *International Religious Freedom Report 2006*, URL: <http://www.state.gov/drl/rls/irf/2006/>

<sup>3</sup> Sa'ūd al-Dīn Ibrāhīm (ed.), *Religious Communities, Creeds and Ethnic Groups, Eight Annual Report 2005*, Cairo: Ibn Khaldūn Center for Developmental Studies, p. 141, URL: <http://www.eicds.org/arabic/publicationsAR/reports/2005-min-AR.doc>

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, the following URL: [www.arabic.cnn.com/2007/middle\\_east/4/2/shiite/~syria/index.htm1](http://www.arabic.cnn.com/2007/middle_east/4/2/shiite/~syria/index.htm1)

policies of the former Iraqi regime. The numbers of Iraqi Shiites grew in the wake of the invasion of Iraq in 2003 which brought instability, insecurity and sectarian strife in its wake.

Official statistics put the number of Iraqi refugees in Syria (of every ethnic group) at 1.2 million, while the UN Commissioner for Refugees estimates the number of Iraqi refugees at 800,000. Most Iraqi Shiites in Syria reside in the Sayyida Zaynab region to the south of the capital Damascus. Native Syrian Shiites live mostly in various neighborhoods of the capital itself, as well as in a few towns and villages in the provinces of ÍmÒ and ÍamÁ.

The most prominent concentration of Shiites in Damascus is to be found in the neighborhood of Íayy al-AmÐn,<sup>5</sup> where the ÍmÁm ÝAID b. AbÐ ÓÁlib Mosque, the al-ZahrÁP Mosque, and the venerable MuÍsiniyya School are located.

Syria possesses one of the main shrines of Shiism, the tomb of Zaynab the Great,<sup>6</sup> daughter of ÝAID b. AbÐ ÓÁlib.<sup>7</sup> The shrine is visited by Shiite pilgrims from the Persian Gulf, Iraq and Iran. It is surrounded by numerous *Husseiniyas* and a *Hawza*, “the *Hawza* of Zaynab”,<sup>8</sup> the third largest *Hawza* in the world, after those of al-Najaf and Qumm. Zaynab’s tomb is the largest Shiite center in Syria. The site is used for lectures and religious celebrations, as well as for the dissemination of ShÐÝte religious literature, including books by Shiite clerics. The entire neighborhood has become known by the name Sayyida Zaynab. The shrine itself consists of a mausoleum with a golden dome, two imposing 54-meter high minarets, and adorned porticos. Its total area is about 15,000m<sup>2</sup> and it has a capacity of 5000 people.<sup>9</sup>

The shrine of Sayyida Ruqayya, daughter of the imam al-Íusayn (d. 680 CE), is located behind the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus, at a distance of somewhat over one-hundred meters, next to Paradise Gate<sup>10</sup> in the SÚq al-ÝAmmÁra quarter, in the al-SÁdÁt region. This is the second most frequently visited Shiite shrine in Syria after Sayyida Zaynab. Due to its central location inside the Syrian capital, near SÚq al-ÍamÐdiyya and the Umayyad Mosque, it draws large crowds. Daily public prayers are held there, as well as the weekly Friday prayer. The shrine’s imam, Shaykh NabÐl al-ÍalbÁwÐ, is one of the most prominent Shiite personalities in Syria.

Yet another Shiite shrine is that of Sayyida Sukayna, the daughter of al-Íusayn<sup>11</sup> (d. 735 CE). It is located in the Small Gate (al-BÁb al-ÑaghÐr) cemetery, named after one of the gates in the ancient city wall of Damascus dating from the Umayyad period. This gate, which stood in the south-western wall of the city, is today called BÁb al-ShÁghÛr. The wall no longer exists today, but in earlier times a cemetery was established outside the wall, opposite this gate. It is one of the city’s largest and best-known cemeteries; today the city’s expansion has brought it nearly into the center.<sup>12</sup>

At the beginning of the 1990s the Iranians constructed a large tomb over the old one and purchased the land around it for a courtyard that would be capable of holding the hundreds, and later thousands, of Iranian pilgrims who began visiting the site, now called Sayyida Sukayna, Daughter of our Master ÝAID b. AbÐ ÓÁlib, Peace Be On Him. After having purchased the land the Iranians also began constructing a very large *Husseiniya* at the grave site, to which they gave the name of Shrine of Sayyida Sukayna, Daughter of the Commander of the Faithful ÝAID b. AbÐ ÓÁlib, May Peace Be on Both. The large building is still in the course of construction, but already shops and residential building have arisen around it, as well as hotels, in preparation for the establishment of a Shiite center in the city of

<sup>5</sup> The neighborhood is named after the Shiite scholar MuÍsin al-AmÐn al-HusseinÐ al-ÝÁmilÐ (1284-1371), who was born in the village of ShaqrÁP in Southern Lebanon. Due to his scholarly renown he was buried near the tomb of Zaynab. For more details see: [www.al-shia.com/html/ara/ola/index.php?mod=rezvan&id=115](http://www.al-shia.com/html/ara/ola/index.php?mod=rezvan&id=115)

<sup>6</sup> She is called “the Great” to distinguish her from other women with the same name. For more details on her see: Íasan al-ÑaffÁr, “al-MarÝa al-ÝaUÐma: qirÁPa fÐ ÍayÁt al-sayyida Zaynab bint ÝAID ÝalayhimÁ al-salÁm” (*The Great Woman: Readings in the Biography of Sayyida Zaynab Daughter of ÝAID, May Both Rest in Peace*), Beirut: MuPassasat al-sayyida Zaynab al-khayriyya, 1993, pp. 280-284; Faraj al-ÝlmrÁn, “WafÁt Zaynab al-kubrÁ” (*The Death of Zaynab the Great*), Kuwait: Maktabat al-alfayn, 1986, p. 65; Mulammad Íasanayn al-SÁbiqÐ, “Marqad al-ÝaqÐla Zaynab” (*The Resting-Place of Zaynab the Wife*), Beirut: MuPassasat al-aÝlamÐ, 1979, p. 109.

<sup>7</sup> The tomb is located in the southern part of al-GhUÓa, the oasis south of Damascus. Today the village, located about seven km from Damascus, is known as *qabr al-sitt* (“the Lady’s Tomb”). The tomb itself is on the west side of the village. For details see: [www.imamreza.net/arb/imamreza.php?id=1925](http://www.imamreza.net/arb/imamreza.php?id=1925).

<sup>8</sup> For more on Zaynab’s *lawza* see its website, URL: <http://www.alhawzaonline.com>.

<sup>9</sup> ÁI Hussein, ÝAbd al-SafÐr, “TaldhÐr al-barriyya min nashÁÓ al-shÐÝa fÐ sÛriyya” (*A Warning to the Land about Shiite Activities in Syria*), Cairo: DÁr al-muladdithÐna, 2007, p. 22.

<sup>10</sup> For details about it see: [www.malkiya.net/vb/showthread.php?t=5085](http://www.malkiya.net/vb/showthread.php?t=5085).

<sup>11</sup> For more details see: Arazi.A., “SukaynÁ bint al-Hussein ” EÍ<sup>2</sup> (1960) , Vol. IV, pp. 802a-803b.

<sup>12</sup> For more details see: [www.imamreza.net/arb/imamreza.php?id=2305](http://www.imamreza.net/arb/imamreza.php?id=2305); Kawthar FuPÁd NÁdiq, “al-ShahÐda al-sayyida Ruqayya bint al-ÍmÁm al-Hussein b. ÝAID b. AbÐ ÓÁlib, al-khÁmis min Óafar dhikrÁ raÐÐlihÁ” (“The Martyr the Sayyida Ruqayya, Daughter of the Imam Hussein b. ÝAID b. AbÐ ÓÁlib; the Anniversary of Her Death is on the Fifth Day of the Month of Nafar”), *al-NabaP*, issue for the feast of ÝÁshÛrÁP 1428 AH, URL: [www.annabaa.org/ashara/](http://www.annabaa.org/ashara/).

DÁrayyÁ. Senior Iranian leaders visit the site and express their support for the project. The latest among these was Iran's Prime Minister Ahmadinejad, who arrived here on his latest visit to Syria, on January 20 2006.

The town's resident's were not unaware of the Iranian plans for their city and protested to the mayor, who was favorably disposed towards the residents. However, the Syrian regime, and especially its security agencies, took a harsh stand, fired the sympathetic mayor, and installed another one, who told the townspeople that he could do nothing since the security forces threatened him with dire consequences for the entire town if its residents continued to protest against the Iranian project. The signs on the shrine and the shops are all in both Arabic and Persian. As a result of the area's development land prices, and the rent of the shops, have skyrocketed.<sup>13</sup>

## The "Drop Mosque", or "The Aleppo Shrine"

The name is due to the Shiite belief that at this spot, on a rock near the city of Aleppo, a drop of al-Íusayn b. ÝAID's (d. 680 CE) blood dropped from his head (he had been beheaded) when it was on its way from KarbalÁP to Damascus. According to Shiite tradition, that drop of blood left an impression on the rock, whereupon the structure was built over it. It is also known as the "Shrine of the Imam al-Íusayn".<sup>14</sup> In the year 333/944 Sayf al-Dawla constructed a large building over it, which became a pilgrimage site already in the fourth century AH. The "JaÝfarÐ Islamic Construction and Improvement Association", founded in 1976, has built a new courtyard for the shrine, the "Imam Íusayn Islamic Studies Institute" next to the shrine, a car park for visiting pilgrims, and a charity hospital.<sup>15</sup> Today the shrine, located on Mt. al-Jawshan to the west of the city, is considered the main Shiite site in Aleppo. At the "Drop Mosque" Shiite books and other publications are disseminated and pilgrims are provided with rich meals. In 1976

Two Shiite shrines, one of the Companion ÝAmmÁr b. YÁsir (37/657) and the other of Uways al-QarnÐ (37/657), are located in the city of al-Raqqá.<sup>16</sup> The tombs were constructed by Iranian organizations and each contains an Iranian cultural office.

The Iranian religious authority in Damascus adopts shrines and tombs of holy men. At first it undertakes to considerably expand the size of the building, and attach to it the name of a son or daughter of ÝAID b. AbÐ ÓÁlib or of one of his sons, Íasan and al-Íusayn. In the wake of the site's identification with such an important Shiite figure, Iranian pilgrims begin to visit the site in their hundreds, or even thousands. The shrine thus gets a reputation for being the burial place of a member of the Prophet's family. In the following years the land and the houses around the shrine are acquired, and a large *Husseiniya* is then constructed over the tomb, in addition to hotels, markets and residential homes. Eventually the *Husseiniya* becomes a center for missionary work aimed at converting people to Shiism. This is in fact what has happened in numerous tombs throughout Syria.

The shrines are financially self-supporting. They belong to the Ministry of Religious Endowments, as do Shiite mosques and imams in general.

The Shiites in Syria do not obey a single "source of emulation"<sup>17</sup> (*marjaÝ taqlÐd*); some are followers of the Ayatollah ÝAID al-SÐstÁnÐ in al-Najaf, others are devoted to the Ayatollah ÝAID KhaminaPÐ, the highest religious authority in Iran, while still others follow Sayyid MuÍammad Íusayn FaÁl AllÁh in Lebanon.

<sup>13</sup> BashÐr, *Report on Conversion to ShÐÝism in Syria* (File on the Conversion Movement in DÁrayyÁ), URL: [www.syriakurds.com/2007/sheasy/sh020.htm](http://www.syriakurds.com/2007/sheasy/sh020.htm).

<sup>14</sup> See "Imam Hussein's Shrine of the Drop", URL: [www.14masom.com/astetlaa/19/19.htm#6](http://www.14masom.com/astetlaa/19/19.htm#6).

<sup>15</sup> For more details see: ÝAbd al-SafÐr Ál Hussein, *A Warning to the Land about Shiite Activities in Syria*, p. 32; *Shiite Activity in Syria*, URL: [www.haqeeqa.com/index.aspx?status=prodetail&aid=94](http://www.haqeeqa.com/index.aspx?status=prodetail&aid=94)

<sup>16</sup> Al-Raqqá is in north-central Syria, on the northern bank of the Euphrates River, about 160 km east of Aleppo, with a population of about 300,000. It is the capital of a province of the same name. For more details see: [www.ar.wikipedia.org/wiki/](http://www.ar.wikipedia.org/wiki/).

<sup>17</sup> The term "source of emulation" in Shiite usage refers to senior clerics who have the right to render independent judicial judgments. This class of religious scholars among Twelver Shiites came into being in the nineteenth century CE in Iran. The idea of a class of such "sources of emulation" has developed in Shiite sources despite the fact that it has no roots in early Shiite thought. The concept of the awaited imam may have played a role in the emergence of the "source of emulation" in later ShÐÝte religious jurisprudence. The idea of a "source of emulation", which has gradually developed into an integral part of the juridical system, may also be associated with two contributing factors. The first of these factors is the victory of the legalistic over the innovative school of Shiite jurists. Senior adherents of the former school played a significant role in the establishment of the institution in later ShÐÝism; they disseminated the view that the most knowledgeable juridical scholar deserves the title of "vicerey of the occulted imam", and should be imitated by those obligated to observe the precepts of religion. Among the Shiite jurists who promoted this idea we may mention Shaykh al-AnÓÁrÐ (1281/1864) and Shaykh al-ÓabÁÓabÁPÐ al-YazdÐ (1338/1920), among others. The second contributing factor was the theory of "loyalty to a religious jurist" (*wilÁyat al-faqÐh*), which required adherence to the most knowledgeable scholar and obedience to his judgments. One of the main promoters of this idea was Shaykh MullÁ al-NarÁqÐ (1245/1830).

It took some time, however, for the concept of "source of emulation" to become firmly entrenched in its mature form. This it did thanks to the efforts of a group of scholars in the nineteenth century, whom Twelver Shiites accepted as "sources of emulation" with no hesitation, among them al-WalÐd al-BehbahÁnÐ, al-Sayyid MahdÐ BaÍr al-ÝUIUm, al-Shaykh JaÝfar KÁshif al-GhiÓÁP, JawÁd al-ÝÁmilÐ, al-Sayyid MuÍsin al-AÝrajÐ, al-

## The Political and Social Situation of Shiites in Syria

In general it may be said that there is no social discrimination against Shiites in Syria. They are socially integrated and intermarry with other Muslim groups. Most of Syria's Shiites are Arabs. The following are among the most prominent Shiite families in the country: NiŪÁm, MurtaÁÁ, BayÁÛn and al-RŪmÁnĎ.

Some Shiites have attained high positions in Syria, among them MahdĎ Dakhil AllÁh, a former Minister of Information, and ŃÁPib NaŃÁs, a prominent businessman.

Syria has a one-party political system and the law forbids the establishment of political parties whose ideology is at variance with that of the ruling party. In addition, the state insists on a strict separation between religion and politics. This explains why the Shiites have not developed any political organizations of their own.<sup>18</sup>

## The Beginnings of Conversion to Shi'ism in Syria

The first Shiite to have engaged in converting others to Shiism in Syria was the scholar ŸAbd al-RaŃmÁn Khayr (b.1925). However, conversion did not take place in significant numbers before the activities of JamĎl al-Asad, brother of the late Syrian President ÁÁfiŪ al-Asad, in the 1980s.

JamĎl al-Asad began to encourage conversion to Shiism in the coastal area of the country, especially among members of the Alawite community. He would send groups of Alawites to study Twelver Shiism in Iran. Upon their return to Syria they disseminated the Shiite creed among their fellow Alawites.<sup>19</sup> Al-Asad built *Husseiniyas* in the mountains of the Alawites, where before there had been only Alawite shrines. In order to make Shiism more acceptable to the people there he appointed a Shiite Shaykh to head the Alawite al-ZahrÁP Mosque in the city of BÁniyÁs on the Syrian coast. At the present time there is an Alawite convert to Shiism, one Ghayth ŸammŪr, who heads the conversion efforts in the city of BÁnyÁs now, after JamĎl al-Asad's death. Before being converted by JamĎl al-Asad he was not a religious person, and owned a video store. Ghayth is a member of the Syrian National Party.

However, after ÁÁfiŪ al-Asad came to power in 1970 some Sunni religious leaders expressed their opposition to him because of his religious affiliation. In order to ingratiate himself with them and to silence them, al-Asad began attending services in mosques and also gave dinner parties for religious leaders after they had fasted all day during the month of Ramadan. He also had his brother JamĎl set up the "al-MurtaÁÁ Association, with branches all over Syria. After some in-depth research ÁÁfiŪ al-Asad asked the Ayatollah MuŃammad Ÿsayn FaÁl AllÁh to work in Syria. He opened an office in the Sayyida Zaynab neighborhood of Damascus, and later Syrian television began broadcasting programs with the Iraqi Shiite Shaykh ŸAbd al-ÁmĎd al-MuhÁjir. However, after BashÁr al-Asad came to power in the year 2000 FaÁl AllÁh's influence waned somewhat; his place was taken by the Iranian embassy, working through its cultural attaché in Aleppo. One method used by the Iranian embassy and the attaché is to contact the heads of large, wealthy and influential tribes and clans, especially those who claim to be related to the Prophet's family. They also invite people to attend celebrations at Shiite centers and *Husseiniyas*, where they hear lectures and sermons which praise the Shiite creed. After the sermon the guests are given a rich meal. The invited guests are of both sexes. In fact, women play an important role in every Shiite center. Imams of mosques and important people are given personalized invitation cards in the name of a senior official, such as the Iranian ambassador to Syria MuŃammad Ásan AkhtarĎ, his assistant, or the Iranian cultural attaché in Aleppo the Ayatollah ŸAbd al-ŃÁlib al-MŪsawĎ. The invited VIP is addressed in terms of respect, as for example "The Shaykh and Scholar, the Imam of the so-and-so mosque...: the ambassador of the Islamic Republic of Iran has the honor of requesting your presence at a celebration in honor of ..."<sup>20</sup>

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MĎrzÁ al-QummĎ, and others. For more details see: Momen, Moojan. *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam: The History and Doctrines of Twelver Shi'ism* (London: Yale University Press, 1985), 140-146, 248-278; Moussavi, Ahmad Kazemi, "The establishment of the Position of Marja'iat al-Taqlid in the Twelver Shi'ite Community", *Iranian Studies* (1985); L. Clarke, "The ShĎĎĎ Construction of TaqlĎd", *Journal of Islamic Studies* 12:1 (2001), 40-64.

<sup>18</sup> [www.arabic.cnn.com/2007/middle\\_east/4/2/shiite.syria/index.htm1](http://www.arabic.cnn.com/2007/middle_east/4/2/shiite.syria/index.htm1).

<sup>19</sup> The beginnings of the trend to conversion can be traced back to a visit which MŪsÁ al-Ńadr made in 1974 to the elders of the Alawite community in the Latakia Mountains. He was preceded by the Ayatollah al-ShĎrÁzĎ, who produced the well-known ruling according to which the people of that region were to be considered Twelver Shiites. See: [www.shababek.de](http://www.shababek.de).

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

Although the late Syrian President ÁÁfiŪ al-Asad maintained a strategic alliance with Iran, he did not permit the principles of the Iranian Revolution to gain a foothold in Syria. In fact, he systematically and firmly restrained the Iranian presence, and occasionally went so far as to close down institutions funded by Iran, including clinics. The Iranians attempted to gain entry into areas populated by Alawites by exploiting their religious affinities with them, but the Syrian President took a number of steps both inside and outside the Alawite community to ensure that the Iranian attempt to infiltrate into the Syrian heartland did not succeed. The former President also ordered the former Mufti of Syria, the late ÁĪmad KaftÁrŪ, to establish schools for QurPÁnic study and inculcation throughout Syria, including in predominantly Alawite regions of the country. These schools are called “al-Asad Institutes for Memorizing the QurPÁn”. He also forbade sending students to study religion in Iran.

After the death of ÁÁfiŪ al-Asad his son BashÁr became President. Under his rule the balance was undermined and Iranian influence in Syria grew apace. Campaigns were instituted among ordinary Syrians to encourage them to convert to Shiism. In addition, the regime naturalized Iranians and pro-Iranian Iraqi Shiites. According to some reports twenty-thousand Iranians have been given Syrian citizenship.<sup>21</sup> The Syrian regime under BashÁr al-Asad has also brought over a special militia whose task is to protect the regime. The militia is composed of about three-thousand Iranian troops as well as a number of units of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard that specialize in urban warfare. These troops operate alongside the Syrian Republican Guard, headed by MÁhir al-Asad.<sup>22</sup>

Since BashÁr al-Asad took over the presidency in Syria a number of changes have also occurred in the official propaganda line as reflected in the Syrian local and satellite television channels. The regime promotes the appearance of pro-Iranian Sheikhs at the expense of Sunni notables. These Shiite clerics use the official media to give lessons whose content is liable to arouse conflicts between Sunnis and Shiites (for example, their attitude towards the Prophet’s Companions). The positions they have taken have been met with very sharp reactions, especially in Damascus but in other areas as well, such as Aleppo and its environs.

Yet another sign of the increasing Iranian influence in Syria is the existence of an FM radio station which broadcasts ideological and political messages similar to those of the Hezbollah radio stations in Lebanon and those belonging to the Supreme Council of the Iranian Revolution in Iraq.

According to a number of sources anyone who displays opposition to the wave of religious and political missionary work carried out by Iranian organizations, which is felt especially strongly in the Syrian province of al-Raqqa, and anyone who dares express disapproval of the fact that some poverty-stricken members of Bedouin tribes in that province have converted to Shiism, are liable to be arrested by the Syrian security forces and accused of being WahhÁbĪs or fundamentalists.

According to reports today there are more than five-hundred *Husseiniyas* under construction in Syria; according to others, this number refers just to Damascus. The Syrian regime has granted Syrian citizenship to tens of thousands of Iranians, while it has been denying citizenship to native Syrian Kurds for forty years. The Syrian regime also supports Iran in its repression of the Bedouins of AhwÁz in Iran (although they are Shiites, too). In October 2007 newspaper reports claimed that the Syrian regime turned a number of AhwÁzĪs who oppose the Iranian regime over to the Teheran government. The Syrian Ministry of Education has issued a ban on primary-school education in Sunni religious institutions of learning. Sunni religious scholars, and especially the “Association of Ulema in Syria” has declared that this is an oppressive step. But despite the tensions that the Minister of Education’s step has aroused within the Syrian cabinet, the regime did nothing to alleviate the situation. The “Association of Ulema” even met with President al-Asad himself to discuss the situation, but he refused to overturn his minister’s decision.

However, after the internal turmoil in Syria and the conflict between the Syrian Sunni leadership and the Iranian institutions came to a head, the Syrian regime decided to back off from its decision to abolish primary-school education in Sunni religious institutions of learning.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> See: “Religious Leaders Reject the Dissemination of Iranian ShĪYism in Syria”, URL: [www.aljaml.com/node/9168](http://www.aljaml.com/node/9168).

<sup>22</sup> Ahmad al-AyyŪbĪ, “The Iranian Incursion into Syria under the Auspices of the Asads”, Nov. 19 2007, URL: [www.syriakurds.com/2007/sheasy/sh005.htm](http://www.syriakurds.com/2007/sheasy/sh005.htm).

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, URL: [www.albainah.net/index.aspx?function=Item&id=13332&lang](http://www.albainah.net/index.aspx?function=Item&id=13332&lang).



## Occupational and Social Status of Converts to Shi'ism in Syria

The known cases of conversion to Shiism cannot be ascribed to standard social or economic causes in any of the denominations. According to the study 64.4% of converts to Shiism in Damascus belong to families of middle to high income merchants and professionals. The great majority (69%) have at least a high-school education. In Aleppo, too, it was found that 61% of the converts came from the middle or upper classes. Among the poor, 39% of the converts belong to former Shiite families (they thus "renewed" their Shiite affiliation); their conversion thus probably had religious grounds. Among Sunnis the proportion of converts for financial reasons (in all the provinces included in the study) was a mere 3%.

One anomaly which the study found was that some Sunni converts, especially university students, said they were not religious at all, but decided to convert "in order to obtain enough money to finish their studies or to marry, despite the fact that neither the Sunni nor the Shiite creed meant anything to them". This motivation may be called "opportunism". Another anomalous finding among Sunni converts, especially those who converted after the war in Lebanon in 2006, was that they claimed to have done so "out of love for Hezbollah and Íasan NaÛrallÁh".

As for Alawite converts, the study found that the great majority (c. 76%) were students or unemployed. Some military people have converted as well; this information came from an Alawite cleric in Tartus, since official information about military personnel is not easy to come by. Isma'ili converts overwhelmingly (84%) come from middle- to upper-class families.

The study came up with the following five basic conclusions concerning conversion to Shiism in Syria:

Most cases of conversion, in the past as well as in the present, occur among families that have traditional Shiite leanings (Isma'ilis, Alawites).

The low rate of conversion among Sunnis (2%) means that in fact no missionary activity has been taking place among them, especially in light of the fact that some Sunni converts belong to formerly Shiite families that had adopted the Sunni creed at one time or another.

The percentage of conversion for economic or financial gain is such that "conversion for mercenary reasons" can be ruled out as a trend.

The great majority of conversions among Isma'ilis are of a purely ceremonial nature, such as separating men and women at prayers, in contrast to the usual "nearly mixed" prayers in that sect.

If the current rate of conversions among Isma'ilis and Alawites continues unabated, the former sect will die out within ten years and the latter within a quarter of a century.<sup>25</sup>

## Methods of Shiite Proselytizing in Syria

- A. *The call to convert to Shiism in Syria has as its starting point a verbal opposition to American policy.* Shiites in Syria are under the effects of a mythical "resistance" created by anti-American media which oppose the existence of Israel and support the resistance movements in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, as well as in Lebanon.
- B. *Iraqi immigrants and Iranian tourists.* Iraqi Shiite immigrants as well as Iranian pilgrims who come to visit Shiite shrines in Syria constitute a considerable human army imbued with the Shiite creed, and help disseminate its ideas and doctrines.
- C. *Shiite shrines.* The Shiites in Syria renovate ancient shrines, build *Hawzas* next to them, and purchase the adjoining properties.
- D. *Shiite celebrations and festivals.* Shiites celebrate many holidays, to which Sunnis are invited as well and are thus exposed to Shiite ideas. Among these holidays are ÝÀshÛrÁP, al-GhadÛr, and the birth and death dates of the Twelver Shiite imams and others.
- E. *Official support for Shiite missionaries.* For example, at the beginning of the 2006/7 school year a Shiite religious college was opened in the town of al-Ûabaqa, with an enrollment of over two-hundred students. The Shiites quickly and easily received a permit to open this college, although in the whole country there are only two Sunni religious colleges, one in Damascus and the other in Aleppo; the latter had to wait decades for approval, which finally came in 2007.

<sup>25</sup> ÍamÛda ÍamÛd, "A Study on Conversion to ShÛÝism in Syria", *Elaph*, Jan. 7 2007.



The new Shiite college is not the only one of its kind in Syria. Another was established in Idlib. Recently it has been reported that Iran has received permission from the Syrian authorities to establish a large Iranian university with numerous faculties.<sup>26</sup>

- F. *Construction of Hawzas.* The Shiites build *Hawzas* next to their shrines and establish religious authorities which give them independence of a kind with respect to religious rulings and the leadership of the community.
- G. *Cultural activities.* Shiites engage in various types of cultural activities, such as lectures and sermons on Shiite holidays, in shrines such as Sayyida Zaynab or in the al-AmĎn neighborhood; occasional seminars at the al-Asad library; dissemination of Shiite books, especially at book-fairs held by the Iranian Cultural Center on al-Marja Square (the office of the Iranian cultural attach ) or the main library of the university. Such books, which have political as well as theological content, are also distributed free of charge at the entrances to mosques. Recordings of Shiite programs (CD programs) and of books are also distributed for a nominal price or free of charge. Other distributed materials include Iranian newspapers and magazines, such as the newspaper *JĎh n* in Arabic.
- H. *Educational inducements.* Scholarships are made available for study at Qumm and Teheran, especially for advanced students chosen for their academic or social background. These institutions give preferential treatment to students who support the authorities. Such students are then given jobs, as happened with Syria's Chief Mufti,  mad al-lass n and others. Other students are permitted to study at the *Hawza* of the shrine of Sayyida Zaynab, where they do not pay tuition fees and are provided with a monthly unconditional stipend.
- I. *Economic inducements.* Shiite missionaries go so far as to offer cash to people, or to help them in their commercial or official dealings. Such inducements are usually offered to notables and heads of clans, especially in the area between the Euphrates and the Tigris rivers, where this method is merely a continuation of the Iraqi system for controlling the people through the heads of tribes and clans. Another way to encourage converts is by providing them with a wife, or with some basic necessities such as oil, sugar, rice and butter.
- J. *Shiite satellite channels.* A number of such channels broadcast Shiite traditions, pictures, lectures and QurP nic exegesis and openly carry missionary content. This is especially true of the al-Man r network which broadcasts from Lebanon and promotes conversion to Shiism in Syria and elsewhere. Syrian television, too, has given a weekly (at least) hour-long broadcast slot to the Shiite missionary  Abd al- mĎd al-Muh jir. It also gives broadcast time to the Iraqi  Abd al-Zahr , especially during the month of Ramadan, when he reads QurP nic verses which are followed by songs and hymns in praise of the Prophet's family.
- K. *Name inducements.* Converts to Shiism who name their sons  asan or  usayn, especially in the province of Idlib, receive a gift of 2500 Syrian pounds, as do people who name their daughters Zaynab. Also, students named  AID receive special attention.
- L. *Loans.* Poor people are given loans in the name of Muslim solidarity, and eventually are told they do not have to pay it back.
- M. *Visits to Iran.* Tribal heads, especially in the al-Raqqa area, are invited by the Iranian ambassador to visit Iran free of charge, as are also other notables in Syria, such as professors at religious colleges. One such trip was made by a group of tribal leaders headed by  mĎd al-Jarb , the Sheikh of the Shamr tribe, Fay al al- rĎf, the Sheikh of the Khaf ja tribe, and  aww d al- Aw mleh, the Sheikh of the al-Wahb tribe from the town of al-Buwayhij. Such visitors come back to Syria laden with presents and with bulging pockets.
- N. *Health care.* Free medical care is provided in Iranian charity hospitals in Syria, such as the Imam Khomeini Hospital in Damascus, the Red Crescent Hospital in Aleppo and the Charity Hospital in the same city.
- O. *Libraries.* Lending libraries, called "stores" (* aw nĎt*) have been opened. The libraries also distribute books free-of-charge, and give prizes (of one-thousand Syrian pounds per book) to readers.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>26</sup>  l Hussein  Abd al-SattĎr, *op.cit.*, p. 66.

<sup>27</sup> Mu ammad al- asn wĎ, "Iranian Influence in Syria", October 13 2005, URL: [www.araae.com/modules.php?name=News&file=print&sid=6680](http://www.araae.com/modules.php?name=News&file=print&sid=6680).

## The Conversion of Syria's Mufti, Dr. Ahmad Badr al-Din al-Hassun

Numerous sources have accused Dr. Aĥmad Badr al-Dĥn al-ĥassŪn, Syria's Chief Mufti, of having secretly converted to Shiism. Many such accusations were heard in the wake of his sermon on last year's ŸĤshŪrĀĀ Day. In that sermon he accused all the Muslim caliphs, from MuŸĀwiya onward, of unbelief, and stated that ŸAIĪ was God's proof for His creatures, and that the existence of the Prophet's family ensured justice and peace in the world. He accused the Prophet's Companions of not taking the post of caliph away from ŸUthmĀn and giving it to ŸAIĪ, and also of giving the post to AbŪ Bakr. Furthermore, he attacked AbŪ Bakr, ŸUmar, ŸUthmĀn, ŸAbd al-RĀlmĀn b. ŸAwf and AbŪ ŸUbayda b. al-JarrĀĪ for removing ŸAIĪ from the post of caliph. In addition, he claimed that the Prophet's family was infallible, and that its least member was greater than the greatest Companion.<sup>28</sup>

The Islamist Syrian member of Parliament Muĥammad ĩabash, head of the Islamic Studies Center in Damascus, has denied the recent allegations on websites and in the Arab press that Syria's mufti has secretly converted to Shiism.<sup>29</sup>

### Shiite Activities in Syria

Shiites have been active in a number of regions of Syria, especially in Damascus. Among the more notable activities in the latter area have been the following:

- A. Book fairs in which Islamic and Shiite books are exhibited. Such fairs are usually set up at the Iranian Cultural Center, at the Cultural attaché's headquarters on al-Marja Square, at the Iranian embassy in al-Mazza, or in the main library of the University of Damascus.
- B. Seminars which take place from time to time at the al-Asad Library, at the Cultural Center or at the shrine of Sayyida Zaynab. The latest such seminar took place at the al-Asad Library; it was attended by numerous teachers at religious colleges.
- C. Sermon festivals on Shiite holidays such as ŸĤshŪrĀĀ, held usually either at the shrine of Sayyida Zaynab or in the al-Amĥn neighborhood.
- D. Acquisition and renovation of tombs which are claimed to hold the remains of members of the Prophet's family. This has happened in the al-ŸAmmĀra neighborhood as well as in the towns of ŸAdhrĀ and DĀrayĀ.
- E. Promotion of studies at the Sayyida Zaynab *Hawza*, where no tuition is charged and students receive a monthly stipend.
- F. Providing inducements to conversion, in the form of financial aid, and arranging marriages or temporary liaisons.
- G. Dissemination of CDs programs of Shiite books at very low prices, or free-of-charge, as well as books, journals and newspapers.

### Factors Favoring Conversion to Shi'ism in Syria

#### A. Role of the Iranian Cultural Chancellery in Damascus

Prominent Syrians have accused the Iranian cultural chancellery in Damascus of activities which are not consistent with its declared aims, that it promotes conversion to Shiism in Syria, and that it actually operates under Iran's Supreme Spiritual Leader ŸAIĪ KhĀminaĀĀ, despite its official status as a part of the Iranian embassy.

Thus, for example, Dr. Wahba al-ZulĀylĪ, a well-known Syrian Islamic cleric and thinker, accused the chancellery of offering inducements in the form of cash, houses and cars in order to attract people to Shiism. He pointed out that "hundreds of Syrians in Deir al-Zor, al-Raqqa, DarŸĀ and the al-GĥŪĪa region near Damascus have succumbed to

<sup>28</sup> For more on the Mufti's speech see: Munĥr GĥĀĀbĀn, "Oh Learned Clerics of Syria, Is It Not Time to Take a Man's Stand in the Face of the Mufti?", URL: [www.syriakurds.com/2007/sheasy/sh004.htm](http://www.syriakurds.com/2007/sheasy/sh004.htm). See also: ŸUṣuf al-HusseinĪ, "Shiite Activity in Syria's Towns and Villages, URL: [www.ahlalheeth.com/vb/showthread.php?t=113193](http://www.ahlalheeth.com/vb/showthread.php?t=113193).

<sup>29</sup> See the following website: [www.stdp.org/8-11-altayr-alsori.htm](http://www.stdp.org/8-11-altayr-alsori.htm).

the chancellery's inducements and converted to Shiism" (according to a newspaper report from October 31 2006 on the news website belonging to the Middle East Center in London).

The head of the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria, ÝAID Ñadr al-DÐn al-BayÁnÙnÐ, told the Quds Press Agency that "the entire conversion to Shiism activity in Syria is just an attempt to create confusion so as to bring about a change in the social composition of Syrian society".

The former Syrian Vice President ÝAbd al-ÁlÐm KhaddÁm, who opposes the present regime, has issued declarations in the press and through statements issued by the opposition Front for National Salvation, in which he criticized the Iranian ambassador in Damascus and accused him of engaging in missionary work in Syria. KhaddÁm has been quoted to the effect that "the Iranian ambassador in Damascus moves around Syria with greater freedom than its own Prime Minister".<sup>30</sup>

In an interview with UPI KhaddÁm declared that the Iranian ambassador exploited the poverty in the country by building shrines where Companions of the Prophet supposedly stayed and giving money to the poor, with the objective of building an Iranian party within Syria by means of converting people to Shiism.

Observers have pointed out that the close relations between Syria and Iran, and their strategic alliance since 1980, have enabled Iran to operate on Syrian territory. Thus senior Syrian and Iranian officials attend the various celebrations organized by the chancellery in Damascus on Iranian national holidays such as the annual celebration in honor of the Iranian Revolution, and religious holidays such as the death of Íusayn on the day of ÝAshÙrÁP.<sup>31</sup>

In addition, numerous Iranian tourists visit Sayyida Zaynab's shrine in Damascus. The number of pilgrims, which stood at 27,000 in the year 1978, rose to 202,000 in 2003. This also has brought about an increase in Iranian influence in Syria.<sup>32</sup>

## **B. The Lebanon War in the Summer of 2006 and the Wave of Admiration for Hasan Nasrallah, Leader of Hezbollah**

When speaking about the relations between Syria and Iran it is impossible to ignore the role of Hezbollah, the Lebanese Shiite organization with ideological and strategic ties to Iran. While Syria was in control of Lebanon it provided the organization with political and military support and in return Hezbollah was Syria's main ally in Lebanon. This state of affairs naturally affected the situation of the Shiites in Syria itself.

The thirty-three day war between Israel and Lebanon in the summer of 2006 gave rise to a wave of admiration for Hezbollah leader Íasan NaÕr AllÁh and for his organization, in view of their resistance against Israel. As a result Shiism came to be seen in a more positive light and more Syrian Sunnis converted to Shiism. Hezbollah's so-called "achievements" and "victories" in the war also brought about an increase in Iranian activity. According to MuÕÕafÁ al-SÁda, a young Shiite cleric who came into contact with numerous Sunnis who showed an interest in adopting the Shiite creed, "George Bush did us a service and unified the Arabs". Al-SÁda said that he knew seventy-five Sunnis in Damascus who converted to Shiism since the beginning of hostilities in Lebanon in July 2007, and that the war gave additional impetus to the rising trend in recent years to adopt the Shiite creed.

WÁpil KhalÐI, a twenty-one-year-old student of international law at Damascus University, says that "for the first time in my life I saw a war in which the Arabs were victorious". Subsequently the Sunni KhalÐI began to observe Shiite rites and he plans to convert completely to Shiism.<sup>33</sup>

Ever since the war pictures of Íasan NaÕr AllÁh and of KhÁminaPÐ are displayed more than any of the region's political leaders. Anyone walking through the streets of Damascus today will see pictures in which the Syrian President BashÁr al-Asad is depicted together with the Hezbollah leader. These pictures are displayed on shop fronts, private cars, buses, even on walls. Local Syrian intellectuals explain that these pictures express patriotism rather than sectarian religious feelings,<sup>34</sup> since NaÕr AllÁh has become a national more than a religious symbol.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Ubayy Íasan, "On Conversion to Sunnism and ShÐÝism in Syria: An Answer to the WahnÁbDs and Those Who Imitate Their Ways", URL: [www.aljaml.com/node/11387](http://www.aljaml.com/node/11387).

<sup>31</sup> "Conversion to ShÐÝism in Syria: Various Bodies Try to Disseminate ShÐÝism among the Kurds in Syria", URL: [www.syriakurds.com/2007/sheasy/sh019.htm](http://www.syriakurds.com/2007/sheasy/sh019.htm).

<sup>32</sup> MuÍammad al-ÍasnÁwÐ, "Iranian Influence in Syria", October 13 2005, URL: [www.araae.com](http://www.araae.com).

<sup>33</sup> Allen Nickmeyer, "A Wave of Conversion from Sunnism to ShÐÝism in Syria, Due to Admiration for NaÕr AllÁh", November 19 2007, URL: [www.m-alhuda.com/showthread.php?t=665](http://www.m-alhuda.com/showthread.php?t=665). See also Ahmad al-AyyÙbÐ, "Iran Penetrates the Arab World: Facts and Figures, Dimensions and Indications", November 19 2007, URL: [www.syriakurds.com/2007/sheasy/sh012.htm](http://www.syriakurds.com/2007/sheasy/sh012.htm).

<sup>34</sup> "Clerics Deny That Iran Disseminates ShÐÝism in Syria", *al-ÝArabijyya*, November 19 2007, URL: [www.aljaml.com/node/9168](http://www.aljaml.com/node/9168).

This kind of demonstration of pro-Shiite feeling is, I believe, only momentary, based on an emotional reaction rather than on deep-seated religious conviction.<sup>36</sup>

## The Saudi Propagandist Salman al-'Awda<sup>37</sup> Warns against the Increasing Prevalence of Shi'ism in Syria

In reaction to the increasing pace of conversion to Shiism in Syria and the Syrian government's indifference, the prominent Saudi religious propagandist SalmĀn al-ŶAwda, head of the "Islam Today Institute" sounded a warning on October 22 2006 against the proliferation of Shiite beliefs among the Sunnis of Syria, in which he pointed out that "Shiite expansion among Sunnis constitutes playing with fire".

In statements to the press al-ŶAwda declared that "Shiism is spreading apace in Syria especially, and in a number of other countries of the Muslim world as well. A part of this trend may be ascribed to political motives, in other words to support for the Iranian political presence. But this does not mean that others do not confuse the political and ideological aspects".

Al-ŶAwda points to the various tortuous ways used for disseminating the Shiite creed in Syria: "Material inducements are used to convince people to adopt Shiism. As a result *Husseiniyas* have proliferated, and all attempts to oppose this trend have been put down". Al-ŶAwda's declarations came after a number of Iranian organizations constructed two shrines, one over the grave of the Companion ŶammĀr b. ŶĀsir and the other over the grave of the *tĀbiŶĪ* Ŭways al-QarnĪ in the al-Raqqa province (in the north-east of Syria), where Iranian cultural offices were opened as well.<sup>38</sup>

Shiite clerics in Syria rebutted al-ŶAwda's accusations. The two most prominent Syrian Shiite religious leaders in Syria, ŶAbd AllĀh NiŪĀm and NabĪl ĩalbĀwĪ have denied that any "Shiite missionary campaign" is taking place among Sunnis, and demanded that the accusers produce evidence for their claims.

A prominent religious leader of the Alawite community, DhŪ al-FiqĀr GhazzĀl, has also denied any tendency to convert to Shiism among Alawites. In a lengthy talk on *arabiyya.net* he spoke about the differences between Alawites and Shiites and stressed that the Syrian regime did not rule as an Alawite regime, and that the Alawites gained their position thanks to the love of the people. He added that Syrians coexist well with each other and that the Alawite community is more open and secular than most, and willing to maintain dialogue with those who are different.

The Shiite cleric ŶAbd AllĀh NiŪĀm, supervisor of Shiite institutions and shrines in Syria and a teacher at the Sayyida Zaynab *Hawza*, sent a letter of rebuke to al-ŶAwda in which he said: "We wish to put al-ŶAwda's mind at ease; there is no danger to the Sunni creed here and we oppose people selling their faith".

MuĀammad ĩbĀsh, a Syrian Islamist member of parliament and head of the Islamic Studies Center in Damascus, revealed that Syrian Sunni clerics have undertaken to rebut the charge of "Shiism for money" in their country. In a series of meetings they also denied recent reports on the internet and the printed media that Syria's Chief Mufti had secretly converted to Shiism and that twenty-thousand Iranians had been granted Syrian citizenship.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> See, for example, what the Syrian expert on minorities NabĪl FayyĀĀ says in the article mentioned in the note above.

<sup>36</sup> "ShĪŶism in Syria: Religious Rights Preserved in an Oppressed Society", URL: [www.arabic.cnn.com/2007/middle\\_east/4/2/shiite.syria/index.html](http://www.arabic.cnn.com/2007/middle_east/4/2/shiite.syria/index.html).

<sup>37</sup> SalmĀn b. Fahd b. ŶAbd AllĀh al-ŶAwda is a propagandist for the Saudi SalafĪ movement and author of a number of books on Islamic jurisprudence. Today he manages the well-known Islamist website *al-IslĀm al-yawm* ("Islam Today"), on which he also disseminates his own lessons and lectures, which are also available on audio cassettes. For more details on him see: [www.radio.islamtoday.net/trjmah.cfm?st=1](http://www.radio.islamtoday.net/trjmah.cfm?st=1).

<sup>38</sup> Conversion to ShĪŶism in Syria: Various Bodies Try to Disseminate ShĪŶism among the Kurds in Syria", URL: [www.syriakurds.com/2007/sheasy/sh019.htm](http://www.syriakurds.com/2007/sheasy/sh019.htm).

<sup>39</sup> "Clerics Deny That Iran Disseminates ShĪŶism in Syria", *al-ŶArabiyya*, November 19 2007, URL: [www.aljaml.com/node/9168](http://www.aljaml.com/node/9168).

# Regions in Syria Where Conversion to Shi'ism is Most Prevalent

## Conversion in Deir al-Zor

The wave of conversions to Shiism in the Deir al-Zor region can be traced to the town of ÍaÔla, where ten percent of a total population of thirty-thousand have embraced Shiism.

The first person there to have converted was a certain ÝUmar al-ÍammÁdÐ, a sergeant-major in the army who served in western and southern Syria and converted to Shiism in 1979 while stationed in DarÝÁ. He is reported to have worked closely with the Iranians, and in the same year he also convinced his cousin and brother-in-law, YÁsÐn al-MaÝyÛf, to embrace the Shiite creed. At that time these were the only two converts.

In 1982 the ImÁm al-MurtaÁÁ Association, founded by JamÐl al-Asad, invited Syrian notables and tribal chiefs to the Association's headquarters in al-QardÁÁa, and asked for their cooperation with its missionary activities. Al-MaÝyÛf was appointed head of the Association's ÍaÔla branch. The association was very active and spent great sums of money, until it was closed down by ÁfiÛ al-Asad in the mid-1980s. But before it was disbanded YÁsÐn al-MaÝyÛf was put in contact with Iran. He became one of the students sent to that country. He and others, including IbrÁhÐm al-SÁyir, continued to receive money from the Iranian Cultural Chancellery in Damascus, the Sayyida Zaynab *Hawza*, and a number of Shiites from the Persian Gulf.

Al-SÁyir came back from Iran at the beginning of the 1990s and Shiite influence began to be felt in public. Thus the call to prayer in the ÍaÔla mosque now included the phrase "and ÝAIÐ is the regent of AllÁh". Al-MaÝyÛf became a very wealthy man thanks to Iranian support. He used his money to induce people to convert to Shiism, either by way of direct payments, or by letting shops in a bazaar he owned for a paltry sum. Next to his home al-MaÝyÛf built a prayer hall where ÝÁshÛrÁP commemoration ceremonies were held.

Another man, Íusayn al-RajÁ, a relative of al-MaÝyÛf, was quite poor until he converted to Shiism and became wealthy. He became the chief Shiite missionary in the Deir al-Zor region. At present he gives a weekly sermon in al-Raqqa.<sup>40</sup>

Yet another well-known convert to Shiism there is a person called IbrÁhÐm AbÛ GharghÛra from the village of al-ÝAbd. He became extremely wealthy and now owns a great deal of real estate, including a large villa in the Tudmur project near Damascus. He married off his daughter to an Iranian, and his sons married Iranian women.

Íusayn al-RajÁ is reported to have given large banquets to which he invited tribal notables and many people from the village. He would film the meal on video and send the tape, which purportedly showed people that he had converted to Shiism, to Iran. For this he received great sums of money. He is also said to film any occasion where many people gather in one place, such as weddings and popular festivals, and send them to Iran on the same pretext. In fact, he is even reported to have sent one of his men to film cars on the highway between al-Raqqa and Deir al-Zor, which he then claimed to belong to people whom he had converted to Shiism.<sup>41</sup>

A number of intellectuals<sup>42</sup> in the Deir al-Zor region are also active in promoting conversion to Shiism. One of these is ÝÁmir ShabÐb, owner of a bookstore called "the Venerable QurPÁn Bookshop" on the main square of the city of Deir al-Zor. Another is ÝAbd AllÁh ÍamdÁn, whose father converted to Shiism first, followed by his son in 1990. He is a cousin of YÁsÐn al-MaÝyÛf. At the time of writing he sells books on the Euphrates bridge near the al-SarÁyÁ Mosque. He gives away books on Shiism, especially to women and girls. Other books he sells on installment in order to attract more customers. In Deir al-Zor there are also a number of additional Shiite book stores.

Among the books which are given away there: *Twelver Shiism* and *The Prophet's Family* by MuÍammad JawÁd Mughniya, and *The Prophet's Family in Noah's Ark* by MunÐr ÝAIÐ KhÁn.

<sup>40</sup> ÁI Hussein, "TaÍdhÐr al-bariyya min nashÁÔ al-shÐÝa fÐ sÛriyya" (*A Warning to the people about Shiite Activities in Syria*), 2007, p. 71.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> Among the most prominent converts to ShÐÝism in ÍaÔla are the following: Hussein RajÁ, YÁsÐn al-MaÝyÛf, MÛsÁ al-MulÁ ÝAbd, ÝAIÐ al-JÁsim, Íasan al-HabÁID, KhaÁr al-JÁsim, MuÍammad al-JÁsim, AbÛ ÝAIÐ Khalaf al-ÍÁÁir, MalÍud al-SaÝÐd, ÝísÁ al-HilÁI, and ÝUmar al-ÝAIÐ b. ÍammÁdÐ, the first Shiite convert in ÍaÔla. For more details see: AbÛ YÛsuf al-HusseinÐ, "Shiite Activity in Syria's Towns and Villages, URL: [www.ahlalheeth.com/vb/showthread.php?t=113193](http://www.ahlalheeth.com/vb/showthread.php?t=113193).

In the Deir al-Zor region, in the town of ÍáÔla and its neighboring villages, a number of *Husseiniyas* have been built recently. The first of these, in ÍáÔla, was built by MuÍammad Íasan al-BaÍYaÔ. Another was built by AmÐn al-RajÁ with funds from ÝAbd al-MuÍsin al-ÍÁPirÐ, and a third, called “the ImÁm al-Íasan *Husseiniya*”, was built by ÁiyÁP Íabash. Yet another *Husseiniya* was built by YÁsÐn al-MaÝyÛf and a fifth, called “The Great Messenger *Husseiniya*”, was built by Íusayn al-RajÁ. A sixth *Husseiniya*, named after the imÁm JaÝfar al-ÑÁdiq, was built by IbrÁhÐm Musa MullÁ.<sup>43</sup>

Numerous *Husseiniyas* can also be found in the surrounding villages. The best-known of these are the following:

One in the village of ZuÝaytir-ZaÝÐr al-Deir in al-JazÐra, headed by MaÍmÛd ÝÁyid al-WakkÁÝ.

There are three *Husseiniyas* in al-ÑaÝwa, a town of five-thousand inhabitants some thirty km outside of Deir al-Zor in the direction of al-Raqqa. One of these, built with a contribution given by the Kuwaiti woman Badriyya IbrÁhÐm al-ÝAbd AllÁh, is headed by RÁbiÍ ÝÁyid ShÁhÐn; the second is headed by AmÐn al-ÝAjÐl; our sources do not mention the name of the head of the third *Husseiniya* in this town.

In al-Kabr, a town of eight-thousand some fifty km from Deir al-Zor, a *Husseiniya* was constructed under the supervision of FarÍÁn al-ManÒÛr.

In AbÛ Khashab, a small town of three-thousand people in the desert, some 120 km from Deir al-Zor, a *Husseiniya* dedicated to the imÁm Musa al-KÁÛim was constructed under the supervision of YÛsuf KardÛsh.

The Sayyida Zaynab *Hawza* paid for the construction of the Prophet's Family *Husseiniya* in JadÐd ÝAqÐdÁt, under the supervision of Íusayn al-ÍÁÁir.

The Sayyida Zaynab *Hawza* in Damascus supervised the construction of a mosque dedicated to ÝAÍÐ al-HÁdÐ and an adjoining *Husseiniya* in the village of Íuwayjat Ñaqr; funding came from Zaynab, daughter of MuÍammad ÝAÍÐ.

Another *Husseiniya*, funded by the MaÝrifÐ family from Kuwayt, was built in the al-ShadÁdÐ area, between al-Íasaka and Deir al-Zor, under the supervision of Álmad al-ThallÁj.

It is worth noting that the land on which the *Husseiniyas* are constructed is acquired for huge sums of money, as an inducement to the owners, even in towns where there are no converts to Shiism. What matters is getting a foothold in the area. Occasionally land is bought for a million Syrian pounds per dunam, although its market price is no more than fifty-thousand. Many more large and ornate *Husseiniyas* are currently under planning and construction.

## Methods of Conversion in the Deir al-Zor Region

Al-ShamrÐ reports that young converts to Shiism argue against the Sunni faith in front of their friends and colleagues and offer them monetary and material inducements. Those whom they manage to win over they immediately marry to a Shiite woman who is willing to enter into such a marriage. The wife is often Iranian. They also invite the villagers and tribe members to feasts and provide them with supplies such as rice, flour, sugar and the like. At first they do not call on them to convert, but merely win their hearts. Later, at a second or third feast, they will try to convince them to adopt the Shiite faith.

It is reported that the afore-mentioned YÁsÐn al-MayÝÛf and Íusayn al-RajÁ brought bags of money from Damascus to Deir al-Zor during the Lebanon war in the summer of 2006, which they distributed among Lebanese refugees who came to the area, although they were not Shiites.

A man from the Persian Gulf area is said to arrive at Deir al-Zor once a month. According to some reports he brings the money, and not the Iranian Cultural Chancellery in Damascus, although according to other reports the man and the Chancellery work in cooperation with each other. This man gives the money to al-MayÝÛf and al-RajÁ and tells them how much to hand out to each convert. The usual sum is five-thousand Syrian pounds per month.

The Syrian security forces put pressure on the local populace and help the process of conversion. Those who resist are persecuted. Thus, for example, it is reported that some wealthy Shiite converts wanted to construct a *Husseiniya* in 2006 in the village of ÝAyn ÝAÍÐ.<sup>44</sup> But a day after the foundations were laid the villagers took them apart and removed them. At the moment of writing the attempt to construct the *Husseiniya* has not been renewed.

In 2003 a delegation of Shiite clerics from Damascus visited the KhÁlid b. al-WalÐd Mosque at the outskirts of Deir al-Zor. They met with the mosque's preacher and informed him that they had an official permit to search for tombs of

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> A village in the province of Deir al-Zor, near the village of al-MuÍÍÁn.

members of the Prophet's family and to maintain them properly. They asked that he cooperate with them and that he let them supervise the mosque. He refused, whereupon they tried to harass him and to acquire the land around the mosque, where they intended to construct a large *Husseiniya*, but their attempts did not succeed.

In another incident in 1998 a group of Shiite clerics visited the mufti of Deir al-Zor during the holiday of Ýîd al-FiÔr. They attacked the Sunni creed, whereupon the mufti said to them: "I was with President ÍÁfiÛ al-Asad just two days ago, and he told me that he did not want any sectarian strife here. In this way he deterred them from their plan."<sup>45</sup>

In 1996 ÝAbd al-ÍamDd al-MuhÁjir<sup>46</sup> made a journey through the provinces of Syria and visited centers of conversion, including the ÝAmmÁr b. YÁsir<sup>47</sup> mosque. The Syrian authorities ordered the preachers in the mosques and students to attend a sermon given by al-MuhÁjir, but its content aroused the anger of a number of Sunni clerics, who succeeded with the help of some tribal leaders close to the regime to put a stop to his travels throughout the country.

## Shi'ism in the Province of Dar'a<sup>48</sup>

Conversion to Shiism made its first appearance in the province at least ten years ago, with the regime's support. Some of the province's towns, such as BuÔrÁ al-ShÁm and others have had a Shiite population for a century, but these Shiites practiced dissimulation and acted as if they were Sunnis.

This was the case until the arrival of ZaydÁn al-GhazÁÍD, a college graduate who majored in philosophy and joined the Muslim Brotherhood and later the al-MurtaÁÁ Movement headed by JamDl al-Asad, the brother of ÍÁfiÛ al-Asad. Subsequently he embraced Shiism publicly and began to call for conversion. He received financial support from Iran and gave inducements to young people, especially cash, furniture, books and clothing. He also promoted temporary marriages. Anyone who opposed him found himself in prison or was threatened by the Syrian security forces, to which al-GhazÁÍD was very close, as the cousin of Brig. Gen. Rustum al-GhazÁÍD, head of Syrian Intelligence in Lebanon, and as a fervent supporter of the government.

Currently al-GhazÁÍD holds the position of preacher at the ÝAÍD b. AbD ÓÁlib Mosque in the al-ZÁhira neighborhood of the city of DarÝÁ, a Sunni mosque which al-GhazÁÍD took over by force.

### The Role of Iraqi Shiites in Conversion to Shi'ism in Dar'a

Iraqi Shiites have played an important role in Shiite activities in the province of DarÝÁ. Even before the fall of Baghdad in 2003 numerous Shiites came there. Their leader, AbÛ JaÝfar al-ÝlrÁqD, had a prominent social position there. He engaged in missionary work among the wealthy, as well as among physicians, to whom he offered free trips to Iran, and he also gave gifts and cash to the poor and to students.

He attended meetings at which he would curse the Prophet's Companions and accuse ÝÀpisha of adultery. Hardly a day would pass without him disseminating hundreds of Shiite missionary books throughout the province.

Numerous people have come under al-ÝlrÁqD's influence. He was the preacher at the Great Messenger Mosque in DarÝÁ which was built not long ago. Íusayn FaÁl AllÁh from Lebanon was present at its inauguration.

Al-ÝlrÁqD left Syria for Iraq after the fall of Baghdad; his place was taken by KÁÛim al-TamDmD, a Shiite missionary, too, but with less of a presence than the former. For that reason al-ÝlrÁqD was called back, but for reasons unknown he left again two months after his return.

In DarÝÁ today there are quite a few Iraqi Shiites; in fact, there is a whole street occupied only by Iraqi Shiite merchants. They have built a *Husseiniya* where all who convert to Shiism can get the services they want; it has a kindergarten, a computer room and a library for children.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>45</sup> *Op.cit.*

<sup>46</sup> ÝAbd al-ÍamDd al-MuhÁjir (b. 1950) is a Shiite cleric and a well-known preacher, born in Iraq. He went to high school in KarbalÁP. In 1963 he joined the *Íawza* there and pursued both secular and religious studies at the same time. He went through all the stages of *Íawza* education and went on to teach Islam at schools for QurPÁn recital.

<sup>47</sup> ÝAmmÁr b. YÁsir (567-657 CE) was a Companion of the Prophet who emigrated to al-MadDna with him and fought at the battles of Badr, Úlud, al-Khandaq and BayÝat al-RaÁwÁn. The Prophet called him "The good benefactor". ÝUmar appointed him governor of Kufa for a time. He was present at the battles of the camel and NiffDn with ÝAÍD b. AbD ÓÁlib. He did at the battle of NiffDn at the age of ninety-three.

<sup>48</sup> DarÝÁ is a city and province to the south of Damascus. The city, with a population of 117,000 is located about one-hundred km from the Jordanian border. Among the province's major towns are NawÁ (pop. 80,000), Óafas (pop. 31,000), Ankhal (pop. 30,000), JÁsim (pop. 29,000), DÁYil (pop. 38,000), BuÔrÁ al-ShÁm (pop. 33,000), al-Nanamayn (pop. 2,400) and others. See: [www.ar.wikipedia.org](http://www.ar.wikipedia.org).

## Husayniyyas in the Province of Dar'a

- A. The first *Husseiniya* in the city of Dar'Á was built in the Airport neighborhood, next to two Sunni mosques. It was constructed in a great hurry; its inauguration ceremony was attended by Mr. Íusayn Fa'Ál AllÁh from Lebanon and a great number of Syrian officials.
- B. The method used there for encouraging people to convert to Shiism is unusual: Shiite clerics from Iran, Iraq, Lebanon and Syria are constantly invited to visit, in particular ÝAbd AllÁh NiÚÁm, head of the Mu'siniyya School in Damascus, a powerful Shiite cleric and leader who takes part in every convocation of Shiite clerics in Syria. The *Husseiniya* is particularly active during the month of *mu'arram*, when preparations are made for the celebration of the Day of ÝAshÚrÁP. It distributes books in great quantities, as well as videos with religious content. Friday prayers are held there, attended by most of the province's Shiites.
- C. There is also a *Husseiniya* in BuOrÁ al-ShÁm, a town of 33,000 people. It is less active than the one in Dar'Á, to which it is subordinate. Still, it engages in missionary work, especially during the first ten days of the month of *mu'arram*.
- D. In al-Shaykh MiskÐn, a town with some 20,000 inhabitants, a *Husseiniya* similarly active and energetic as the one in Dar'Á has been built. It is run by an Iraqi, AbÚ MuntaÚar. Only Shiites were permitted to take part in its construction. It, too, has facilities for children, like the *Husseiniya* in Dar'Á.
- E. In the town of al-MalÐÁ al-Gharbiyya a *Husseiniya* has been constructed near the mosque, at a distance of no more than one-hundred meters. In this town of 5,000 people the roots of the Shiites go back a long time, but Shiite activity only began a few years ago, when they separated themselves from their Sunni neighbors. Now it is as if the town is divided into two parts. The Shiites even gave their stores and workshops new and typically Shiite names.
- F. In the town of al-Qarfa a *Husseiniya* called "Muslim Unity" has been built by Iran. Its construction was supervised by its current preacher, ZaydÁn al-GhazÁÐ, who enriched the poor in order to draw them to him. He openly receives financial backing from Iran, and equally openly visits educated people and notables and calls on them to convert to Shiism. To these people he also offers money, whereas to the poor he offers temporary marriages.
- G. In Óafas, a town with 31,000 inhabitants, the Shiites began making preparations for constructing a *Husseiniya*. At the moment, however, the local Shiites meet in a large house, which they consider their *Husseiniya* for the moment. It was given to them by a certain Mu'ammad al-ÍijÁzÐ, a man close to the Iranian ambassador to Syria and a representative of KhÁminÐÐ, whom he has visited on a number of occasions.

Conversion to Shiism has taken place also in many towns and villages where there are no *Husseiniyas*. Thus in the town of al-NÚra there lives a Shiite family which is actively engaged in missionary work. The father of the family and his son and daughter provide inducements to young people to convert. It is reported that the father even offers his daughter in temporary marriage in order to attract young men. This girl is a third-year student at the Sayyida Zaynab *Hawza* and supposedly at one time entered into more than fifty temporary marriages within a span of a few months.<sup>50</sup> The factors which promote Iranian penetration in the province of Dar'Á can be summed up as follows:

- A. The Syrian regime works hand-in-hand with the Iranian Cultural Chancellery in Damascus, which uses its financial clout and the security backing it gets in order to impose its own sectarian and denominational views on the citizenry.
- B. Followers of ÝAbd al-ÝAzÐz al-ÍakÐm in Iraq are allowed into the Dar'Á region freely and give support to the actions of the Iranians, under the protection of the Syrian security forces.
- C. A number of powerful and influential personalities support the Iranian moves, among them ZaydÁn GhazÁla, the son-in-law of Rustum GhazÁla, the former head of Syrian intelligence in Lebanon.

## Conversion to Shi'ism in the Province of al-Hasaka<sup>51</sup>

<sup>49</sup> Ahmad al-AyyÚbÐ, "Iran Penetrates the Arab World: Facts and Figures, Dimensions and Indications", November 19 2007, URL: [www.syriakurds.com/2007/sheasy/sh012.htm](http://www.syriakurds.com/2007/sheasy/sh012.htm)

<sup>50</sup> See "ShÐÝism in Dar'Á", URL: [www.d-sunnah.net/forum/showthread.php?t=34097](http://www.d-sunnah.net/forum/showthread.php?t=34097); BilÁl Muwaffaq, "Conversion to ShÐÝism Becomes Prevalent in Five Counties in the Province of Dar'Á", November 19 2007, URL: [www.syriakurds.com/2007/sheasy/sh001.htm](http://www.syriakurds.com/2007/sheasy/sh001.htm).

<sup>51</sup> Al-Íasaka is a city in north-eastern Syria on the KhÁbÚr and al-Jaghjagh rivers, with a population of 1,100,000. It is the main city of the province by the same name, at a distance of 600 km from Damascus, 494 km from Aleppo and 179 km from Deir al-Zor. The province's main cities are: al-



A number of sources<sup>52</sup> point out that Shiite missionaries in the province (whose population is mostly Kurdish) have recently begun to be very active. Flyers calling on people to convert have been distributed in shops in the city of al-Íasaka; these promise a monthly stipend of between 5000 and 10,000 Syrian pounds (about \$200) to converts. Obviously the missionaries in this case exploit the region's poverty, with the full knowledge of the local authorities. According to some sources this activity is sponsored by the Iranians, through their cultural attaché in Aleppo, with the cooperation of the Syrian intelligence services. The attaché is a cleric by the name of Ayatollah ÝAbd al-NÁÍb al-MÚsawĐ, a sophisticated Iranian Arab, who speaks fluent Arabic.

The leaders of the missionary movement in the province have, so it is reported, trained a great number of people, either by sending them to Iran on full scholarships for the purpose of studying the Shiite creed, or by financing trips to visit family members in southern Lebanon. The missionaries enjoy the protection of the Syrian authorities, who allow them full use of the province's mosques and grant them complete freedom of movement.<sup>53</sup>

The targets of the missionaries are mainly young people and the unemployed, whose dire need for cash makes them easy targets for conversion to Shiism.

The leaders of the conversion movement also by land for the construction of *Husseiniyas*. The latest such acquisition was in the Kurdish city of QÁmishiĐ. Recently, too, a *Husseiniya* dedicated to the Prophet's family was constructed in al-Nashwa, financed by a Shiite businessman from Kuwait.

The Shiites in the al-Íasaka Religious College instituted the recital of prayers for the birth of a Shiite saint; some of the college's teachers also teach that temporary marriages are sanctioned by Muslim law.<sup>54</sup>

The leading Shiite missionaries in the province are MaÍmÚd NawÁf al-KhalĐf, Dr. Íasan al-AÍmad al-MashhadÁnĐ and, perhaps the most prominent, the black-turbaned AbÚ FirÁs al-JabbÚrĐ (MuÓÓafÁ KhamĐs), in addition to ÝAbd al-Mulsin al-ÝAbd AllÁh al-SarÁwĐ, author of a number of books,<sup>55</sup> among them *Eight Issues Easily Understood*.

At least one of the province's missionaries owns a large bookstore, where weekly meetings are held and people are enticed to adopt Shiism.<sup>56</sup>

## Conversion to Shi'ism in Latakia

Conversions to Shiism in the city of Latakia<sup>57</sup> began in the 1980s, at the instigation of the al-MurtaÁÁ Movement, led by the Syrian President's brother JamĐl al-Asad. This movement constructed some seventy-six *Husseiniyas* in the Latakia region the largest of which, in the DamsarkhÚ neighborhood, has an area of 6000 m<sup>2</sup>, and the smallest, in the village of YAyn al-TĐna, has just 40 m<sup>2</sup>. In the past these *Husseiniyas* were not used for missionary activity at all; rather, they served as meeting places for people opposed to the government. However, after the death of President al-Asad the father the new ruler of Syria, the latter's son, enabled Teheran to gain increasing influence in the country, especially after the fall of Baghdad. The Iranians now manage the affairs of the Shiites in Latakia. This new phase was inaugurated by the construction of a *Hawza* ("The Great Messenger *Hawza*") in the al-Azhari neighborhood of Latakia, on a 4000 m<sup>2</sup> tract of land belonging to a Sunni endowment. The *Hawza's* manager is a representative of KhÁminaĐ, an Iraqi citizen by the name of Ayman ZaytÚn. In the al-ZirÁÝa neighborhood a cultural center has been constructed on the road leading to TishrĐn University, on a 2000 m<sup>2</sup> plot belonging to the Latakia municipality. This center employs over three-hundred Iraqis and Lebanese whose job it is to approach people and offer them inducements to convert. Iranian officials visit the province regularly. The Iranian Minister of Housing on his visit gave away three-hundred apartments to new converts to Shiism in Latakia. The apartments were built by the MuÍammad al-BÁqir Association, which was founded within the last five years. Even the head of Iran's Expediency Discernment

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Íasaka, al-QÁmishiĐ, al-MÁlikiyya, RaPs al-ÝAyn, ÝAyn ĐĐwÁr, RamĐlÁn al-ÝAmÁliyya, al-QaÍÓÁniyya, ÝÁmÚdÁ, al-DarbÁsiyya and Tall Nimr; see: [www.ar.wikipedia.org](http://www.ar.wikipedia.org).

<sup>52</sup> IbrÁhĐm DarwĐsh, "On Proselytizing for the Shiite Cause in al-Íasaka: How Cheap Religion Is to These People!!", February 18 2007, URL: [www.syriakurds.com/2007/sheasy/sh014.htm](http://www.syriakurds.com/2007/sheasy/sh014.htm).

<sup>53</sup> "Various Bodies Try to Disseminate ShĐÝism among the Kurds in Syria", April 20 2007, URL: [www.syriakurds.com/2007/sheasy/sh019.htm](http://www.syriakurds.com/2007/sheasy/sh019.htm).

<sup>54</sup> Ál Hussein, *op.cit.*, p. 73.

<sup>55</sup> AbÚ YÚsuf al-HusseinĐ, *op.cit.*; see also: Ál Hussein, *ibid.*, pp. 73-74.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 73.

<sup>57</sup> Latakia is Syria's main harbor and the capital of the province of the same name, on the Mediterranean coast. The city has some 650,000 inhabitants belonging to numerous Muslim and Christian denominations and many different ethnic groups (Turkmen, Armenians, Kurds and more). Among these the Armenians have preserved their original language and culture more than most. See: [www.ar.wikipedia.org](http://www.ar.wikipedia.org).

Council Rafsanjani visited the region, including the seaport of Latakia and the state farms which provide more than half of all the fruits and vegetables on the city's markets. He also signed some contracts with local people, and called on the inhabitants to visit Iran.

It should be noted that neither the province governor nor the provincial party secretary, the two highest officials in the region, go anywhere without Ayman Zayt'Un, whose picture is never absent from the daily newspapers. Zayt'Un has a say in all administrative appointments in the city, and quite openly promises jobs to converts to Shiism. At a closed meeting he went so far as to boast that "the West thinks we shall attack it from Sidon and Tyre, but we shall surprise them from Latakia and Tartus".

Shiite leaders in Latakia promise young people jobs, acceptance to university, and even wives. Those who want to participate in a holy war are sent to southern Lebanon. Iran helps its allies in Lebanon through propaganda in Syrian universities and colleges. Thus, for example, the president of Tishr'Un University in Latakia handed two buildings on the campus to the Iranian ambassador in March 2007 for the purpose of establishing an Islamic college within the university.

## Conversion to Shi'ism in Aleppo

The main Shiite center in Aleppo is the al-Nuq'Ôa Mosque near Jabal al-'Áwshan. Near the city there are two veteran Shiite villages, Nubbal and al-Zahr'ÁP, whose inhabitants are very active in Shiite affairs.

The following people are among the most important missionaries in the area: Dr. Ma'm'Ud 'Yakk'Ám, a professor at the Schools of Law and Education of Aleppo University and a preacher at the al-Taw'Íd Mosque, one of the city's largest and most popular Sunni mosques; 'Álmad 'Íass'Un, Syria's Chief Mufti; Mu'ammad Ad'Db Ra'Í'ÁI, a convert to Shiism.

Shiites control the Aleppo Red Crescent; the Red Crescent Hospital in the city is Iranian. The Iranian consulate in Aleppo, headed by Y'Abd al-N'Á'Íb al-W'Á'Íd al-M'Ûsaw'Ð, is very actively engaged in missionary work among university students. The consulate is quite close to the campus and provides rich meals to students in the hope of inducing them to convert.<sup>58</sup> Shiites in Aleppo typically hold large celebrations on the Prophet's birthday, the birthday of the sixth im'Ám Ja'Yfar al-N'Ádiq, and during Islamic Unity Week. An example of the latter was the celebration on May 30 2002, which took place at the al-Nuq'Ô'Á ("the Drop") shrine; the celebration was attended by some five-thousand Shiite men and women, mostly from the villages of Nubbal and al-Zahr'ÁP, as well as some Sunnis. The festivities were very carefully prepared by the Iranian consul in Aleppo, including a large screen for those who were not close enough to see the notables, loudspeakers and projectors. The walls were covered with large signs on which traditions about the Prophet were inscribed. The celebration opened with the recitation of a few Qur'P'Ánic verses.

The Hezbollah band played an important role. In fact, Hezbollah figured prominently there. 'Íasan Na'Ôr All'Áh's picture was placed next to those of Khomeini and 'Y'Á'Íd Kh'Ámina'Ð. The organization was represented by Na'Ôr All'Áh's deputy, Shaykh Na'Y'Ðm Q'Ásim, who spoke about Hezbollah's achievements in southern Lebanon in terms of their propaganda value to the Shiites. He was followed by a Shiite poet, 'Y'Abd al-Kar'Ðm Taq'Ð, who recited a poem about conversion to Shiism. At the end of the celebration al-M'Ûsaw'Ð spoke, and mentioned a number of books which in his opinion can be useful for promoting people's faith, such as *Nahj al-bal'Ágha* and *al-N'Á'Ífa al-sajj'Ádiyya*. But perhaps the most significant event at the celebration was a mass marriage ceremony, in which sixty couples were wedded at the Iranian embassy's expense (as proclaimed by the announcer at the event). Al-M'Ûsaw'Ð also announced that each of the grooms would receive a gift from the Iranian embassy and Kh'Ámina'Ð's office.<sup>59</sup>

## Conversion to Shi'ism in Idlib

In the province of Idlib there is a large village, al-Fou'Y'a, whose inhabitants converted to Shiism long ago. Two other villages where many have converted are Ma'Yarrat Mi'Ôr'Ðn and Zarz'Ûr, the latter in the Jisr al-Shugh'Ûr region.

Towards the end of 2006 a religious Shiite college opened in the province. It's curriculum is Iranian and it offers numerous inducements.

<sup>58</sup> Ab'Û Y'Ûsuf al-Hussein'Ð, *op.cit.*; see also: 'Ál Hussein, *op.cit.*, p. 52.

<sup>59</sup> 'Ál Hussein, *op.cit.*, pp. 53-55.

Shiite missionaries are very active in the province of Idlib. Some of them hand out monetary inducements, such as a sum of 2500 Syrian pounds to whoever names his son Iasan or Iusayn.<sup>60</sup>

Two of the most prominent missionaries in the province are Iasan al-Sayyid from the village of ZarzÙr, author of *Lover and Adherent of Muġammad and His Family*, and IbrĀhĒm Muġammad JawĀd from the village of al-FawĶa, known as “the poet of the Prophet’s family”.

One of the most prominent centers of Shiite activity in the province is ZarzÙr, a village near the Turkish border, some seventeen km north of Jisr al-ShughÙr, with between seven- and eight-thousand inhabitants.

The first conversions to Shiism in the village occurred already in 1945. The conversions were performed by Muġammad NĀjĒ al-GhafrĒ, who himself had converted after an encounter with Shaykh MarĶĒ al-AnŌĀkĒ al-ĶalabĒ and his brother Shaykh Ālmad al-AnŌĀkĒ. At first the mainly Sunni people of the village and the surrounding area did not receive his conversion well. However, al-GhafrĒ declared his conversion openly and began to engage in missionary activities among his fellow villagers, with the support of the Iranian embassy which maintained regular contact with him and financed the construction of a *Husseiniya*.

The following are some of the prominent people of the village of ZarzÙr who converted to Shiism:

NĀŌir Ālmad DĒIÙ, who became the imĀm of the al-ZahrĀP *Husseiniya* in ZarzÙr;  
KĀmil Iusayn, who studied at the Khomeini studied at the Khomeini *Hawza* in Damascus and later became a teacher there;  
YÙnis AmĀnĒ, Ālmad MuŌŌafĀ QĒrĀĀa, Muġammad al-BĀqir son of Muġammad al-GhafrĒ (i.e., son of the founder of the conversion movement in the village), ĶĀmid NajĒb al-Sayyid, and KĀmil Ālmad JanwĀr.

The Shiite missionary activities of the above have been supported by the Iranian embassy in Damascus, with the blessings of the Syrian regime. As a result the original conversion of a single person has by now brought it about that fully a fourth of the village’s inhabitants are Shiites. Whole clans have converted, including the Ōarmash, the al-Manjad and the Aṣayyad. By now Shiism has also spread into some neighboring villages such as ŶĀmÙd, KharĒba, al-Malnad, al-JĀnÙdiyya and al-Dariyya, although in smaller numbers.<sup>61</sup>

## Conversion to Shi'ism in Hims and the Coast

In Hims there is a large concentration of Shiites in the al-BayyĀĀa neighborhood, one of whose streets is named Iran St. There is also a large Shiite mosque there. The village of al-ĶamĒdiyya, not far from Hims, is Shiite, too.

Iranian and Iraqi Shiites are active along the Syrian coast. One of their great successes has been that the head of the Tartus religious endowments (*awqĀf*), Dr. Muġammad al-Sayyid, has publicly advocated the Shiite creed, as stated on the front page of issue no. 25 of *al-Minbar*, a journal devoted to converts to Shiism.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> AbÙ YÙsuf al-HusseinĒ, *op.cit.*

<sup>61</sup> “Shiite Expansion in Syria – Conversion to ShĒĶism in ZarzÙr”, URL: [www.muslim.net/vb/showthread.php?t=189953](http://www.muslim.net/vb/showthread.php?t=189953).

<sup>62</sup> Āl Hussein, *op.cit.*, p. 69.

## Conclusions

As we have seen, the roots of Shiism in Syria go back to the first century AH. Shiism became common during the period of ĩamdĀnĒ rule in Aleppo beginning in 904 CE and remained so during the Fatimid Isma'ili period. This was followed by a period of regression under the Ayyubid and Ottoman dynasties, until Twelver Shiism came to be the faith of only a small minority of the population.

The present study has shown that today Shiites constitute somewhat more than one percent of the eighteen million people presently living in Syria. Because of the regime's sensitivities concerning sectarianism no accurate statistics are available. Most of Syria's Shiites are Arabs, but some are of Iraqi and Iranian origin.

We have seen that Shiites in Syria today actively engage in missionary activities among Sunnis and that they possess a considerable number of institutions and shrines, the most important of which are the following: the tomb of Sayyida Zaynab, the shrine of Sukayna daughter of al-ĩusayn, and the "Mosque of the Drop" in Aleppo. All these sites are visited by numerous Shiite pilgrims from the Persian Gulf, Iraq and Iran.

After BashĀr al-Asad came to power in 2000 the Iranian influence in Syria grew apace, supported and encouraged by the Syrian regime. As a result numerous Iranians and Iraqis became naturalized Syrian citizens and the pace of conversion to Shiism grew, especially among Alawites, who had a desire to belong to a larger and more broadly-based community. The present study has also shown that the Iranian embassy and its cultural attaché in Damascus have played an important role in the dissemination of the Shiite creed in Syria and are active in missionary work in every province of the country, which they support by way of financial inducements, scholarships to Iranian universities, free medical care, monthly stipends, and more. We have also seen that the Lebanon war of 2006 aroused a wave of admiration for ĩasan NaĒr AllĀh, with the result that many Syrians converted to Shiism and Shiite activities in Syria intensified.

Our study has concluded that Shiites in Syria do not suffer from any social discrimination. To the contrary, they are fully integrated into Syrian society and maintain contact with the other communities in the country. Shiites live in most of Syria's provinces, although the highest proportion lives in Tartus, a province that accounts for 44% of the Shiite population in Syria.