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Autor(en): **Dudoignon, Stéphane A.**

Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **Asiatische Studien : Zeitschrift der Schweizerischen
Asiengesellschaft = Études asiatiques : revue de la Société
Suisse-Asie**

Band (Jahr): **63 (2009)**

Heft 1

PDF erstellt am: **22.07.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-147811>

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SUNNIS ONLINE

THE SUNNI CONFESSIONAL INTERNET IN IRAN

Stéphane A. Dudoignon¹, Paris

As-salaam-aylakum brother. What kind of people are Sunnis in Iran? In Azerbaijan they are very difficult people; they doubt about everything. They ridicule the Ahl-ul-Bayt (عليهم السلام). Baluchi people are crazy I think, is that right?

On www.shiachat.com, June 27, 2007²

Abstract

The typology of the Sunni confessional Internet in Iran is marked by its relative diversity, with: 1) electronic “halls (*bārgāhs*)” relying on perennial institutions like Friday mosques and prominent religious schools; 2) networks of more informal sites by disciple groups of figureheads in reformed Sufism; 3) the Salafi blogosphere promoting the politicisation of an Iranian Sunni identity.

- 1 A Senior Research Fellow, CNRS, and Lecturer, EHESS (Combined Research Unit “Turkic & Ottoman Studies,” Paris, dudoignon@aol.com), the author would like to express his touched gratitude to Leila Cherif-Chebbi (National Foundation for Political Science, Paris), Yves Gonzalez-Quijano (Louis Lumière University of Lyons), Marcus Michaelsen (University of Erfurt), Stephan Rosiny (Free University of Berlin), and Dominique Thomas (School of Advanced Studies in Social Sciences, Paris), for their friendly pieces of advice during the preparation of the present study. The author’s gratefulness also goes to Rémy Boucharlat, Jean During, Yann Richard, and Christian Bromberger, the successive Directors of the French Institute of Research in Iran (IFRI, Tehran), and to this institute’s whole Staff for their kindest welcome and assistance during successive winter stays in this country’s capital and eastern regions, between November 2004 and April 2007. It is a pleasant duty as well for us to express our gratitude to Anke von Kügelgen for her kind remarks on the content and form of this article. Last but foremost, the author would like to thank his wife Forouzan-deh for her patient reading and checking of the English text. As to the approximations and mistakes that the Reader may find in it, it goes without saying that they remain the author’s exclusive property.
- 2 <http://www.shiachat.com/forum/index.php?showtopic=234922657>; a milder, more politically correct answer (“I’ve met only a few Baluchi people and they were really nice;” “Most Sunnis in Iran are [of] liberal thought”) was given to this provocative question by an anonymous correspondent of www.shiachat.com, an Ottawa-based English-language forum for discussion on, and defence of Ja’fari Shiite Islam.
Last access date of all the web pages: November 2008.

This study shows how the weight of state censorship has been advantaging a small amount of religious scholars and mystics, some of whom have become community leaders or – posthumously – behavioural models at the scale of the whole country (like the Shaykh al-Islam of Zahedan in the first case, or the leaders of the Naqshbandiyya-Khalidiyya in the second). Reversely, this study also points out the numerous lacunae of the Internet as a documentary resource, illustrated for instance by its discretion on the supranational missionary organisation Tablighi Jama'at, despite the latter's activism on the field.

If the rising concern about the state of relations between the Sunni and Shiite populations of Iran, and the growing role of the Internet in the current debates on this issue ought to be demonstrated, the amount of material available on the worldwide web would suffice to provide convincing argument. Since the launching of the anti-Taliban campaign in Afghanistan in 2001, and the beginning of the Iraq War in 2003, the cyberspace has emerged as an increasingly significant forum reflecting the oscillations of national and international opinion on the Sunni question in the Middle East in general, in Iran in particular. In the immediate aftermath of the spectacular attacks by the Pakistani-based Iranian Baluch guerrilla group Jund-Allah against personnel of the Pasdaran in Zahedan (Iranian Baluchistan) on 17 February 2007, preoccupations have been increasingly expressed by people living or working in eastern Iran,³ as well as in the Iranian Diaspora,⁴ and even among the political authorities of the Islamic Republic⁵ as to the ongoing degradation of relations between the country's Sunni and Shiite

3 Conversation of the author with a senior official of a French NGO active in the Middle East, Paris, 31 Jan. 2008.

4 Beside the climate created by the regular broadcasting of sensitive material on Iranian Kurdistan or Baluchistan by the Persian programmes of the US satellite TV channel 'Voice of America', a telling indication of the Iranian Diaspora's growing concern is given by the diffusion of the chapters on relations between Shiites and Sunnis in Iran from a recently published English-language monograph: Vali NASR, *The Shia Revival (How Conflicts within Islam Will Reshape the Future)* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006) on the site of a US-based Iranian political organisation (<http://www.liberaldemocrat-ir.com/news.php?news=1597>). See also the site of the 'National Council of the Iranian Resistance' in early 2006 (<http://www.ncr-iran.org/fr/content/view/647/58/>).

5 Testimonies on this general state of mind can be found in the Iranian official Internet, notably those of the central or regional public press agencies devoting more and more room to the praise of 'harmonic' relations between the Shiite and Sunni populations of Iran: <http://www.khafnews.persianblog.ir/> (an agency concerned by the preservation of good relations between the Sunni majority (70%) and the Shiite minority of a rural district that hosts an important Sunni religious school of Khurasan, the Ahnaf *Madrassa* of Khwaf (opened in 1327/1948, visited by the author in December 2005): cf. <http://www.farsnews.net/newstext.php?nm=8611150136>).

communities. Though tensions have been regularly reported since the late 1970s (a ‘founding drama’ of this change was the demolition of the Shaykh Fayz Sunni Mosque in Mashhad in January 1994),⁶ they have worsened and taken an openly political character since the gradual conservative turn that has been taking place in Iran since 2002. In July 2003, a group of eighteen Members of Parliament representing Kurds, Baluch and other Sunni Muslims of Iran – including Persians from central and southern Khurasan – were questioning the government for its treatment of the Sunni minority, openly demanding to stop the appointment of Shiite clerics to run confessional institutions in Sunni-majority areas.⁷ In turn, this rapid change has brought about a growing concern amongst Iranian Sunni community leaders as to the increasingly derogatory representations conveyed on them in the Iranian political arena. An immediate consequence of this new attitude has been the rapid expansion and self-differentiation of a Sunni confessional cyberspace in Iran. In the long run, this change has been shedding a glaring light on the global shift that can be observed, also since the 1970s, in political identities in the Middle East, from ethnic to confessional. To the extent that the issue of the Sunni confessional Internet in Iran has come to raise innumerable questions, ranging from the discussion of key aspects of the modernisation theory to, more prosaically, growing concerns on regional and international security.

As to the former, contrary to lasting assumptions by theoreticians of modernisation,⁸ the Muslim-majority world is demonstrating a vigorous and increasingly diverse intellectual pluralism. The proliferation and accessibility of the means of communication in today’s global society, together with the rise of mass education, have unquestionably increased the power of intellectuals to communicate and of audiences to listen and discuss. If the influence of state power and of intellectuals trained in the formal religious sciences remains strong, their respective authority has nevertheless been contested by intellectuals with disparate backgrounds. Religious intellectuals, like their secularly minded counterparts, have been tacitly competing for fragmented publics.⁹ Whilst in this specific political context the printed word remains more than ever “the apex of valued knowledge,” its role has been multiplied by discussion in other media and “by

6 For an example of the resonance now given to this event, see <http://www.isl.org.uk/farsi/index.php>.

7 Story on BBC news: http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/middle_east/308421.stm.

8 GELLNER, 1994:22, 29.

9 *E.g.*, McLAUGHLIN, 2003: *passim*; EICKELMAN, 2006:289–304.

word of mouth.”¹⁰ More than ever, the Internet has become a hyper-medium of global dimension, capable of connecting individuals and communities scattered all over the world, and of diffusing all sorts of documents (written, audio- or video-taped).¹¹ In parallel, since the late 1970s the prevalent view of the declining role of religion has begun to erode. Several simultaneous but independent developments ignored by modernisation theory – beginning with the Iranian revolution of 1978/79 – have clearly indicated the continuing central role of religion in public life. However, major transformations of the Iranian revolution have been taking place since the 1990s. A “religious public sphere” has emerged in Iran in which politics and religion are subtly intertwined in ways not anticipated by Iran’s established religious leaders.¹² Later on, in a Republic that since at least 2005 has been supreme-ruled by the Pasdaran, a growing number of “centrist” Muslims and religious authorities largely support openings for democratisation, while secular conservatives often oppose efforts to open the political system.¹³

Contrary to another assessment of modernisation theory, in the Middle East these recent phenomena has driven not to a general collapse, but to an overall reappraisal and redefinition of earlier hierarchical notions of religious authority based on claims to the mastery of fixed bodies of religious texts. The Internet has been indeed perceived as the vector of a more opened, even more democratic communication space, through the facilitation of the access to a flexible medium for a rapidly growing amount of less visible social actors. On the one hand, objectified understandings have deeply transformed Muslim relations to the sacred authority. Of crucial importance in this process have been the “democratisation” of the access to religious authority and the development of a standardized language inculcated by mass higher education, the mass media, travel and labour migration.¹⁴ On the other hand, however, the constant rise of censorship and of the state’s intervention since the mid-2000s, particularly in Iran, has been favouring a reaction of institutional Islam, in particular of the ‘ulama’, in the cyberspace. Interestingly, this apparently contradictory combination of evolutions – viz., on the long duration, a continuing expansion of the printed word and modern media and, on the shorter run, the increased weight of censorship – has

10 EICKELMAN, 2006:289.

11 GUIDÈRE, 2006:45–62 (esp. 46).

12 ADELKHAH, 1998:152–247; more recently, on the impact of the Internet on the balance of power between the state and dissident actors: MCLAUGHLIN, 2003:2, 8–9.

13 E.g., ROUHANI, 2000:4–6; MCLAUGHLIN, 2003:11ff.

14 EICKELMAN, 2006:292.

favoured a concentration of religious authority in the hands of a limited amount of central ‘ulama’ to the expense of local clerics: a phenomenon particularly evident in the modern emergence and recent reinforcement of the Shiite institution of the *marja‘iyyat*.¹⁵ In the new contest characterized by increasing limitations upon ordinary citizens, those institutional Islamic intellectuals spared by growing censorship and repression, especially the representatives of confessional minorities, have been advocating diversity and tolerance in the public sphere more than any of their secular counterparts, promoting compromise whilst their practice conveys significant modern ideas of person, authority, and responsibility. This has been the case of the leading figures of the Sunni minority of Iran, whose role in the cyberspace has considerably evolved during the eventful past decade. At the same time, the reassessment of the ‘ulama’'s authority and the new competition between them and alternative intellectuals for the diffusion of reformed Islamic norms have led to a stimulation of concurrence, materialized by a spectacular multiplication of sites.¹⁶ This perpetual change involves significant issues from the viewpoint of modernisation theory as well as of Iran’s rapid political evolution and of regional security at the scale of the whole Middle East. In the following pages we shall try to see how this change has become apparent as far as Iran is concerned, in the framework of a more general project on the modern and contemporary history of this country’s Sunni minority¹⁷ – still a no man’s land of research in human and social sciences. The approach favoured for the present study has been a combination of the selective path (consisting of following links out of a selection of departing sites, for entering a sub-network of cross-references between websites communicating with each other), and of the “internal” method founded on precise and verifiable textual facts,¹⁸ in order to cast light on a country-wide loose conglomeration with partly encrypted international links, and to analyse their organisation, connections, and rhetoric. This work had been preceded by visits by the author to numerous religious and educational institutions in the easternmost districts of central Khurasan (border-

15 ROSINY, 2004:59–74; *ibid.*, 2007:245–262.

16 On present-day Saudi Arabia, see THOMAS, 2008, *passim*.

17 The provisional results of this ongoing work have been communicated in the form of a research seminar given during the study years 2007/08 and, hopefully, 2008/09 under the title “Jihad as a Lifestyle? The Sunni Revivals in Eastern Iran (1936–2003),” at the Institute for the Study of Islam and of the Societies of the Muslim World (IISMM) in the School of Advanced Studies in Social Sciences (EHESS) of Paris.

18 GUIDÈRE, 2006:47–48.

ing on the frontier with Afghanistan)¹⁹ and through the region of Sistan & Baluchistan. In some cases this has enabled us to reconstruct irrefutable and permanent links between virtual sites and physical persons, the limits between the two becoming more and more diffuse.²⁰ Such observations should have caused us to have some prejudice against the “effect of illusory coordination”²¹ that may emerge from the consultation of sites of similar content, often hosted by a small range of common Internet service providers.

1 A Sunni Internet in Iran? Obstacles and Assets

1.a The Internet in Iran since 1993: An Industrial Involution?

It is not before the late 1990s that the Internet has reached a large accessibility and audience in the world of Islam in general, in the Islamic Republic of Iran in particular. Even so, we still lack measurement means for the access to – and practice of – the Internet in Iran as in most part of the world of Islam, “a perpetual movement that challenges any analysis.”²² Introduced as early as 1993 into Iranian academic institutions, the Internet could rapidly be diffused throughout the country thanks to the flexibility of private Internet service providers.²³ The country’s integration into the worldwide web has happened in 1998. Until then, the majority of the Iranian actors of the Internet were recruited outside of the country, in the merchant space of globalisation in which they were appearing as full-right protagonists, as producers as well as consumers. As such, they were partaking of the privileged margins of the Diaspora – whether those installed, provisionally or not, in the most developed countries, or those that had “emigrated” inside their homeland, for instance in the trendiest neighbourhoods of

19 Officially ‘Khurasan of Reza (*Khurasan-i Razawi*)’, a region recently created through the subdivision of former Iranian Khurasan into three entities: Northern Khurasan, Khurasan of Reza, and Southern Khurasan. The two latter are distinguished by significant Persian Sunni populations, along the boundary of Afghanistan.

20 Cf. LEGRAIN, 2004:1; ROSINY, 2007:245.

21 THOMAS, 2006:33–44.

22 GONZALEZ-QUIJANO, 2004:11–29 (esp. 7, 12).

23 Cf. ROUHANI, 2000:2–3; RAHIMI, 2003:1–2; MICHAELSEN, 2006:*passim*.

northernmost Tehran.²⁴ Nevertheless, the use of the Internet has rapidly reached ever wider sectors of society and Iran has been making its entrance into the ‘age of information’.

As in a majority of Arab countries, the political power symbolized by President Muhammad Khatami (in charge from 1997 to 2005) played the card of toleration of a relatively large freedom of expression, whilst keeping a rigorous control of opinion on ‘classical’ media (the press and terrestrial TV networks). This selective political openness was completed by official measures aiming at encouraging the diffusion of the Internet: Ambitious governmental projects reveal that the young generation of Iranian leaders was more sensitive to these questions than the older one, and was awaiting political legitimacy as well as economic and scientific profits from this media’s development.²⁵ However, since the students’ demonstrations of late 2002 and 2003, a system of evaluation and filtration of websites has been established according to the country’s “moral and political security”, so that the access to the cyberspace for the Iranian audience has since then become much more complicated.²⁶ Not directly linked with the access to central power of Mahmud Ahmadinezhad in summer 2005, this change had been preceded by the first closure of 450 Internet cafes as soon as 2001.²⁷ It has been confirmed by the victory of the conservatives in the general elections of February 2004, and followed by a whole series of restrictive measures: In 2006, Iran’s Internet service providers were forced to restrict online speeds to 128 kilobits per second;²⁸ on December 16, 2007 the police of Tehran was closing twenty-one internet-cafes (coffee-nets) in the city, arresting twenty-three persons for “immoral behaviour” ...²⁹

24 ROUHANI, 2000:1 (this study suffers from a recurring shortcoming of social and political sciences of Iran: its over-concentration on Tehran, and lack of interest in the country’s regions).

25 For reappraisals of the Internet during the early Khatami period, see also ROUHANI, 2000:5; RAHIMI, 2003:1.

26 Reporters without Borders for Press Freedom: “Internet under Surveillance 2004,” online at http://www.rsf.org/article.php?id_article=10733.

27 RAHIMI, 2003:3–6.

28 Robert TAIT, “Iran Bans Fast Internet to Cut West’s Influence,” *The Guardian* (18 Oct. 2006); available with corrections at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/technology/2006/oct/18/news.iran/>.

29 <http://rsf-ch/?q=node/330&rsfprint=true&rsfprint=true>; see also Kelly O’CONNEL, “Iranian Internet Laws,” *Internet Law News* http://www.ibls.com/internet_law_news_portal_view.aspx?s=articles&id=EB50E2B3-69E9-47DB-8CE7-FFD9A259595D.

1.b The Turning Point of the mid-2000s

The media countryside of the Middle East remains characterized by authoritarian structures, the Internet being largely perceived by installed powers as a challenge to their monopoly on information. As suggested by many observers, online communication sustains the exchange of ideas between diversified protagonists, and the Internet also questions the established hierarchies and transmission channels that have been dominating so far the diffusion of religious knowledge. The initial enthusiasm raised by the expected impacts of the democratisation of the Internet has given way to a growing awareness of the social and linguistic barriers, as well as of the weak diffusion of the technology in developing countries.³⁰ In parallel, the 'digital fracture' has considerably slowed down the influence of the Internet outside of the urban, educated and well-off milieus. Although the Internet has become a means of expression for the political elites, its impact upon the mass of the population is not yet palpable and most of the time it is, as we shall see, the alternative media like fanzines distributed inside institutions, printed journals distributed in special networks of bookstores, audiocassettes and more recently CDs and DVDs proposed on specific markets, to say nothing of fax and cellular telephony, that remain the common instruments for mobilisation amidst anti-establishment groups and networks.

Moreover, the appropriation of this instrument of communication by the power has brought about, besides censorship and blockage of sites, an active involvement in the development and application of this technology in order to shape the Internet's environment. In Iran since the revolution of 1978, the state has given a large significance to means of communication and education, which were supposed to convey its own ideology to the masses. Nowadays, the media are regarded as possible vehicles for the promotion of the values of official discourse, whether inside or outside of the country. At the same time, the press is since 2004 subject to permanent pressures from the conservative elite.³¹ These pressures are even more palpable in Iran than, contrary also to what is happening in the Arab world, the Iranian Internet remains for its most part limited to the territory of the nation-state, and does not express an evolution towards the constitution of supranational markets tending to federate local initiatives around regional poles, in parallel with the appearance of supranational newspapers and satellite TV networks. Whilst the Arabic production on the Internet is character-

30 McLAUGHLIN, 2003:6.

31 *Ibid.*:11ff.; MICHAELSEN, 2006:326.

ized by “a strong Islamic complexion,”³² the Persian production remains divided between clearly segregated secular and religious cyberspaces, communications between the two being observable only on sites with a strong ethnic, regionalist or local dimension.

1.c A Real Space for a Virtual Minority?

Estimated between eight percent and “one third”³³ of the country’s population, the proportion of Sunni Muslims in Iran is difficult to calculate since confessional affiliations remain a major taboo of Iranian statistics.³⁴ As to the equation sometimes proposed by observers between ethnic and confessional membership,³⁵ it does not take into account the presence of sometimes significant Shiite minorities amidst ethnic groups traditionally associated with Sunni Islam (for instance among Kurds or Baluch), or substantial Sunni minorities among Shiite-majority groups (as in the cases of the Talishis of the western Caspian shore and of the Kura-Sunni Azerbaijanis of Urumiya and Khoy).³⁶ Moreover, this equation ignores the historical and demographic significance of Sunni Persians (*Fars*), most particularly in the newly created regions of Khurasan of Reza (cen-

32 GONZALEZ-QUIJANO, 2004:9.

33 See notably <http://www.isl.org.uk/farsi/index.php>.

34 The most precise, though poorly documented figures region by region are given by the foreign-based ‘Internet Society of Muslims’ (<http://www.mosalman.net/vb/showthread.php?t=3179>), an organisation focusing on the defence of the Sunni minority of Iran. A comparison is given between the official statistics of the 1996 census (giving a total of 5,307,142 Sunnis for a total of 62,385,513) and those gathered at uncertain dates by the main Sunni religious school of the country, the Dar al-‘Ulum of Zahedan (giving some 17,000,000 Sunnis for the same total population). Unsurprisingly, the biggest concentrations of Sunni populations and of Sunni mosques are found in the regions of Western Azerbaijan, Kurdistan, Kermanshah (Kurdish-peopled), Hurmuzagan (littoral of the Persian Gulf), Sistan & Baluchistan, Khurasan, and the Turkmen-peopled region of Gulistan on the south-eastern shore of the Caspian Sea (with significant minorities in the regions of Bushehr, Fars, and Gilan). The clearer and least erroneous mapping of the geographical distribution of compact Sunni populations in Iran, albeit it does not take into account the variations of relative density, is the one provided on <http://sunnairan.wordpress.com/about-this-site-contact/>.

35 E.g., www.tlfq.ulaval.ca/axl/asie/iran.htm; these figures of the Laval University of Québec, based on data from 2004, drive to an overall proportion of circa 10% of Sunnis, without taking into account the existence of Sunni Azerbaijanis and Sunni Persians.

36 For rare statistics on the Sunni populations of Eastern Azerbaijan, see the figures provided in “Ashnayi ba manatq-i sunni-nishin dar ustan-i Ardabil [An Introduction of the Sunni-Peopled Districts of the Ardabil Region]”, *Nida-yi Islam* (Zahedan) 5/2 (spring 1383/2004), 75.

tral Khurasan) and Southern Khurasan – two regions playing nowadays a particularly active role in the revival of Islam in post-Soviet Central Asia, through direct links established since the late 1990s between, on the one hand, local theological and juridical schools (called *hawzas* in Iran, *madrasas* in Central Asia), and on the other hand Tajikistani missionary centres.³⁷ A most striking feature of the geography of the Sunnis of Iran is their extremely uneven spatial distribution³⁸ in the ethnic and confessional patchworks of regions bordering on Sunni-majority countries or areas (Turkey, Iraq, the Gulf, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Turkmenistan). This geographical dispersion has probably influenced the rapid adoption of the Internet by the country's Sunni Muslims as a tool for their specific purposes. As we shall see, this adoption has been playing a role in the recent evolution of the Sunni religious norm and religiosity throughout the territory of the Islamic Republic of Iran: In the same way as improved communication facilities and, more recently, the growth of censorship have encouraged the development and concentration of the *marja^c-i taqlid* among Ja^cfari Shiites, the same combination of phenomena has been favouring the concentration of religious and, to some extent, political authority in the hands of limited amounts of imams and *shaykhs* as far as the Sunnis of Iran are concerned.

“A minority without a status,”³⁹ since politically assimilated with the Ja^cfari Shiite majority, the Sunnis of Iran also appear economically and culturally weak if compared with their mainstream Shiite counterparts. From this

37 Field observations made by the author in central and southern Tajikistan, central and southern Khurasan, and Iranian Baluchistan, every autumn and winter between December 2004 and January 2007.

38 A feature particularly obvious in central and southern Khurasan, where the unofficial proportion of the Sunni population oscillates between 50% in Turbat-i Jam, 70% in Khwaf and Taybad (figures obtained orally, not without reluctance, from the local bureau of the ‘Cultural Heritage [Mirath-i Farhangi]’ Foundation of one of these cities). These figures do not take into account such specific places as new-found rural towns which have been springing out of the desert during the past decade thanks to the technology of Artesian wells; located in frontier areas, created around large mosques and sometimes important religious schools, specialising in intensive saffron cultivation – as in Kayrabad in Khurasan-i Razawi, a place still absent from the most sophisticated maps of Iran, where the author has been recognized in 2005 by Tajikistani students previously met in Dushanbe – these places gather exclusively Sunni populations attracted by the Salafi project of these towns’ founders.

39 A felicitous formula proposed by Jean-Pierre DIGARD, Bernard HOURCADE, Yann RICHARD, *L'Iran au xx^e siècle: Entre nationalisme, islam et mondialisation*, 2nd ed. revised and enlarged, Paris: Fayard, 2007:13.

viewpoint, the Internet often appears as an attempt at creating a new territory developed by the Sunnis of Iran in order to make up these weaknesses. The educational obstacle remains still important, especially in those peripheral, rural regions of Iran where the rate of illiteracy remains high. A telling illustration of this discrepancy is provided by the Sunni-majority peopled district of Zahedan (the modern capital of the region of Sistan & Baluchistan, created by Reza Shah in order to have the predominantly Sunni tribalized and unruly Baluch administered by the predominantly Shiite non-tribalized Sistanis). In this district the overall literacy, the literate urban and rural population, the urban and rural differences in literacy, the literacy among rural girls aged 5–15 and among women aged from 15 to over 50 were systematically, in 1996 as well as in 1986, *the lowest* of the whole country – this being slightly compensated by very high rates of the growth of literacy during the 1980s in the southern districts of Sistan & Baluchistan (providers of migrant population to Zahedan and to this city’s sprawling suburbs), and to a lesser extent in the region’s northern districts and the southern districts of Southern Khurasan, as well as by the proportion of university doctors, now one of the highest in the country.⁴⁰ Analogous statistics are met in many other Sunni-majority regions and districts of Iran, which may provide another explanation for the significant role played there by sometimes powerfully subsidized religious schools with a predominantly male attendance, and by their prestigious teaching personnel, assisted by handfuls of young Islamic intellectuals who have become rapidly familiar with all the tricks of computer technology.

2 An Evading Reality: the Protagonists

2.a *The Paradoxes of Censorship: Concentration and Atomisation*

As well as the Sunni population of Iran, the amount of Sunni confessional websites is difficult to assess, partly because of the proliferation of ephemeral blog-scale sites often held by a very limited amount of persons, and of the total lack of connection between the respective networks of, respectively, Deobandi⁴¹

40 *E.g.*, TALEGHANI, BURGEL, GOLI, KOWSARI, 2005:126–134.

41 The epithet “Deobandi” refers to the most important school of Sunni ‘ulama’ in the Indian subcontinent, the *madrasa* of Deoband (now in the state of Uttar Pradesh) created in 1867 by Muhammad-Qasim Nanautawi (1833–1877) and Rashid-Ahmad Gangohi (1829–1905). Inspired by British educational models but excluding ‘Western’ sciences from their pro-

Sunni religious schools and traditional Sufi paths – both placed under permanent scrutiny of the Islamic Republic’s officialdom. Through this combination of observations the author’s own calculations have established a weak amount of Sunni sites that have an established viewer basis, excluding such sites as those of trading companies supporting Sunni educational, charitable and religious institutions, as well as innumerable and more or less ephemeral personal blogs, even if some of the latter are shaped as websites and tend to show less constraints in expression. If tens of thousands of connections are registered a year by the main sites, some of which include pages in varied languages, the sites are often created and ruled by single individuals or by very small groups of persons, sometimes isolated from their local community, and often impossible to identify from the outside.

Significantly, in the religious field the multiple restrictive measures taken by the Iranian government since 2002 have gradually restricted the cyberspace to the sites of an ever diminishing amount of unassailable teaching and juridical institutions led by prominent clerics with strong educational pedigrees. In the margins of these institutions’ e-networks and, in a radically different logic, the Sufi cyberspace has been prospering too. In the context of increasing censorship and repression, both have been favouring the glorification of the great deceased figureheads of the recent past – an essential asset for the legitimacy of present-day community leaders, and a retrospective assessment less likely to arouse the solicitude of political police. If institutional websites (those emanating from prominent Sufi networks or from important religious schools) are naturally led by the *shaykhs* of the former and the *mudarrises* of the latter, it remains more difficult to determine the identity, if not the social and intellectual profile of those behind bunches of mutually related Sunni militant blogs that have been pullulating in Iran since 2003, viz. in a period of increasing censorship and repression. As we shall see, a characteristic of these networks of sites is their likely conception by a limited group of persons (judging by the sites’ common technical and aesthetical features), and their functioning, in the form of interconnected

grammes, the ‘ulama’ of Deoband have been centring their teaching on a revival of Qur’anic sciences. Rooted in reformed Sufism, the Deobandi movement underlines the individual spiritual discipline through the teaching of a spiritual master, but at the same time opposes the cult of saints in line with Wahhabis (cf. Barbara D. METCALF, “Deobandis”. In: John L. Esposito, ed., *The Oxford Encyclopaedia of the Modern Islamic World*, New York – Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995, 1:362–363, bibliography). Deobandis have been exerting a deepest impact in the Sunni *madrasas* of Iranian Baluchistan since the opening of the first of them in the mid-1930s by Deoband- and Karachi-educated Baluchistani ‘ulama’.

blogs hosted by the same providers, as a range of different pages of the same book, with different respective tones from the more moderate to the more radical.

2.b *Inside and Outside the Nation-State*

As suggested by the author's visits to Sunni confessional institutions in eastern Iran since 2003, the members of the virtual Sunni confessional web in this country are mostly educated urban young men. Among them, one finds generations of imams educated in modern schools in Iran or abroad (mainly in Karachi and Lahore), who have played a decisive role in the appearance of sometimes important and creative computer section in the religious schools of the country's eastern periphery. As to the outline of a typology of Sunni confessional websites in Iran, a first category, quantitatively not the most significant, is represented by foreign or international websites, with a special offer in Persian language intended for the Sunnis of Iran. First and foremost, comes the Indo-Pakistani Tablighi Jama'at ["Society for the Propagation"], a grassroots non-political purist Islamic movement for the reawakening of faith with followers all over the world of Islam and the West.⁴² Historically based on the early nineteenth-century teachings of the reformed Naqshbandiyya mystical path and on the modern growth of Islamic religious schools in the subcontinent, the Tablighi Jama'at has been acquiring a growing influence in eastern Iran from its branch in Sarawan, on the frontier between Iranian and Pakistani Baluchistan, and from its dynamic outpost in Zahedan, the capital of the Iranian region of Sistan & Baluchistan. Though its annual international conference in Raiwind near Lahore still attracts limited numbers of Iranian believers,⁴³ and albeit it remains a phantom of the Iranian Sunni Internet (it is notably absent of the links rubrics of the numerous sites visited by the author), the Tablighi Jama'at's influence can be felt in the whole Iranian Sunni cyberspace, especially in the sites of the great religious schools, notably through the theme of conversion to Islam⁴⁴ – seen through the

42 Mumtaz AHMAD, "Tablīghī Jamā'at". In: *The Oxford Encyclopaedia of the Modern Islamic World*, 4:165–169; M. GABORIEAU, "Tablīghī-Djamā'at". In: P. J. Bearman *et al.*, eds., *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., 10, Leiden: Brill, 2000:38–39.

43 Eight thousand only in 2006, according to figures produced by a delegate of the Tablighi Jama'at, Iranian Baluchistan, who had participated in it that year and had made a video tape of his journey (interview, Khash, late Jan. 2007).

44 Before wearing a thick beard, the author was often reproached not to convert by bunches of young *madrasa* students gathering around him after the midday prayer in the main court-

publication of ideal, highly normative portraits of converts, amongst whom young ladies from Western Europe, Northern America, or Israel.⁴⁵ (Interestingly, this Tablighi-inspired missionary stance is observable as well on sites related to the Sufi blogosphere.⁴⁶ It is true that in last years, the Tablighi method, viz. an unselective preaching without political implication, seems to be widespread, new actors being favoured by the web and its non-hierarchical exposure of Islam.) Another significant ghost of the Iranian Sunni confessional Internet is the London-based Salafi⁴⁷ ‘League of the Sunnis in Iran [Rabita ahl al-sunna fi Iran]’,⁴⁸ which focuses on the virulent denunciation of the legal and political situation of the Sunni minority of Iran, with tremendous insistence on the brutality of the methods implemented against it by the Islamic Republic. Though not represented by a website of its own in the Iranian Sunni confessional Internet, it diffuses its message through an instable network of highly politicized Salafi blogs in Persian language, distinguished by the hatred that they convey towards both

yard of the Dar al-‘Ulum [House of Learning] of Zahedan, clearly the most *tabligh*-oriented Sunni educational institution of eastern Iran.

45 A classical theme in the Deobandi Dar al-‘Ulum of Zahedan, where it appears in the form of Persian translations of newspaper clippings: cf. Shafiqa SHAMS, transl., “Dastan-i islam awardan-i yak dukhtar-i yahudi-yi makziki [The Story of the Adoption of Islam by a Jewish Girl from Mexico],” *Nida-yi Islam* 5/3 [19] (autumn 1383/2004), 64–65; *ibid.*, “Dastan-i islam awardan-i Kiza Salih az Uganda [The Story of the Adoption of Islam by Kiza Salih from Uganda],” *ibid.* 5/4 [20] (winter 1383/2005), 67; anonymous, “Dastan-i islam awardan-i yak amira, dukhtari az ayalat-i Arkansas-i Amrika [The Story of the Adoption of Islam by a Leaderess, a Daughter of the American State of Arkansas],” *ibid.* 6/2–3 [22–23] (summer-autumn 1384/ 2005), 88–89; etc.

46 For instance: <http://100as.blogfa.com/post-12.aspx>.

47 A neo-orthodox brand of Islamic reform founded by Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1839–1897) and Muhammad-‘Abduh (1849–1905) at the turn of the twentieth century, the modern Salafiyya [from the Arabic word *salaf*, the virtuous forefathers of Islam, comprising the first three generations of Muslims] has religious, cultural, social and political dimensions. In face of the threat of cultural submission to Western colonialism, it worked to assert the validity of Islam in modern times, at the same time proving its compatibility with reason and science, and restoring its unadulterated form. The reforms they propose being of a comprehensive yet gradual nature, the Salafiyya hope to bride the gap within their societies by introducing sweeping reforms at the individual as well as institutional levels (Emad Eldin SHAHIN, “Salafiyah”. In: *The Oxford Encyclopaedia of the Modern Islamic World*, 3:463–469). Significant channels of penetration of the Salafiyya into Iran, through the country’s south-eastern region, have been the Pakistani posterity of Abu’l-‘Ala al-Mawdudi (1903–1979) and the militants of the Jama‘at-i Islami.

48 Present in the Iranian Internet essentially through its UK-based bilingual (Arabic & Persian) site ‘Society of the Sunnis of Iran’: <http://www.isl.org.uk/index.html>.

the West and the Islamic Republic of Iran.⁴⁹ Even more than websites clearly domiciled in Iran, the freshly emerging foreign-based Iranian Sunni Salafi blogosphere – to which we will get back in the last paragraphs of the present study – differentiates itself by the amount of provocative graphic and literary material, and by its shady organisation.

A subcategory of the foreign-based Internet intended for the Sunnis of Iran is made of sites providing bibliographic information to the Persian-language readership, such as the Turkish ‘Hakikat Kitâbevi’,⁵⁰ a multilingual library of reformed Naqshbandi orientation which proposes the downloading of Persian-language e-books amongst which one can find the classical *Anis al-talibin* by Salah b. Mubarak Bukhari (praising the divine prodigies of the fourteenth-century eponymous saint Baha al-Din Naqshband), a selection of works by Ahmad Sirhindi (1564–1624, the early modern reformer of the Naqshbandiyya mystical path), Abu Hamid Ghazali (1038–1111)’s *Kimiya-yi sa’adat* (a vade mecum for the devout Muslim in every aspect of Islamic religious life), or still several anti-Wahhabi treatises. A relatively large amount of Iran-based sites and blogs are also specifically devoted to the purchase of religious e-literature,⁵¹ in different shapes including, since a more recent date, literature downloadable on mobile phones.⁵² The inspiration of the books proposed is clearly reformist (including a number of references against “innovation [*bid’at*]”) if not Salafi (innumerable items on the Companions of Prophet Muhammad, and their respective wives). Interestingly, the bookstore pages or sites are the place where the biggest amount of information can be found on a theme generally avoided on the main pages of the Iranian Sunni cyberspace: testimonies on the general effort of missionary activity towards Iran’s Shiite population (in the form of accounts of converts, and polemic literature for quibbles with Ja’fari Shiites – including, curiously enough, the sharp polemic treatise “On Islam and Shiism” by the Azerbaijan-born historian and iconoclastic secularist Ahmad Kasrawi (1890–

49 E.g., <http://sunnairan.wordpress.com/> (As well as a majority of foreign-based highly politicised websites, this site was accessible from Tehran and from the Sistan & Baluchistan region in early 2007, though change may have occurred since that date.)

50 <http://www.hakikatkitavevi.com/persian/persian.htm>; links to this online bookstore can be found on mutually related sites of the Naqshbandis Khalidis of Iran (e.g., <http://www.naqshbandi.blogfa.com/post-30.aspx>).

51 See notably the ‘Library of the Sunnis’ (<http://www.ketabkhanehahlesonat.blogfa.com/>); the ‘Library of the New Sunnis’ (<http://islamtxt2.8m.net/>).

52 See for instance <http://eslam-sonni.blogfa.com/>, the Salafi-oriented ‘Library: Books of the Sunnis for Mobile Phones (Kitabkhana: Kitabha-yi ahl-i sunnat bara-yi mubayl)’.

1946).⁵³ It goes without saying that larger amounts of international online bookstores, mainly in Arabic language, are represented in the links of the Iranian Sunni confessional cyberspace.⁵⁴ A completely different category of foreign sites present in the latter, though in the form of cross-references in the links, is made of mainly Arabic-language websites of an openly Jihadist character, centred notably on Iraq, on which the surfer based outside of Iran falls after half a dozen of mouse clicks in the links rubric of mutually related websites.

Also clearly situated on the interface between the nation-state and the international space, but in a completely different register, one finds a very limited amount of state-sponsored organisations and sites oriented mainly towards foreign countries, revealing the general concern of the religious authorities of the Islamic Republic as to the relations between the different theological and juridical rites (*madhhabs*) of Islam. Among the latter must be mentioned the ‘World Forum for the Conciliation of Islamic Rites (Majma^c-i jahani-yi taqrib-i madhahib-i islami)’ and its characteristically multi-language website (in Persian, Arabic, Urdu, Turkish, English, French, and Russian) – revealing its characteristic orientation towards the near abroad more than towards the country’s Sunni periphery.⁵⁵ This site’s overall discourse on the unity of the Islamic community (oriented explicitly against Western powers) includes apologetic pages on the remote Islamic past (under the rubric ‘Common Heritage [*mirath-i mushtarak*],’ including illustrated texts on the varied celebrations of Ramadan, the martyrdom of Hamza (a key figurehead of political Islam, whether official or underground), music and the gnostic heritage of the Qur’an. The same official site also dispenses more insidious qualifications of the role of Sufism in the history of Islam, and generally speaking a consensual discourse addressed to Muslims of varied affiliations, strictly focused on the main authorities, past and present, of the Islamic Republic (no trace of a Sunni orator; as to the openings to non-Iranian figures, they are limited to Arab, mainly Lebanese Shiite scholars: a testimony of the specific Shiite-centred geopolitics in which the Islamic Republic has been confining itself since its very origin, though with more spiteful anger and haugh-

53 See notably <http://www.ahlesonnat.net/>; on Kasrawi, see Ervan ABRAHAMIAN, “Kasravi, Ahmad”. In: *The Oxford Encyclopaedia of the Modern Islamic World*, 2:404–405; M. A. JAZAYERI, “Kasrawi Tabrizi, Sayyid Ahmad”. In: E. van Donzel, *et. al.*, eds. *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., 4, Leiden: Brill, 1997:732–733.

54 See for instance <http://www.douroud.org/markaz.htm> (the general-interest ‘Markaz al-Kitabiyyat al-Islami,’ recommended on the main websites of the Kurdish branches of the Naqshbandiyya mystical path).

55 http://www.taghrib.ir/tmain_fa.aspx?lng=fa.

teness since 2005, and of the discouraging vision of pluralism that prevails in both Tehran and Qum's leading circles).

2.c *Sunni Islam in Local and Regional Lobbying*

Among Sunni confessional websites with a more regional or local dimension, some, difficult to detect through the analytic approach, have been created by trading companies, though intended to function as non-profit-making websites. Such is the case of a Mashhad-based transport company with interests in central Khurasan, and with offices in the border city of Turbat-i Jam, with a site⁵⁶ and a homonymous illustrated monthly journal *Jadda-yi abrisham* ['Silk Road']. Not specifically Sunni, the journal, supportive to President Khatami in the late 1990s, used to show till 2005 a strong interest in the Sunni cultural institutions of eastern Khurasan.⁵⁷ A considerably broader category of regional Internet is made by a much wider range of sites – official, institutional, or individual – with community interests, in particular those promoting the defence of ethnic groups, beginning with the Kurds, the Baluch and the Turkmens,⁵⁸ which show the most active ethnic minorities, though in different fields, in the promotion of a religious and political Sunni identity on the scale of Iran. Significantly, in the case of Kurdistan (and of the Kurdish-peopled Western Azerbaijan and Kermanshah regions) the history of the Naqshbandiyya Sunni mystical path always appears a key element of regional history.⁵⁹ Such is also the case of other groups of western Iran, like the aforementioned Shafi'i-majority and Hanafi-minority Kura-Sunni group of the Iranian region of Western Azerbaijan and of eastern Anatolia (with their main centres in Khoy, Salmas, and Urumiya in Iran, and Van in Tur-

56 <http://www.silkroadnews.com>.

57 See for instance the special issue of *Rah-i abrisham* (67, 1384/2005) on the monuments and the spiritual heritage of Turbat-i Jam – all the articles being written by apparently (judging by their given names) Shiite correspondents.

58 On the latter, see notably <http://webgozar.com/feedreader/redirect.aspx?url>; <http://www.turkmenstudents.com/> ("the first information site of the Turkmen students and teachers of Iran"), with interesting elements introduced from an ethnographical viewpoint on some vernacular Sufi rituals.

59 These include a large typology of sites, whether official ones, like the Kurdistan page of the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (<http://cms.mfa.gov.ir/cms/cms/Tehran/fa/Tourism/OSTAN/Kurdistan.html>), or regional pages of sites intended for tourism (for instance <http://www.ataland.com/Pages/Province/ProvinceInfo.aspx?id=25>, or still <http://www.farazkurd-travel.com/kurdestan.htm>); conversely, some major Naqshbandi sites are exclusively associated with Kurdistan: see <http://www.naqshbandi1.blogfa.com/>; <http://naqshbandi.parsiblog.com/>.

key), who have promoted sites of their own including elements on their ethnography, literature, and history (notably on the confessional repressions that they have been submitted to since the sixteenth century).⁶⁰ Such data are sometimes given in passing on regional sites, like for instance on the role of the sociability and rituals of the Qadiriyya and Naqshbandiyya mystical paths and their influence on traditional music in Talish, a hilly Caspian district bordering on the Republic of Azerbaijan.⁶¹

Most sites or networks of blogs associated with Sunni Sufi paths and groups include a strong ethnic, regional or local dimension. Indeed the main historical paths enjoy a number of mutually related sites of their own, especially the very active and influent Naqshbandiyya.⁶² As to the Qadiriyya, the Suhrawardiyya or the Chishtiyya,⁶³ they appear mostly in the Persian cyberspace through general-interest sites or through sites devoted to Islamic gnosticism and Sufism in general.⁶⁴ At the same time, the presence of these historical Sufi paths in the cyberspace of Iran is often associated with the apology of a specific region or place, in the form of more or less ephemeral blogs elaborated apparently by isolated individuals: for instance the Naqshbandiyya in Kurdistan,⁶⁵ in Mashhad,⁶⁶ or in Balkh⁶⁷ in present-day Afghanistan); the Qadiriyya in varied places

60 See notably the bilingual Persian/Azerbaijani site <http://www.kuresunni.com/KuresunniHTML/Irn/Tarix.htm> (with geographical information on the present settlements of the Kura-Sunnis).

61 E.g., <http://www.talessan.com/honar1.htm>; on the history of the Naqshbandiyya mystical path in Talish, see Hamid ALGAR, "The Naqshbandiyya-Khâliidiyya in Talish (Northwest Iran)," *Journal of the History of Sufism* 5 (2007):169–197.

62 See in particular <http://naqshbandi.parsiblog.com/>; <http://baktashie.persianblog.ir/> (notably: Milad IZADI-MUQADDAM, "Sufiyan dar Iran [The Sufis in Iran]," posted on 26 Adhar 1386 / 17 Dec. 2007 – with elements on the history of the Naqshbandiyya Khalidiyya and its nineteenth and twentieth-century diffusion in Iran from Kurdistan).

63 <http://cheshtieh.com/index.asp?sPage=Link&ContentID=217&lang=Farsi>.

64 Like <http://www.moridenur.ir/> ('a general data basis on religions, rites, Islamic gnosticism, and Sufism') or still <http://mc.blogfa.com/post-98.aspx> ('La'llah ila hu,' a site created in Mihr 1387/October 2007); see also an advertisement for a book by Muhammad DARWISHI, *Tawajjuh ba musiqi-yi qudsi, madhhabi wa ayini-yi Iran* [About Holy, Confessional and Ritual Music of Iran] on <http://www.ircap.com/magentry.asp?id=1399> (the site of the Sura-yi Mihr publishing company).

65 See supra note 57.

66 <http://www.shamsiyeh.blogfa.com/>.

67 <http://naqshbandeyan.blogfa.com/>.

of Kurdistan;⁶⁸ and the Chishtiyya in Sistan and in Khurasan (in this case, from a historical and retrospective viewpoint).⁶⁹ The sites are now often centred on the posthumous cult of prominent authorities of the recent past, illustrated by biographies summarized from previously published books.⁷⁰ In connection with this category, one can find elements on the genealogies of the main *shaykhs* such as those of *Shaykh* °Ali Hisam al-Din Naqshbandi (d. 1939),⁷¹ a holy figurehead still honoured by a special site devoted to apologies of his divine prodigies (*karamat*).⁷² Interestingly, we observe that a majority of sites and blogs devoted to Sunni Sufi paths and gnosticism are located in (and tend to deal predominantly with) the western part of the Iranian territory (Kurdistan, Western Azerbaijan, Talish), whence as we shall see the prominent sites associated with Deobandi confessional schools belong to the country's easternmost periphery (Sistan & Baluchistan, southern and central Khurasan). Before broaching this important category of the Iranian Sunni confessional Internet, some words must still be said of the cyber-activity of militant press agencies dealing specifically with the issues of the Sunni populations of Iran, the most interesting (and accessible) ones being, besides the recently created pan-Iranian agencies Sonnat News⁷³ and Sunni News,⁷⁴ agencies illustrating the current affairs of a specific region or district like Khwaf News in Khurasan,⁷⁵ and organisations oriented towards the

68 *E.g.*, <http://kasnazani.persianblog.ir/>, with a connection to <http://www.kasnazan.com/> (the Arabic-language 'official site' of the Qadiriyya in Kasnazan, a rural place north of Divandareh); <http://www.njar.blogfa.com/> (a blog by a Qadiri from Najjar, a tiny village of the Zagros between Paveh and Nudsheh), etc.

69 *E.g.*, http://www.sajestan.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=62&Itemid=42 (in the shape of a page on a site devoted to the defence of the 'civilisation' of Sistan); <http://www.diyare-eshgh.blogfa.com/cat-2.aspx> (a blog created in Adhar 1385/December 2006, fostering the idea of an Islamic gnostic tradition proper to Sistan).

70 See for instance the apology of the Kermanshah-born *Shaykh* Muhammad °Uthman Naqshbandi Siraj al-Din II (1896–1997), who came from Iraq in 1958 and was protected by Muhammad-Reza Shah Pahlavi, but was obliged to flee anew to Iraq after the establishment of the Islamic Republic: <http://www.naqshbandi.blogfa.com/post-26.aspx> and affiliated sites (*e.g.*, <http://tasavofarigat.blogfa.com/>); the apology is classically based on the holy man's studies in sciences and gnosis, achievements and written works. For a less apologetic, more contextualized approach to Siraj al-Din II's path, see ALGAR, 2007:186–187.

71 <http://www.tn.coo.ir/>; http://www.sercawe.ir/links/shex%20hesameddin/shex_hesameddin.htm.

72 *E.g.*, <http://hesamaldin.blogfa.com/post-8.aspx>.

73 <http://www.sonnatnews.blogfa.com/> (online since Farwardin 1386/March–April 2007).

74 <http://sunni-news.com/>.

75 *Cf. supra* note 4.

defence of the interests of the Kurds or of the Baluch of Iran such as, in the case of the latter, Baluchistan News⁷⁶ and the Taftan News Agency. Created in November 2003 and bearing the name of a volcano located in Iranian territory, the summit of greater Baluchistan and a consensual symbol of Baluchistani identity, the Taftan News Agency specializes in news “from Baluchistan and the world” and plays a significant role in the mobilisation for the defence of human rights, in connection with the ever-growing amount of arrests and expeditious executions of Baluch people in Iran, under varying accusations among which predominates procedures for smuggling⁷⁷ – a key factor of discontent in the south-east periphery of the country. A subcategory closely connected to this one is made by sites and blogs of political parties and organisations like the site of the more classically separatist London-based Baluchistan People’s Party.⁷⁸

2.d From Headmasters to Webmasters: Confessional Schools

More strictly religious questions are occasionally tackled by generalist sites of debates on confessional issues, or groups of academic scholars writing under their names or pseudonyms, or intervening in the ongoing polemics on the status of the Sunnis.⁷⁹ Such was the function of the cultural and historical journal *Haft iqlim* [“The Seven Climates”] until its forbidding in December 2006, its director the Shiite-background Sistan-born Professor Ghulam-Husayn Jahantigh (b. 1962) of the Free University of Zahedan, also acting as a senior official for the Tablighi Jama’at in Iran.⁸⁰ However, as far as the Sunni confessional cyberspace of Iran is concerned, a leading protagonist, with an ever-growing influence, is unquestionably the large network of mutually related mosques and private confessional schools (*hawzas*, *madrasas*). Since the late 1990s the propagation of their speeches and writings through the Internet has permitted the ‘ulama’ to conquer the attention of their peers and of the faithful, and so doing to increase

76 <http://www.balochistannews.com/>.

77 <http://www.taftaanb.blogspot.com/> (Includes a link with the site of Human Rights Watch.)

78 <http://www.ostomaan.org/> (The site is equipped with a filter breaker.)

79 For instance on a site partially devoted to Kurdistan <http://www.fakouhi.com/> that was initially conceived as a personal site (*sayt-i shakhsi*), but rapidly developed into a public site (*sayt-i ‘umumi*) held by academics, journalists, writers and students in human and social sciences.

80 Besides, the journal was also offering tribunes, notably to prominent ‘ulama’ of Baluchistan, for campaigning in favour of the unity of Islamic rites: e.g., Mawlawi Salah al-Din SHAHNAWAZI, “Wahdat-i ummat-i islam [The Unity of the Community of Islam],” *Haft Iqlim* 9 (1383/2004):30–32.

their reputation and the number of their supporters. The phenomenon has begun in the early Khatami years with the digitalisation of religious texts presented first on audiocassettes and VHS videocassettes, then on CDs and DVDs, last on the Internet. (The diffusion of the discourse of Iranian Sunni religious leaders in the form of CDs and DVDs by far exceeds nowadays its circulation in the shape of books.) According to a convergence of older and younger generations which remains typical of the Islamic Republic of Iran, an alliance has quickly arisen between religious scholars and computer specialists, for the advertisement of each prominent Sunni mosque or religious school's intellectual activity. As well as the Shiite *hawzas* of Mashhad and Qum, numerous Sunni confessional schools had been first multiplying fanzines, journals, bookstores, before beginning to open websites, which now help them in the competition to attract faithful and students from all over Iran and, on a larger scale, from the Middle East and Central Asia. (Tajikistani students have been coming to Khurasan and Sistan & Baluchistan since the end of their country's civil war in 1997, and their number has been tending to grow since 2001; the website of the Dar al-^oUlum of Zahedan⁸¹ – a Sunni *hawza* which has become, since 2001, the main Sunni religious teaching centre on the scale of Iran – has recently planned the opening of pages in Russian language, explicitly intended for viewers from the whole former Soviet Union.)

Several prominent mosques and religious schools run their own site, the most efficient and explicitly intertwined ones being those of the Salah al-Din Ayyubi School of Religious Sciences of Urumiya (Western Azerbaijan);⁸² the Quba Friday Mosque in Sanandaj (Iranian Kurdistan);⁸³ the Madrasa-yi ^oUlum-i Islami of Bandar Lengeh (in the Hurmuzagan region, on the shore of the Persian Gulf);⁸⁴ the Madrasa-yi ^oArabiyya-yi Islamiyya of Chabahar and the most important of all the Dar al-^oUlum of Zahedan⁸⁵ (both in Iranian Baluchistan); and the *Wahdat Musalla*⁸⁶ of the Turkmen-peopled district of Gunbad-i Kawus (Gulistan region, along the westernmost segment of the boundary with Turkmenistan).⁸⁷ Contrary to their respective sites, a majority of these institutions

81 <http://www.sunnionline.net>.

82 <http://www.m-salah.coo.ir> (created in Farwardin 1385/March–April 2006).

83 <http://qubaonline.com> (the mosque itself was constructed between 1379/2000 to 1381/2002)

84 <http://sultanolama.com>.

85 <http://mdchabahar.com>; <http://www.sunnionline.net>.

86 A *musalla* (مصلى) is a large public area intended for the Friday prayer of a whole local community, often located in some peripheral neighbourhood of a big city.

87 <http://www.mosallavahdat.ir/>.

enjoy a long history and their respective headmasters are better known for exerting the functions of local Imams (the successive Directors of the Dar al-^oUlum [House of Learning] of Zahedan have also been acting as *shaykh al-islam* of this city; since the early 2000s the current titular of the position, *Mawlana* ^oAbd al-Hamid,⁸⁸ has been seen by many as the leading religious authority of the Sunnis of Iran as a whole – an equivalent of the *wali-yi faqih* for Ja^ofari Shiites). At the same time, each headmaster runs his institution's website personally, or at least exerts a direct and tight control over the site's content, given the growing political pressure exerted since the mid-2000s by Iranian censorship on leading Sunni *madrasas* and on their communication policy.

Created in 1350/1971⁸⁹ by *Mawlana* ^oAbd al-^oAziz Mullazada 'Makki' (1295/1916 – 21 Murdad 1366 / 12 Aug. 1987)⁹⁰ the Dar al-^oUlum of Zahedan has enjoyed a spectacular quantitative development since 2001,⁹¹ and has be-

88 Biographical material on *Mawlana* ^oAbd al-Hamid (born in early Mihr 1326/late September 1947) is difficult to find in publications, in sharp contrast with the large amount of data published on the prominent ^oulama^o of the Deobandi school of thought in contemporary Iranian Baluchistan; most of our information on his life comes from an interview kindly given by him in his house of Zahedan on 6 Jan. 2004.

89 Interview with *Mawlana* ^oAbd al-Hamid in his house in Zahedan, 6 Jan. 2004; see also the anonymous "Ashnayi ba hawza-yi ^oilmiyya-yi Dar al-^oUlum-i Zahidan wa buniyadgudhar-i an [Introduction of the Religious School Dar al-^oUlum of Zahedan and of Its Founder]," *Nida-yi Islam* (special issue, Mihr 1382/October 2003), 9–12; *Mawlawi* Salah al-Din SHAHNAWAZI, "Mukhtasari az ta^orikhcha-yi nizam-i amuzish-i hawza [A Brief History of the Teaching Programme of the School]," *ibid.*, 26–27; Anonymous, "Nigahi ba ta^orikhchay-i Dar al-^oUlum-i Zahidan [A Look at a Brief History of the Dar al-^oUlum of Zahedan]," *ibid.* (11 Bahman 1385 / 31 Jan. 2007) http://www.sunnionline.net/default.cfm?tbid=tbp_content&rule=view&id=167&xPg=99999999; elements of the chronology on the *madrasas* of Zahedan can be found in Mahmud ZAND-MUQADDAM, *Ta^orikh-i baluch* [A Baluch Chronicle], Tehran: Karun, 1371/1992:100–107.

90 See the last version of the founder's official biography by a grandson of *Mawlana* ^oAbd al-^oAziz, *Mawlawi* ^oAbd al-Basat BUZURGZADA, "^oAlim-i rabbani wa muslih-i buzurg hazrat Mawlana ^oAbd al-^oAziz [A Great Theologian and Conciliator: His Excellency *Mawlana* 'Abd al-'Aziz]," *Nida-yi Islam* (Bahman 1386/Jan. 2008) http://www.sunnionline.net/default.cfm?tbid=tbp_content&rule=view&id=904&xPg=99999999.

91 Oral testimonies recorded from *Mawlana* ^oAbd al-Hamid and from several of his assistants, in the Dar al-^oUlum of Zahedan, between December 2004 and January 2007. According to the latter, the *madrasa*'s audience has passed from six hundred male students in the last years of the twentieth century to one thousand and five hundred male and four hundred female students at the date of the author's most recent visit in January 2007. This evolution is confirmed by the spectacular architectural evolution of the Makki Mosque & *Madrasa* complex during the same period of time.

come a major forum for Middle-Eastern and Central Asian Persian-speaking Sunnis. As such, and because of its permanent and narrow links with prominent *madrasas* of Karachi and Lahore in Pakistan, it has also become a major concern for the Iranian Ministries of the Interior and of Intelligence – demonstrated by the amount of police forces present in its precincts at each Friday collective prayer. Besides a large amount of fanzines edited by local students for inner use in the shape of photocopies of computer data captures, on subjects directly related to lectures given in the school,⁹² the Dar al-‘Ulum of Zahedan has been publishing since 1378/1999 a high-quality Persian-language illustrated magazine intended for the Sunni readership of Iran, the quarterly *Nida-yi Islam* [“Clamour of Islam”].⁹³ Though poorly distributed outside the network of the Sunni religious schools of Iran,⁹⁴ the *Nida-yi Islam* has been playing a key role in the school’s very active communication policy, notably through regular columns on graduation ceremonies (*hamayish-i farigh al-tahsili*) attended since the early 1990s by the upper crust of the Sunni clerics of Iranian Baluchistan,⁹⁵ in the presence of leading headmasters from the Dar al-‘Ulum of Karachi – one of the most renowned Sunni religious schools of the world of Islam,⁹⁶ and the alma mater of numerous Iranian Baluchistani ‘ulama’. Not deprived of an explicit political dimension, the journal has been loudly expressing the position of the Dar al-‘Ulum of Zahedan and of a significant part of the Sunni political representatives and upper clerics of Iran at large in every election period, promoting the union of the Sunnis of the country and the defence of their rights against the encroachments of a political leadership perceived as exclusively and militantly Shiite.⁹⁷ From this viewpoint, the message conveyed by what has become one of

92 According to our rapid survey during a visit of the library of the Dar al-‘Ulum in December 2006.

93 Accessible through www.sunnionline.com/farsi/.

94 The only bookstore selling issues of the *Nida-yi Islam* in Tehran was closed in 1386/2007, only one year after its opening by a Zahedan-based Baluch publisher specialising in religious and didactical literature; symbolically, it was located in front of the shop of a renowned Kurdistan-based Sunni religious and didactical publishing house.

95 See recently ‘Abd al-Ghafur DAWRANI, “Buzurgtarin ijtimā‘-i salana-yi ahl-i sunnat-i Iran, panzdahumun hamayish-i farigh al-tahsili-yi tullab-i Dar al-‘Ulum-i Zahidan [The Biggest Yearly Assembly of the Sunnis of Iran, the Fifteenth Graduation Ceremony of the Students of the House of Learning of Zahedan],” *Nida-yi Islam* 26–27 (summer–autumn 1385/2006):78–89.

96 For a recent rating, see <http://www.sunniforum.com/forum/archive/index.php?t-21232.html>.

97 E.g., “Khvastaha wa intizarat-i jami‘a-yi ahl-i sunnat az manzar-i sahib-nazaran-i siyasi-madhhabi [The Expectations of the Sunni Community from the Viewpoint of Perspicacious

the main private media of Iranian Baluchistan (and the province's only printed medium with an interregional, if not international dimension) shows a radical difference with the separatist claims that were prevailing in the discourse of Baluch community leaders until the end of the Pahlavi regime. Conveying a new sense of solidarity of the Sunnis at the scale of the Iranian nation-state, the *Nida-yi Islam* has contributed to make the Dar al-^oUlum of Zahedan an equivalent of the leading Shiite institutions of Iran, and Zahedan a counterpart of – if not a rival to – Qum. This content of the *Nida-yi Islam* has exerted the deepest impact on those of the Dar al-^oUlum's website, in which the 'Makki' *Madrassa* has been increasingly underlying its role as *the* key intermediary between the Sunni communities of Iran and the government of the Islamic Republic.

Observers of Confessional and Political Matters],” *Nida-yi Islam* 2/1 (spring 1380/2001):36–49 – with speeches by Jalal Jalalizada and Baha^o al-Din Adab, two Deputies of Sanandaj in the Majlis-i Shura-yi Islami, by Baqir Kurd, a Deputy of Zahedan in the same Assembly, and by *Shaykh* Muhammad-^oAli Amini, a prominent ^o*alim* of the Hurmuzagan region –; “Bayanat-i Shaykh al-Islam Mawlana ^oAbd al-Hamid piramun-i intikhabat-i riyasat-i jumhur: ra^ois-i jumhur bayad in shuja^oatra dashta bashad ki dar muqabil-i nazarat-i shakhsi-yi afraad wa dar muqabil-i tilifunha wa namaha-yi kasani ki pish giriftan-i rawiyya-yi tab^oizra dar haqq-i bakhshi az shahrwandan, ba u tawsiyya wa ya mikhwahand tahmil kunand, biistad. Zira maslahat wa haqq dar ijra-yi qanun wa hakim shudan-i ^oadalat ast [The Comments of the *Shaykh al-Islam Mawlana* ^oAbd al-Hamid about the Election to the Presidency of the Republic: The President of the Republic Must Have the Courage to Stand against the Personal Opinions, Phone Calls and Epistles of Those Who Want to Recommend Him or to Impose on Him to Adopt the Method of Discrimination against a Part of the Citizens. For Goodwill and Truth Lie in the Implementation of Law and in the Reign of Justice],” *ibid.*, 6/21 (spring 1384/2005):6–8; on the general elections of February 2008: *Shaykh al-Islam Mawlana* ^oAbd al-Hamid Imam Jum^oa-yi Ahl-i Sunnat-i Zahidan, “Tanawwu^o-i qawmi wa madhhabi dar barkhi mawarid-i intikhabat ri^oayat nashud [Ethnic and Confessional Diversity Has not Been Respected in Some Circumstances of the Elections],” http://www.sunnionline.net/default.cfm?tbid=tbp_content&rule=view&id58&xg=25 (this text being the second part of *Mawlana* ^oAbd al-Hamid's *khutba* on Friday 2 Farwardin 1387 / 21 March 2008).

3 A Multifaceted Virtuality: The Contents

3.a *Elements of Codicology*

Contrasting with the ever-increasing amount of ephemeral Sunni blogs of varied contents and dimensions regularly mushrooming throughout Iran, the site of the Dar al-°Ulum of Zahedan and, to a lesser extent, those of the aforementioned analogous institutions in other regions of the country create impressions of professionalism and of intense activity. Available in Persian and, more selectively, in Arabic and English (for pages dealing with theological debates on reform in Islam, or with international current affairs), composed of numerous different sections, and updated on a daily basis, www.sunnionline.net has been preceded since 2002 by several other URLs regularly modified for varying technical and legal reasons. It has been permanently enjoying the contribution of a small nucleus of professionals enriched with the interregional and international networks of the *madrassa* itself and of its flagship publication the *Nida-yi Islam*. Interestingly, the textual and iconographic grammar and vocabulary elaborated for the *Nida-yi Islam* have initially been adopted for the site, before the latter – since its beginning the host of the journal’s latest electronic version – started to exert its influence on the former. Contrary to more radical underground organisations often inclined to display univocal provocative symbols, the journal and the site have been constantly favouring sobriety. Though very present on the multicoloured pages of www.sunnionline.net, photography remains restricted to the illustration of classical items, enriched with portraits accompanying numerous biographical notices and obituaries – a priceless resource, if a highly normative one, for the modern and contemporary history of Sunni Islam in Iran. From the viewpoint of graphic vocabulary, besides the URL written in Latin alphabet, the Arabic script is otherwise omnipresent on our didactical sites, great care being given to calligraphy in the most classical genres, but also to the choice of elegant though unsophisticated fonts for their clarity and legibility – in sharp contrast with the endless innovations of the Iranian secular and, in particular, commercial Internet. As far as vocabulary and grammar are concerned, some words should be said on the over-dominance of Persian language in sites most of which have been elaborated in regions of Iran (Baluchistan and Kurdistan, especially) where Persian is traditionally not much spoken in the private sphere. If some Kurdistan sites, especially those related with the Sufi world, maintain a Kurdish and Persian bilingualism of some sort (sometimes with the adjunction of pages in Arabic language), it is interesting to observe how the great Iranian Sunni *madrassas*’

option of favouring Persian language in order to attract students, listeners and more recently net surfers from the whole non-Arabic Middle East has been confirmed and emphasized by the chaotic but continuous progression of the Internet in Iran. In this matter, the gradual opening of the frontiers of former Soviet Central Asia, the disappearance of the Pashto-language Taliban regime in Afghanistan, the latter's replacement by a predominantly Dari-speaking administration, and the rapid emergence of Iranian Baluchistan as a major centre of Sunni religious learning at the scale of the whole Middle East have been concomitantly playing in favour of a new prestige and influence of Persian language, in its most classical literary form.⁹⁸

Though this feature is less marked in the Sunni Sufi blogosphere of Iran, the prominence of Persian is there even more striking, since a majority of the most informative pages are elaborated by single individuals originating from Iranian Kurdistan. Actually, the common design of Kurdish Naqshbandi sites reveals the simple frameworks of the small number of their common providers,⁹⁹ suggesting the latter's power and influence on the contents accessible to Internet consumers in Iran. Interestingly, however, these sites' aesthetical vocabulary and grammar does not differ fundamentally from those of Deobandi religious schools. A major difference is made by the respective layouts, and by the very size given on Sufi blogs to photographs of leading *šayhs* of the recent past, offered to the adulation of mystical paths' adherents.¹⁰⁰ The very distribution of rubrics is another telling difference between the two major spheres of the Sunni confessional Internet in Iran – the institution websites of the great Deobandi schools distinguishing themselves by the diversity of the information conveyed on them, whence a great majority of present-day Sufi blogs focus on the cult of

98 Differing from the trendier 'Farglisi' (or 'Perglish') of the general-interest secular Persian Internet: see ROUHANI, 2000:6.

99 See notably a large amount of mutually related Naqshbandi sites of Blogfa, a free Persian weblog service (<http://blogfa.com/>) created by 'Ali-Reza Shirazi in 2001 and effectively active since 2004, with a total amount of more than one million claimed clients in 2007 (short history in <http://news.blogfa.com/Post-120.aspx> [posted Day 1386/Dec. 2007 – Jan. 2008]): <http://www.naqshbandi.blogfa.com/>, <http://www.adam121.blogfa.com/>, <http://tasavof-tarigat.blogfa.com/>, <http://100as.blogfa.com/8605.aspx>, <http://asman68.blogfa.com/post-6.aspx>, <http://www.perch.blogfa.com/>, <http://www.roostamajami.blogfa.com/> (the latter being of a young lyrical poet from Tajikistan), etc.

100 For instance those of *Shaykh* Muhammad-°Uthman Siraj al-Din II and *Shaykh* °Ali Hisam al-Din, accompanied by classical Persian verses celebrating their respective and common virtues, on <http://tasavof-tarigat.blogfa.com/>.

holy figures of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.¹⁰¹ It remains to be said that bridges do exist between both worlds, especially in the case of the westernmost regions of Iran where connections have been maintained till nowadays between the Khalidiyya and a network of predominantly rural religious schools.¹⁰² As we shall see, in the last part of the present study, new actors on the cyber-stage of the Iranian confessional Sunni Internet, viz. individuals and groups advocating a more aggressive defence of the interests of the Sunnis of Iran, and challenging the moderate discourse of the *madrāsas*, have been promoting a rhetoric lying on a completely different graphic vocabulary.

3.b *The Salafiyya and the Crystallisation of a Sunni Identity*

The Sunni confessional Internet in Iran being made of two different classes – multidimensional sites (*bargahs*) backed by perennial institutions, on the one hand, and on the other hand thinner and more ephemeral blogs elaborated by elusive authors –, let's begin with a content analysis of the most sophisticated ones. Among the categories dividing the most complete sites, we find: (1) sections on current affairs with archives of varied dimensions; (2) archives of articles posted during previous months; (3) sections on theological teaching and research; (4) the specific pages of the teaching or worship institution host to the site (including interactive services like the possibility to ask questions to the school's teachers or to the mosque's Imam); (5) selections of Friday sermons in the case of mosques; (6) the page of the magazine attached to the site (the only registered case being the *Nida-yi Islam* at the Dar al-°Ulum of Zahedan); (7) "libraries" with downloadable didactical literature; (8) and indeed variously elaborated collections of links (the '*linkistan*'). The sections on current affairs are particularly relevant for an analysis of the overall positioning of the sites, and of the general evolution of the Sunni confessional Internet in Iran. In most cases, the essential part of the public discourse conveyed in this space is that of the school's headmaster – *Mawlana* °Abd al-Hamid occupying in the Dar al-°Ulum of Zahedan a position of quasi-monopoly, especially during electoral and crisis periods; his voice is challenged only by tribunes offered on strictly reli-

101 Cf. Hamid ALGAR, "Nakshbandiyya, 1. In Persia". In: C. E. Bosworth *et al.*, eds., *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., 7 (Leiden: Brill, 1993):934–936.

102 See for instance the celebration of °Allama Mulla Muhammad-Baqir 'Mudarris-i Kurdistanî' (18 Shawwal 1316 q. / 28 February 1899 – 19 Dhu'l-Qa°da 1392 q. / 24 December 1972), a prominent *madrāsa* teacher and mystic affiliated to the Naqshbandiyya, in March 2008 on <http://naqshbandi.parsiblog.com/>.

gious subjects to prominent Pakistani ‘ulama’,¹⁰³ or ... to leading figureheads of the vernacular or international remote past. Western Iranian institutions, including those related to the Naqshbandiyya, are predominantly oriented westwards: here the Egyptian thinker *Shaykh* Yusuf al-Qaradawi (b. 1926) often appears as the leading foreign authority in religious as well as in ethic matters.¹⁰⁴ From this viewpoint, a regular consultation of www.sunnionline.net (and indeed of *Nida-yi Islam*) offers a telling illustration of the way the Sunni ‘ulama’ of Iran construct their own image, according to the weighty norms of traditional *tabaqat* literature,¹⁰⁵ but also to their respective historical visions (the ‘ulama’ of Baluchistan stressing their recently acquired primacy in Iran, based on their Indian and Pakistani Deobandi heritage), and to the current state of the Iranian censorship. Interestingly, the censorship’s increased weight in recent years seems to have brought about a tightening of the range of the signatures and of the themes present on the Sunni Internet. Even the past issues of the *Nida-yi Islam*, till recently available for consultations on ww.sunnionline.net, have been withdrawn from the site, the archive of which has been purged from any non-theological content. Conversely, on the pages dealing with the current affairs of the teaching institutions, more room has been devoted to retrospective historical overviews, focused on the mosques or *madrasas*’ founding fathers¹⁰⁶ or on great figures of the past.

103 Especially ‘*Allama Mufti Muhammad-Taqi ‘Uthmani* (b. 1943), the Headmaster of the Dar al-‘Ulum of Karachi in Pakistan, a frequent guest of graduate ceremonies at the Dar al-‘Ulum of Zahedan, also frequently present in the *Nida-yi Islam* and on www.sunnionline.net through his numerous travelogues in the world of Islam and in the West, regularly translated from Urdu into Persian. On him, see in particular Muhammad-Qasim ZAMAN, “Les ‘ulamâ’ pakistanaï après le 11 septembre 2001”. In: Amina Muhammad & Jean Schmitz, eds., *Figures d’islam après le 11 septembre: Disciples et martyrs, réfugiés et migrants*, Paris: Karthala, 2006:157–160; *ibid.*, “Tradition and Authority in Deobandi Madrasas of South Asia”. In: Robert W. Hefner & Muhammad Qasim Zaman, eds., *Schooling Islam: The Culture and Politics of Modern Muslim Education*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007:65.

104 E.g., http://www.qubaonline.com/news/p2_articleid/111.

105 On this point, see notably G. R. SMITH, “Ṭabaqāt”. In: P. J. Bearman *et al.*, *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd edition, 10, Leiden: Brill, 2000:7–10; Jürgen PAUL, “Hagiographic Literature in Persia and Central Asia”. In: Ehsan Yarshater, ed., *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, 11, New York: Encyclopaedia Iranica Foundation, 2003:536–539.

106 In the early weeks of 2008 a new website has been launched by the Dar al-‘Ulum for the posthumous celebration of the school’s founder *Mawlana ‘Abd al-‘Aziz Mullazada ‘Makki*’, insisting on the latter’s contribution to the progression of Islamic reformist thought, and to the defence of ‘human rights’ (those of the Sunni minority) in the Islamic Republic: <http://molanaabdolaziz.com/>. Interestingly too, for the first time the present site

Institutional sites are however intended for a range of audiences. The general public is notably concerned by each site's positioning on current affairs, especially regarding the defence of the political rights of the Sunnis of Iran (*infra* 3.C), but also by offers in theological studies answering to selections of precise questions, from the position of hands in collective prayer (a key issue of self-differentiation between the Hanafi rite and, for instance, "Wahhabi" anti-*madhab* tendencies that have been enjoying an exceptionally rapid proliferation in Sunni Islam since the end of the twentieth century), the successive rituals of the lunar and solar calendars both practiced amongst Iranian Sunni Muslims (with theological reassessments of festivals of the ancient Iranian calendar like Nawruz and Mihragan), the different status of man and woman in a definitely creationistic vision of the world (woman appearing in the Iranian Sunni confessional Internet mainly as an icon, invited to embody the ethic virtues of the Companion's wives or, as far as foreign women are concerned, to provide examples of conversion to Sunni Islam),¹⁰⁷ advice for the religious education of children, not forgetting introductions to diverse ritual and dogmatic specificities of Ja'fari Shiite Islam – underlying its universal ethic significance for non-Shiites.¹⁰⁸ Rare polemic pages on Shiite Islam deal with alleged Shiite treatments of the personality and behaviour of the prophet Muhammad's Companions and

will soon propose an introduction of the main Sunni mosques and *madrasas* of Sistan & Baluchistan, and of prominent figureheads among the latter's respective personnel. The elaboration of this graphically sophisticated website follows the appearance of the first publications devoted to the Mullazada lineage, beginning with a first hagiography (in a reformist mood) of *Mawlana* °Abd al-°Aziz' father, a founder of reformed Islamic teaching in the city of Sarbaz (Iranian Baluchistan), and the leader of the 1936 jihad against the Dhikri minority: °Abd al-Basat BUZURGZADA & Nur al-Nisa MULLAZADA, *Zindagi, shakhsiiyat wa mubarizat-i Mawlana °Abd-Allah Sarbazi, padar-i buzurgwar-i Mawlana °Abd al-°Aziz Mullazada* [The Life, Personality and Struggles of *Mawlana* °Abd-Allah of Sarbaz, the Venerable Father of *Mawlana* °Abd al-°Aziz Mullazada], Tehran: Nashr-i Ihsan, 1384/2005).

107 See also, for an expression of the official view of the Dar al-°Ulum of Zahedan, by one of its teachers, °Abd al-Hakim °UTHMAN, "Naqsh-i ijtimaa-yi zan dar islam [The Social Status of Woman in Islam]," *Nida-yi Islam* 3/3 (Autumn 1381/2002), 52–56; 4/2 (summer 1382/2003), 57–60.

108 See for instance the publication of a translation of the reassessment of the battle of Kerbela by the Urdu columnist and reformist Islamic thinker and religious Universalist *Mawlana* Abu'l-Kalam Azad (1888–1958), in http://www.sunnionline.net/default.cfm?tbid=tbp_content&rule=view&id=140&xPg=99999999; the figure of Azad is estimated among Iranian Sunni reformists of the Deobandi school for his embodiment of a Muslim option for composite, multi-confessional Indian nationalism.

the four ‘Righteous Caliphs’;¹⁰⁹ contrasting with this Salafi orientation, the bibliographical pages of the Sufi blogosphere focus of the history of Islamic gnosticism and of its great figureheads).¹¹⁰ Though the websites of the most electronically active mosques and *madrāsas* of Iran remain so far deprived of interactive programmes of juridical consultation, some of them nevertheless provide lists of articles answering to FAQ on topical issues of Islamic law, theology and ethics – a classical feature of modern Islamic religious media since their appearance in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, in the initial form of printed journals and newspapers, and a regular rubric of the quarterly *Nida-yi Islam* under the title “Questions and Answers on the Shari‘a [*pursish u pasukh-i shar‘i*]”. Based on different authoritative collections of fatwas published in the course of the past decade,¹¹¹ notably by the Dar al-Ifta‘ (House of Fatwas) of Zahedan,¹¹² these answers often refer less to the latter of the Shari‘a or to the legislation of the Islamic Republic than to the necessary quest for the common good (*maṣlahat*) of all the parties – a key notion of modern reformist thought in Islam.¹¹³ Besides this relatively abundant general-interest information, several sections of the sites of the main teaching institutions are clearly designed for *madrāsa* students, be-

109 E.g., by an anonymous author, “Chara baradaran-i shi‘a ba sahhaba tawhin mikunand? [Why Do Shiite Brothers Outrage the Companions?],” posted on 22 Bahman 1386 / 11 Feb. 2008 on the site ‘Ahl-i sunnat wa jama‘at mazlūm ast’ [“The Sunnis Are Tyrannized”] <http://ahlesunat.blogfa.com/post-3.aspx>.

110 E.g., Muhammad-Ra‘uf TAWAKKULI, *Ta‘rikh-i tasawwuf dar Kurdistan* [A History of Sufism in Kurdistan], Tehran: Intisharat-i Tawakkuli, 1381/2002 (1st ed. 1378/1999): on <http://www.fakouhi.com/node/1516>.

111 See for instance the collection of fatwas issued by ‘Allama Mufti Khudanazar (b. 1302/1923), *Mahmud al-fatawi (Fatawi-yi Dar al-‘Ulum-i Zahidan)* [The Most Laudable Fatwas (The Fatwas of the Dar al-‘Ulum of Zahedan)], ed. under the supervision of *Shaykh al-Islam Mawlana* ‘Abd al-Hamid, Zahedan: Intisharat-i Siddiqi, 1383/2004, 4 vols.

112 Created in 1402 q. / 1985–1986 by *Mawlana* ‘Abd al-‘Aziz Mullazada ‘Makki’, within the Dar al-‘Ulum of Zahedan where it is still located: *ibid.*, IV-V; see also *Mufti* ‘Abd al-Qadir ‘Arifi, “Ashnayi ba Dar al-Ifta‘ wa majma‘-i fihi-yi ahl-i sunnat [An Introduction of the Dar al-Ifta‘ and of the Compendium of the Jurisprudence of the Sunnis],” *Nida-yi Islam* (special issue, Mihr 1382/October 2003):23–25.

113 E.g., on the marriage of young girls of age (*baligha*), through the full mention of a fatwa by ‘Allama Mufti Khudanazar: http://www.sunnionline.net/default.cfm?tbid=tbp_content&rule=view&id=940&xPg=99999999 (fatwa taken on 5 Muharram 1418 q. / 12 May 1997, in which Khudanazar was putting forward the primacy of the desirable character of an agreement – *maṣlahat* – between the young girl and her parents as to the choice of a groom, upon the Islamic law that recognizes the validity of a regular marriage contracted by the young girl on her own exclusive initiative).

ginning with the introduction of each institution's different departments, continuing with online libraries where essentially religious didactical literature can be found, with insistence on ritual obligations (the hajj, in particular) and on Qur'an and Hadith studies¹¹⁴ (both disciplines largely rehabilitated by the Deobandi movement since the 1870s, and a renowned speciality of the Dar al-^oUlum of Zahedan.

3.c Religion & Politics: Before and after the "Year of National Unity"

All in all, the trend backed by the main Sunni higher religious educational institutions of Iran is a non-sectarian type of reformist Sunni Islam, criticising traditionalism (including that of Sufi paths), but trying to avoid open religious polemic with the Shiite majority. As we have seen when tackling the current affairs rubrics of the main sites of this class, this does not mean that politics is absent from the institutional Sunni confessional Internet. Theologically and politically, this specific cyberspace fits into a multidimensional geographical and political space, oriented partly eastwards – as a taker towards India and Pakistan, as a giver towards Afghanistan and former Soviet Central Asia. If a key figurehead of modern-day political Islam like *Shaykh* Yusuf al-Qaradawi is held in high esteem in the *madrāsas* of Iranian Baluchistan, mentions of his name remain much scarcer there than in Kurdistan (where he is celebrated even in the reformed Sufi blogosphere), and they are due to the Baluchistani ^oulama's interest in the recently created 'World League of the Scholars of Islam' chaired by him. Symptomatically, allusions to this international organisation are sometimes coupled with references to the Union of ^oUlama of Pakistan, showing the efforts made by ^oulama of Iranian Baluchistan to take inspiration and support from their Baluch counterparts in Pakistani territory for the promotion of the political interests of their community in the territorial and institutional framework of the Islamic Republic of Iran.¹¹⁵ Moreover, in the context of increasing tension marked by the February 2007 attacks against the Pasdaran in Zahedan, problems

114 http://www.sunnionline.net/default.cfm?tbid=tbp_downloads&catid=55&xPg=67

115 E.g., ^oAbd al-Ghafur DAWRANI, transl., "Ta'sis-i Ittihadīyya-yi Jahani-yi ^oUlama-yi Islam [The Foundation of the World Union of the Scholars of Islam]," *Nida-yi Islam* 5/3 (summer 1383/2004), 53–54; *ibid.*, "Tashrif awari-yi Mawlana Hasan-Jan wa Mawlana Sami^o al-Haqq ba Dar al-^oUlum-i Zahidan [The Honourable Visit of *Mawlana* Hasan-Jan and *Mawlana* Sami^o al-Haqq to the Dar al-^oUlum of Zahedan]," *ibid.*:57 – a short account of the visit paid to *Mawlana* ^oAbd al-Hamid in Zahedan by two prominent *madrāsa* teachers of Pakistani Baluchistan, also acting as representatives of the Jam^oīyyat-i ^oUlama-yi Islam in the Pakistani Senate.

with the Shiite majority and demands to the Iranian political authorities are almost exclusively entrusted to the pens of the titular headmasters/webmasters of the prominent *madrāsas* and the Imams of the main mosques, who usually insist on the unity of the *umma* and of the nation (notably through participation in the “Year of the National Unity and Islamic Concorde” launched by ‘Ali Khaminai in spring 1386/2007 in response to the spectacular attacks by the Jund-Allah),¹¹⁶ at the same time they call for more equality between the two prevailing Muslim communities of Iran. Less self-restraint and heavier insistence on dogmatic differences with Shiite Islam¹¹⁷ are displayed in other classes of the Iranian Sunni confessional Internet, beginning with the more informal and elusive Salafi blogosphere that has been rapidly mushrooming since late 2007. (Till recently, the domain of verbal violence, notably against the Shiites, was confined to books printed by confidential Sunni publishing houses, to audiocassettes, CDs and DVDs – like those in posthumous praise of Abu Mus‘ab al-Zarqawi that the author could find, in December 2006, on the little religious market of Tabligh Street, two steps from the main students’ entrance of the Dar al-‘Ulum in Zahedan.) A symptom of the epoch is the concurrence that has recently appeared between these very different classes of the Iranian Sunni cyberspace for showing the best defender of the religious, political and cultural rights of the Sunni minority – contributing to the further crystallisation of a political Sunni identity already perceptible in the geographical distribution of votes in each Iranian general election since the late twentieth century. A telling electronic symptom of this evolution can be found in the directions for use of the market’s main research engines: net surfers falling on Sunni confessional sites and blogs are more and more often invited to identify themselves as ‘Sunnis’ (in this cyberspace, “*ahl-i sunnat u jama‘at*” is a keyword now frequently given as the example *par excellence* to Persian-language Google users).¹¹⁸

Further verbal escalation is perhaps to be feared from the challenge put to the schools’ and mosques’ authority among the Sunni populations of Iran by this appearance of a rapidly expanding bunch of recently created (several of them not earlier than Bahman 1386/Jan.–Feb. 2008) and mutually related (they are obvi-

116 Cf. Husayn SULAYMANPUR, “Ahl-i sunnat dar sal-i ittihad-i milli wa insijam-i islami [The Sunnis in the Year of National Unity and of Islamic Concorde]”, http://www.sunnonline.net/default.cfm?tbid=tbp_content&ruleview&id=960&xPg=25.

117 Cf. “Usul-i ahl-i sunnat u jama‘at [The Principles of the People of Tradition and Community],” on a blogsite entitled “Ahl-i sunnat wa jama‘at” (<http://100as.blogfa.com/post-4.aspx> [16 Murdad 1386 / 7 Aug. 2007]).

118 E.g., <http://www.tn.coo.ir/> (paragraph 2).

ously conceived by a little number of webmasters and share common providers) Salafi blogs intended for Sunni net surfers, whether at the scale of the nation-state,¹¹⁹ or of a region or particular place (the best represented being Kurdistan,¹²⁰ the Hurmuzagan province south of Iran,¹²¹ the easternmost part of Iranian Khurasan,¹²² and the Sistan & Baluchistan region. (As to the latter, if the respective sites of its major Sunni religious teaching institutions are referenced in the rubrics of links of the Sunni radical blogosphere,¹²³ it is also present in this peculiar cyberspace through blogs devoted for instance to “the victims of the [Islamic Republic’s] regime in Baluchistan”¹²⁴.) This struggling blogosphere shares space with those Persian-language ‘press agencies’ specialising in the denunciation of the brutalities inflicted by the Iranian state to the country’s Sunni minority (amongst the most militant ones can be mentioned ‘Sunna Iran’¹²⁵ and an ‘Internet Society of Muslims [Anjuman-i interneti-yi musalmanan],’¹²⁶ both displaying links with the already referred London-based ‘League of the Sunnis in Iran’). Though it remains extremely difficult, if not

- 119 Besides individual blogs (like ‘Aqidaha-yi man [My Opinions],’ by a certain Siraj al-Din: <http://serajedin.blogfa.com/>), see: <http://100as.blogfa.com/> (‘Ahl-i sunnat wa jama’at’); <http://12345665432123.blogfa.com/> (‘Ahl-i sunnat’); <http://www.madadhagh.blogfa.com/> (‘Ahl-i sunnat-i Iran’); a protest site, extremely politicized and anti-Israeli: <http://ahlesunat.blogfa.com/> (‘Ahl-i sunnat mazlum ast [The Sunnis Are Tyrannized],’ created in Bahman 1386/Jan.-Feb. 2008); the aforementioned UK-based ‘Society of the Sunnis of Iran’: <http://www.isl.org.uk/index.html>); a ‘Cultural Foundation for the Clamour of Islam’ (Mu’assisa-yi farhangi-yi Nida-yi islam, <http://www.nedaye-tohid.blogfa.com/cat-10.aspx>, the only accessible page of which in March 2008 was a philippic against the celebration of Nawruz as a Zoroastrian festival ratified by the Shiites, and for this reason doubly blameworthy).
- 120 Among others: <http://www.sonni.sub.ir/> (‘Ahl-i sunnat-i Kurdistan’); <http://zxcvbnmasdfgh.blogfa.com/> (Sayt-i fa’aliyat-i jawanan-i Laylakh-i Kurdistan-i Iran).
- 121 E.g., <http://www.eslami.myblog.ir/more-903.ASPX>, the highly politicized and very lively site of the ‘Southern Sunnis (Ahl-i sunnat-i janub)’.
- 122 <http://www.sunnijam.blogfa.com/>, a site focusing on the region of Turbat-i Jam on a road to Herat, on the frontier with Afghanistan.
- 123 The site of the Dar al-‘Ulum of Zahedan is present in the lists of links of a majority of Iranian Sunni religious sites.
- 124 See <http://delaavar33.blogspot.com/> (‘Bayangar-i jinayat-i rizhim [The Denouncer of the Regime’s Crimes]’), also created in January 2008 by an author with the pseudonym of ‘Dilawar’ or ‘Dilawar-i baluch [“The Baluch Brave Man”]; Dilawar is also a Persian male given name], with regular information on and praise of the deeds of the Jund-Allah and its young leader ‘Abd al-Malik Rigi.
- 125 <http://www.sunnaIran.wordpress.com>.
- 126 <http://www.mosalman.net/vb/showthread.php?t=3179>.

impossible, to identify with a sociological certainty these blogs' authors and organisers, one of their most important features is the relative thematic specialisation of each, and the existence of large, multidimensional *linkistans* of direct or indirect connections. If polemics with Ja'fari Shiites, especially on the Prophet Muhammad's Companions, on the Righteous Caliphs, or still on the Ottoman Empire seen as a champion of the Sunni faith, have for long become common practice, more worrying are the openly apologetic allusions to Bin Laden and al-Qa'ida that have been emerging since fall 2007 on certain of these blogs.¹²⁷ It must be clear, however, that the very concept of original ideas and material being a nonsense in the cyberspace, most of this information appears to be a borrowing from incomparably more sophisticated general-interest sites of international press agencies. For a substantial part, the radical Salafi blogosphere of Iran looks like a big *mille feuilles* rapidly made of inserts of varied origins, coming from different, unidentified kitchens specialising in reheated food. At the very utmost, it provides us with a tint of the current evolution of taste in a so far neglected segment of public opinion.

Conclusion

This first analysis of a necessarily limited selection of sites and blogs of varied dimensions and contents has, hopefully, driven us to the identification of a characteristically wide range of discourses within the Iranian Sunni web, oscillating between, on the one hand, the 'centrist' stance of the institutional Internet and, on the second hand, more radical positions held in other, more unstable 'niches' of communication. The Deobandi movement, based on historical propaganda centres (first and foremost, mosque and *madrasas*) and on the latter's respective cyberspaces, now has to face the encroachments of other reformist and more and more openly Jihadist Salafi trends. This new concurrence between the institutional and the anti-establishment Sunni confessional Internet in Iran, in a period of increased censorship of the press and of terrestrial TV channels, has been expressed for months by an unprecedented multiplication of sites and blogs, the only public space accessible to the most politicized and radical protagonists of

127 Cf. <http://www.altohid.blogfa.com/> (a site created in Bahman 1386/Jan.–Feb. 2008 and bearing several titles: 'Masjid [Mosque]' and 'Salafi' – it is under this name that it appears in the links of associated sites); for thundering of Bin Laden's proclamations, see <http://bonean.wordpress.com/>.

the Sunni cause in Iran. From this viewpoint, the recent evolution (since 2004) of the Iranian state towards a tighter control of the public space has apparently played in favour of an atomisation of initiative in the field of electronic communication. It has also been blurring the boundaries between institutional and anti-establishment discourses in the framework of an overall verbal escalation. If this evolution bears testimony of a sociological differentiation of the protagonists, it has also driven to a spectacular impoverishment of the very contents accessible on the net – if compared, in particular, to those still available in ordinary or specialized bookstores in all the places visited by the author. Within the institutional Internet, the specific political context created by the state's increasing scrutiny on the cyberspace has been favouring a bunch of prominent religious institutions led by 'ulama' well aware of the possibilities offered by the Internet for the propagation of their discourse far beyond the precincts of their mosques and *madrasas*, notably through the selective and controlled two-way communication in the "questions/answers" rubrics of their magazines and websites. Like other communication means, like Friday sermons, radio and TV broadcastings, books, the press, audio- and video-cassettes, CDs and DVDs, the Internet has permitted a part of the Sunni religious personnel of Iran to have their views known to varied publics, which has allowed a limited number of 'ulama' to assess (at least on the net) a prominent position among their peers, and a status of established references towards the general public. In this field, these recent evolutions can be compared to those observable among Shiite clerics (characterized by a selective reinforcement of the institution of the *marja'iyat*). The specificity of the Iranian Sunni Internet if compared with its Shiite counterpart partakes of the proliferation of a private, more elusive than ever radical Salafi cyberspace which makes up a new challenge for both the Sunni religious establishment and, to some extent, the political authorities of the Islamic Republic.

More interestingly perhaps, the Sunni confessional Internet in Iran also bears testimony of general evolutions of the real world, though *per se* it does not always display instruments or data for understanding them. A first striking observation is the strong confessional segregation of the Sunni and Shiite audiences; as well as worship places themselves, confessional websites are intended for and, apparently, attended by members of each confessional group to the exclusion of the other, a strong spatial segregation being naturally translated into the religious Internet. The primacy of confessional over ethnic identities and the emergence of the Sunni 'ulama' and of their perennial institutions as key actors of the public debates on religion, culture, society and politics may be resituated in different durations. For example, the present situation of the confessional

Internet in Iran can hardly be understood without reference to the policy of the Pahlavi dynasty, which managed to get rid of the power of tribal aristocracies throughout the nation-state's territory, and encouraged financially the creation of a national network of Sunni *madrasas* (initially centred in Sanandaj, Kurdistan – the east-west reversal of poles in favour of Baluchistan and Khurasan gradually taking place during the first decades of the Islamic Republic). A long period of time during which, in its western and eastern marches, the Iranian state had to face unruly tribes in the country's Sunni-peopled regions has given way for thirty years to the antagonism between *akhunds* and *mawlawis* (respectively, Shiite and Sunni clerics), before the latter's face-to-face was troubled, since the mid-2000s, by the rule of the Pasdaran, on the one side, and the emergence of the Jihadist Salafiyya on the other.

Besides, durable geographical differences continue to be expressed in the discrepancy between a “western” (mainly Kurdish) cyberspace demographically dominated by representatives of prominent reformed mystical paths (notably of regional branches of the Ottoman- and Iraq-born Khalidiyya), whence in the east of the country the mainly Baluch Sunni confessional websites have been emanating from rapidly expanding and mutually concurrent Deobandi *madrasas*. Few connections can be observed between the two, at least in the cyberspace – even if, for a decade at least, Kurdistan *madrasas* have been regularly sending students to Baluchistan, now the admitted pole of Sunni religious teaching as far as Iran is concerned. In this matter, however, the Internet rapidly shows its limits as a documentary resource, to say nothing of its silence on the modern and present activity of a lot of yet undocumented trends (the Kurdish-based Khalidiyya Sufi path in Khurasan, the Indian-based Chishtiyya in south-eastern Iran) and institutions (contrary to the Iranian Shiite ‘ulama’, a lot of the latter's Sunni counterparts remain deprived of a website, or even of a blog of their own, and many important Sunni *madrasas* of the country, especially numerous in Baluchistan and in the easternmost districts of central and southern Khurasan, remain in the shade of the electronic network of the Dar al-‘Ulum of Zahedan. The Internet still plays a very limited role, moreover, in the recruitment of battalions of Sunni students of religion – including groups of young orphans taken in charge by their community¹²⁸ – rushing up in growing numbers to Khurasan and Baluchistan

128 Interviews with young Tajikistani boarders, aged six to eight, coming from the Wahdat district of Tajikistan, who were playing football in the central courtyard of the Dar al-‘Ulum of Zahedan, and could easily be recognized through their heavy clothing (*tuppi* and *chapan*), December 2004.

from former Soviet Tajikistan, through the networks of the latter's vernacular Naqshbandiyya and Qadiriyya paths, or of the Tajikistani Party of the Islamic Revival. From this viewpoint, as any other kind of source the Internet remains conspicuous by its lacunae and silences more than by its occasional spotlights: The most active and efficient networks are not necessarily the most evident ones. As a matter of fact, it seems that despite the lack of measurement instruments as far as the peripheral regions of Iran are concerned, we must relativize the real impact of the visited sites. For the relatively limited Iranian general public that enjoys regular access to the Internet, especially in the peripheral regions concerned by the present study, the content of the Sunni religious sites probably has a limited interest. As to the clientele to which the contrasting Iranian Sunni confessional cyberspace is intended, they remain confronted with recurring problems of access to the net, still restricted to privileged groups, more substantial information being available to these clientele through a wide typology of real sociability.

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