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Sunnite-Shiite Polemics in Norway

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Abstract

As a result of the so-called Islamic State's expansion in Syria and Iraq, Sunnite-Shiite polarization appears as an increasingly relevant topic, including among Muslims in Europe. Taking into consideration that this is a relatively new manifestation of intolerance in the West, such intra-Islamic tensions remain an under-researched subject and are superficially described as a reproduction of Middle Eastern so-called sectarianism. While this article recognizes the regional origin of exclusivist Islamic narratives and their dissemination by transnational Islamic networks, it also highlights the fact that Sunnite-Shiite polemics are rearticulated in new local contexts. In light of the IS's anti-Shiism in particular, the public debate in Norway about "Islamic radicalism" is currently being rationalized by many Norwegian Muslims in terms of the "moderate self" versus the "extreme other", notably across the Sunnite-Shiite divide.

Introduction: contextualizing Sunnite-Shiite conflict

In light of the sectarian dimension of the IS's conquests in the Middle East (Abdo, 2013), the aim of this article is to clarify how regional intra-Islamic tensions shape Sunnite-Shiite relations in Norway. At the same time, an important objective of the article is to avoid the risk of analysing Sunnite-Shiite relations in the West as a mere reflection of Middle Eastern so-called sectarianism.[1] In other words, this article is based on the premise that Sunnite-Shiite relations change when faced with new circumstances (*See* Makdisi, 2000). The goal is partly descriptive, namely to map a field of knowledge that is almost unexplored. As a means to achieve this, the idea is first to identify the agents of Norwegian Sunnite-Shiite polemics and their polemicist discourses. Rather than representing a defining phenomenon among Norwegian Muslims, such polemics are voiced by a few predominantly young Sunnite and Shiite activists,[2] most notably online on Facebook groups such as "Shia-Sunni Debatt (Shiite-Sunnite Debate)",[3] Den islamske ungdomsorganisasjonen i Norge (The Islamic Youth Organization in Norway: DiN)[4] and Tawfiiq Ungdom (Tawfiiq Youth).[5] Then, in order to account for the transnational dimension of these networks and discourses, the article aims to trace their origins and how they are disseminated, notably by focusing on traditional and new so-called "sectarian media" (Hroub, 2014). The second goal of the article is interpretative: to shed light on why Sunnite-Shiite polemics are pertinent in a Western context such as the Norwegian one. As a means to answer this question, this analysis relies on fieldwork conducted both on- and offline throughout 2014, notably before and after a multi-denominational street demonstration that took place in the centre of Oslo against the so-called Islamic State on 25 August 2014.

The pre-modern origins of Sunnite-Shiite polemics

Without going into extensive detail about the doctrinal similarities and differences between Sunnite- (*Ahl al-Sunnah wa'l-ijma*: people of the Sunnah and consensus) and Shiite-Islam (the partisans of Ali) which represent approximately 85 percent and 15 percent of the world's Muslim population (Vogt, 2012a), respectively, it is nonetheless useful to describe the main points of agreement and disagreement between them. First, it is important to emphasize that both Sunnite- and Shiite-Islam are extremely diverse Islamic entities. For example, while Shiite-Islam is normally equated with the so-called *Imamah*-doctrine, adherents of that doctrine make up 90 percent of the world's Shiites, while adherents of Zaydism, Ismaelism, Alawism and Alevism account for the remaining 10 percent. In this article, however, Shiism is used to refer only to the *Imamah* doctrine, or the twelver school.

Secondly, Islamic Sunnite-Shiite history is shaped by both periods of peaceful coexistence and periods of conflict. This double-bind process of rapprochement (*taqrib*) and discord (*fitna*) has been conceptualized in terms of a "unity-diversity dialectic" (Gardet, 1987, p. 14). Both Sunnis and Shiites believe in the Quranic revelation, the resurrection and the day of judgement. They also abide by "Islam's five pillars", the proclamation of faith, the ritual prayer, charity, fasting and pilgrimage (e.g. Vogt, 2009; 2012a). Yet, Sunnite and Shiite

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1 Sectarianism may be defined as "discrimination, violence, hatred or bigotry that are legitimized from attaching importance to perceived differences between one's own group or another" (Marechal, & Zemni, 2013, p. 308).

2 Islamic activism may be defined as "the mobilization of contention to support Muslim causes" (Wictorowicz, 2004, p. 2).

3 https://www.facebook.com/groups/381882578616056/

4 https://www.facebook.com/groups/8213894359/

5 https://www.facebook.com/groups/ungtawfiiq/

theology also diverge on fundamental issues, especially with regard to the problem of the Prophet Muhammad's (d. 632) succession, an issue that gave birth to the Shiite doctrine of religio-political leadership (*imamah*). In contrast to the Sunnis, who claim that Abu Bakr al-Siddiq (d. 634), Umar ibn al-Khattab (d. 644), Uthman ibn Affan (d. 656), and Ali ibn Abi Talib (d. 660), the four so-called "rightly guided Caliphs" were elected as the political-military rulers by the Muslim community (*ummah*), the Shiites assert that Ali was designated by the Prophet as his successor, not by virtue of being Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law, but because he was chosen by God. Accordingly, while only members of the Prophet's family (*ahl al-Bayt*) been have entitled to the *Imamah*, the Shiites believe that this chain of succession is not determined by kinship, but through divine designation (e.g. Vogt, 2012a). In sum, Sunnite-Shiite polemics are primarily rooted in competing orthodoxies of the Caliphate and the *Imamah*. While the "rightly guided Caliphs" and the Prophet Muhammad's companions (*sahaba*) laid the basis for Sunnite orthodoxy, notably by transmitting the Prophet's act and deeds (*ahadith*), it is mainly the partisans of Ali of the *ahl al-Bayt* who has a similar function in Shiite orthodoxy, including with regard to the transmission of *ahadith*.

The specificity of Shiism and the *Imamah* further implies implicate a doctrine of victimhood and Messianic millenarianism, a Shiite vision of history incarnated by the martyrdom of Husayn ibn Ali (d. 680), the third Imam and the Prophet's grandson, and the occultation of the redeemer (*al-Mahdi*), the twelfth Imam, who is expected to return at the day of judgement and restore justice (Mervin, 2013). The death of Husayn in a battle on the plains of Karbala in modern Iraq against the troupes of Yazid (d. 683), the Omayyad Sunnite Caliph, is of particularly significance to Sunnite-Shiite relations. Every year, on the tenth day of the Islamic month Muharram (Ashura), Shiites commemorate the martyrdom of Husayn. While Ashura is commemorated differently by Shiites worldwide, the so-called "Karbala paradigm" (Fischer, 1981, p. 21) nourishes a collective memory of "good versus evil" which has been politicized by Shiites and used for the purpose of mobilization, particularly since the second half of the 20th century.

Finally, in contrast to the somewhat flat structure of Sunnite authority, Shiites are subordinated to a hierarchical clergy with a relatively small number of Grand ayatollahs who have status as guides to be imitated (*marja al-taqlid*). In comparison to Sunnite Muslims' relatively impersonal relationships with their religious scholars (*ulama*), Shiites are more bound to their *marja*'s specific requirements concerning religious belief and practise. In fact, all Shiites are expected to follow one specific *marja*, who is often connected to one of the holy Shiite cities in Iran or Iraq, such as Qom, Najaf or Karbala (*See*, e.g., Vogt, 2012b). After the Iranian Islamic revolution in 1979, when Ruhollah al-Musavi Khomeini (d. 1989) introduced the rule of the jurisprudent (*vilayat-i faqih*), the role of the *marja* became increasingly politicized. As the representative of al-Madhi, the hidden imam, Khomeini appeared as the supreme leader of both religious and worldly affairs in Iran (e.g. Vogt, 2012a).

From a theological perspective, this set of doctrinal differences has triggered various forms of Sunnite-Shiite polemics in pre-modern times, especially with reference to the Caliphate and the *Imamah*. In medieval anti-Sunnism, Hisham al-Hakam (d. 799), the first formulator of the *Imamah* doctrine, was reportedly also the first to associate the *sahaba* with disbelief (*takfir al-sahaba*). In this "doctrine of excommunication", the majority of the *sahaba* were characterized as usurpers, falsifiers, and unbelievers who deprived Ali and his descendants of their destiny to fulfil the prophecy. In particular, the three first Caliphs, along with Aishah, who was Abu Bakr's daughter and one of the Prophet's wives, and who was also the Sunnite so-called "mother of believers" who opposed Ali's bid for the Caliphate, became legally sanctioned targets of cursing (Brunner, 1991).

Conversely, the most important source of modern anti-Shiism and an anti-Shiite vocabulary based on polemicist verses of the Qur'an, is Hanbalism. Ahmad ibn Hanbal (d. 855) the founder of the Hanbali law school, first developed a robust anti-Shiism, notably as a result of his work as a *hadith* scholar. Because the Shiites dissociate themselves from the *sahaba* and the "rightly guided Caliphs", notably by misrecognising their transmissions of *ahadith* (Steinberg, 2009), Ibn Hanbal was among the first Sunnite scholars to label the Shiites as rejectionists (*rawafid*) (Steinberg, 2011). Later, Ahmad Taqi al-Din ibn Taymiyyah (d. 1328), another famous Hanbali *hadith* scholar, focused more on doctrinal aspects of Shiism, particularly in his anti-Shiite treatise *Minhaj al-Sunna* (the path of the Sunna), in which he characterized the Shiite *Imamah* doctrine as paganism (*shirk*) and disbelief (*kufr*) (Mervin, 2013). Finally, Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (d. 1792), another renowned Hanbali scholar, summarized the anti-Shiism of his predecessors in his short treatise *The refutation of the rejectionists* (Steinberg, 2009). In addition, by preaching return to the beliefs of the so-called "pious ancestors" (*al-salaf al-salih*) and by instructing the *ulama* to abide strictly to the Sunna (Steinberg, 2011), Abd al-Wahhab laid the Islamic basis for Wahhabism, a politico-religious doctrine that is anti-Shiite in its essence. While these medieval doctrines may appear as out-dated, they nonetheless provide the theological basis for contemporary expressions of Sunnite and Shiite intolerance, including within Norway.

Modern Sunnite-Shiite polemics

In the beginning of the 1970s, sociologists and scholars of Islamic studies described Sunnite-Shiite relations in terms of an "ecumenical re-centering of beliefs" (Charnay, 1994). This description was made only a decade after the so-called "golden age of ecumenism", a period that began with the Islamic Congress in Jerusalem and reached its zenith in 1959, when Mahmud Shaltut (d. 1963), the rector of al-Azhar in Cairo, issued a fatwa recognizing Shiite Jafarite law as a fifth school of Islamic law (Brunner, 2013). Some believed that these ecumenical achievements, together with the pressures of nationalism and secularism, were causing the differences between Sunnis and Shiites to become increasingly irrelevant in Muslim countries (Bengio & Litvak, 2011).

Nonetheless, these modern ideologies were rarely perceived as entirely secular, notably by Shiites who felt discriminated against by the fact that the national mythologies of most Muslim countries were shaped by Sunnism. In Iraq, for example, where such expressions of nationalism are fittingly described in terms of "antagonist visions of unity" (Haddad, 2011), both Shiites and Sunnis have been marginalized, first by the Saddam (Hussein) regime and more recently by the (Nouri al-) Maliki regime (Haddad, 2013). Furthermore, Sunnite-Shiite relations became increasingly strained as a result of the politicization of Islam during the 1970s (Bengio & Litvak, 2011), particularly in the wake of the Iranian Khomeinist revolution in 1979 and Saudi Arabia's contra-revolutionary Sunnite politics (Al-Rasheed, 2011). Of particular interest for this article is the fact that the polarization was underpinned by a veritable "renaissance of anti-Shiite and anti-Sunnite literature" (Brunner, 2013, p. 33).

After a brief period of enthusiastically supporting the Khomeinist revolution, the leadership of most Sunnite Islamist movements grew increasingly hostile towards the Iranian revolution's Shiite character (Brunner, 2013). First, a significant portion of the anti-Shiite literature of this period was written by Syrian Islamists who had been exiled by the predominantly Alawi regime of Hafez al-Assad's (d. 2000) Baathists (Ende, 1990). More recently, this Syrian variety of anti-Shiism has been strengthened by new salafi-jihadist narratives (Kazimi, 2010), notably after the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011. Historically, however, anti-Shiism was particularly prevalent in Saudi Arabia, where the Wahhabi state-ideology instigated systematic discrimination of the Shiite minority since the

establishment of the first Saudi state in 1744 (Steinberg, 2011). On an international level, Saudi Arabia spread anti-Shiism via transnational Islamic institutions such as the Muslim World League (MWL, est. 1962) (Steinberg, 2009), notably to countries with mixed populations such as Pakistan, where Sunnite-Shiite violence became widespread from the 1980s onwards (e.g. Zaman, 1998). In addition to revised editions of classical works authored by polemicists like Ibn Taymiyyah (Brunner, 2013), the literature included, among other things, anti-Shiite fatwas edited by scholars such as Abd al-Aziz Ibn Baz (d. 1999), the former Grand mufti of Saudi Arabia, who prohibited Sunnis to deal with the Shiites, whom he declared to be "unbelievers" (*kuffar*) (Nakash, 2006, p. 50).

Accordingly, condemnation of Shiism as *kufr* constitutes an important feature of Salafism, a global multifaceted movement that is underpinned by Saudi Arabia. (e.g. Meijer, 2009). More specifically, the polemicist Salafi vocabulary inherited from Hanbalism consists of denouncing specific Shiite beliefs and rituals such as the *Imamah* doctrine and Ashura processions as innovation (*bidah*) and paganism (*shirk*) . Militant anti-Shiism has been particularly articulated among so-called Salafi-jihadists, especially in Iraq where the 2003 American invasion and the establishment of a Shiite-dominated government led by Nouri al-Maliki (1950-), represented a major turning point in Sunnite-Shiite relations, notably as the Shiite sense of victimhood became a Sunnite grievance (Haddad, 2013). Currently, the IS, which is responsible for "religious cleansing" in both Syria and Iraq (Amnesty report, 2014), is the principal agent of polarization. Rather than implementing an entirely new type of anti-Shiism, however, the IS is the successor of Al-Qaida in Iraq (est. 2004), an organization established by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi (1966-2006). Inspired by Ibn Taymiyyah, Syrian Islamism and radical Wahhabism, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's (1966-2006) main strategy in Iraq was to provoke a Sunnite-Shiite civil war (Milelli, 2009). Bearing in mind that several young Norwegian Muslim men have fought alongside Jabhat al-Nusra and IS in Syria and Iraq, and that some of them have returned to Norway (Lia, 2014), militant anti-Shiism has also emerged here.

Conversely, since revolutionary Khomeinism claimed to speak for both Shiites and Sunnis, Iranian pan-Islamism was anti-Wahhabi rather than anti-Sunnite, at least officially (Mervin, 2013). In line with the shift from traditional Shiite quietism to revolutionary Khomeinism (Brunner, 2009), Sunnite attacks on Shiism also caused a shift from small-scale Shiite apologetics intended for internal usage to large-scale Shiite proselytization. In order to make the information appear as credible to both Shiites and Sunnis (Hasson, 2009), Iranian propagandists borrowed from earlier Sunnite refutations of Wahhabism (Redissi, 2008). As a means to present Wahhabism as primitive, violent and intolerant, the propagandists equated the Wahhabis with the Kharijites, a medieval group of zealots that is considered by both Sunnis and Shiites as the precursor of modern Islamic extremism (Hasson, 2009), notably for murdering Ali, the fourth Sunnite Caliph and the first Shiite imam. In addition to such anti-Wahhabism however, the Iranian authorities also published anti-Sunnite material such as the works of Muhammad al-Tijani (1943-), a former Salafi and a convert to Shiism. Al-Tijani used the *Sahi* of al-Bukhari, one of the most influential collections of Sunnite *ahadith,* to undermine the integrity of the Prophet Muhammad's companions (Takim, 2009). It is noteworthy that some of his works are translated into Norwegian and published on a dormant Internet portal entitled Samarra1.[6] According to the person who translated the texts into Norwegian, the portal was established as a reaction to the 2006 bombing of the al-Askari, the Samarra shrine of the 10th and 11th Shiite imams, Ali al-Hadi and his son Hasan al-'Askari.

Nonetheless, most anti-Sunnite propaganda originates from other Shiite networks, notably from the partisans of al-Shirazi (*shiraziyyin*), a clerical family of Iranian descent based in

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6 http://www.samarra1.com/sjiaislam/, accessed 27 June 2015.

Karbala. The group is closely associated with the ideas of Mohammed al-Husayni al-Shirazi (d. 2001), a charismatic leader who assumed the role of *marja* at the age of thirty-three, which was regarded as an open challenge by Abol-Qasem Khoi (d. 1992), the predecessor of Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, the current *marja* of Najaf. The Shirazi-group is also contested due to its political Shiite ideology and its innovative modes of guidance (Loüer, 2008). In contrast to the Khomeinist doctrine of *vilayat-i faqih,* the *shiraziyyin* favoured the doctrine of a council of jurisprudents (*shurat al-fuqaha*). In fact, while other political Shiite networks appear to have a more prominent role in current regional politics, the *shiraziyyin* has historically been a central oppositional Shiite force, notably in Saudi Arabia where the organization was severely repressed until the 2000s (Matthiesen, 2015). In terms of guidance, the al-Shirazi family is accused of exaggerating its status as descendants of the Prophet Muhammad (*sayyid*) and its attachment to the revolutionary "spirit of Karbala" (Loüer, 2008). Additionally, the network has been criticized for preaching aimed at large public audiences, notably propagated via booklets, satellite TV and on the Internet in so-called "simple language". Finally, Grand Ayatollah Sadiq Shirazi (1942-), the current Shirazi *marja,* and his family-network are accused of propagating a polemicist view of Sunnite-Muslims in general and the Prophet Muhammad's companions in particular (Larsson & Thurfjell, 2013). According to various sources, the *shiraziyyin* enjoy limited support in Norwegian Shiite congregation, except in the Norwegian-Iraqi so-called al-Huda Umm al-Banin mosque.

As a result of the media revolution that took place in Muslim countries from the 1990s onwards, Islamic propagation has moved from print, cassette and state-owned television to satellite television and Internet (Anderson, 2010), a process that also shapes current Sunnite-Shiite polemics. However, while contemporary "sectarian media" are transnational, they are in general not privately owned, with states or quasi-statutory parties in control of the broadcasting (Hroub, 2014). In the wake of the Arab spring and the emergence of a so-called "new Middle East cold war" (Gause, 2014), Iran and Saudi Arabia remain the main mediators of Sunnite-Shiite polemics. Nonetheless, empowered by "new media" and the consolidation of Islamism during the last two decades, broadcasting channels owned by religious groups or religious figureheads that are supported by rival states have become important actors in the "sectarian mediascape" (Hroub, 2014).

One such "freelancer" of anti-Sunnite Shiite broadcasting is Yasser al-Habib (1979-), who was stripped of his Kuwaiti citizenship in 2010 while exiled in London, after he declared that Aishah, the Sunnite "mother of believers", is the "enemy of God". Having previously criticized Grand Ayatollah Sayyed Ali Khamenei's (1939-) clerical credential and declared Grand Ayatollah Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah (1935-2007), the deceased so-called spiritual leader of Hizbollah, a "misguided innovator", Ali Khamanahi responded with a fatwa forbidding any Shiite cleric from insulting the Prophet Muhammad's companions (Wehrey, 2014). Bearing in mind that al-Habib studied in Qom under the tutorship of Mohammed Reza Shirazi (d. 2008), the son of Grand Ayatollah Mohammed al-Husayni al-Shirazi, Grand Ayatollah Sadiq Shirazi is among the few Shiite scholars that al-Habib approves of (Rezvi & Homazadeh, 2014). Still, in light of his consistent cursing of the Prophet Muhammad's companions, it seems that al-Habib is a more outspoken anti-Sunnite propagandist than his Shirazi tutors. Via Fadak TV (est. 2010) in particular, a satellite channel established in the U.K., al-Habib spreads anti-Sunnism globally, including to Scandinavian countries (Larsson & Thurfjell, 2013).

With regard to anti-Shiite broadcasting in Europe and more specifically in Norway, it is worth emphasizing the legacy of two Sunnite "freelance preachers", notably Zakir Naik (1965-) and Anjem Choudary (1967-). Zakir Naik, who has made a career for himself as a "television star of religious polemics", notably via his satellite channel Peace TV (est. 2006),

is an influential autodidact Saudi-funded Indian preacher who appeals to young urban Indian Muslims and the South Asian Muslim diaspora in the West (Sadouni, 2013). In 2010, Zakir Naik, who is also known for his anti-Shiite rhetoric, was denied a visa to enter the United Kingdom. The ban was supported by British Shiite organizations such as the Al-Khoei Foundation, which issued a press release criticizing the Sunnite-dominated Muslim Council of Britain (MCB, est. 1997) for defending the Indian preacher (Bowen, 2014).

Anjem Choudary, a British citizen of Pakistani origin who is referred to as a Salafi-jihadi (Amghar, 2011), does not control any specific media network, but spends much time preaching to his followers on social media such as Skype and Paltalk (Akerhaug, 2013). In recent years, his main agenda has been to encourage the U.K. to withdraw its troups from Afghanistan and Iraq, and to establish an Islamic state in the country (Amghar, 2011). However, in light of the civil wars in Syrian and Iraq, anti-Shiism now seems to be one of his new main agendas. In a demonstration organized by Choudary in London in 2013, supposedly in support of the Syrian rebels, Choudary's supporters carried banners rallying against the "Shia Enemies of Allah". Because the protesters physically attacked a Shiite bystander, the incident is described as "the first case of Muslim sectarian violence in Britain" (Elgot, 2013). As described below, Yasser al-Habib, Zakir Naik and Anjem Choudary have a relatively large number of young followers in Norway, a situation that inevitably leads to tension across the Sunnite-Shiite divide.

The ideal of a unified Muslim minority in Norway

In Norway, Muslims are a small religious minority of maximum 220,000 people, or 4.5 percent of the country's total population of 5 million (Leirvik, & Jacobsen, 2014). The Shiites represents only about 15 percent of this minority, or approximately 33,000 people. Nonetheless, many Norwegian Muslims have a background from countries with substantial Shiite populations, such as Iran and Iraq where they are majorities. Bearing in mind the sectarian challenges of Iraq in particular, it is noteworthy that in the course of the last two decades Iraqi refugees and their descendants have become the third most numerous group with a Muslim background in Norway (Bangstad & Elgvin, 2015). Moreover, a large proportion of these immigrants are Shiites from cities like Baghdad, Karbala and Basra, who fled the sectarian politics of Saddam Hussein, notably the repression that followed the so-called "Shiite intifada" that erupted in the wake of Iraq's military defeat in the 1991 First Gulf War. Other Norwegian Shiites have a background from countries where Shiites are important minorities, notably Pakistan, Afghanistan and Turkey. It should be noted, however, that most of the Shiites in Turkey are Alevis, and that a small minority in Pakistan are Ahmadis (Vogt, 2012b, p. 50).

The mosques in Norway are primarily stratified along ethnic and doctrinal lines. The first three "Norwegian-Pakistani" mosques in Norway were officially established explicitly as Sunnite (ICC, est. 1974), Ahmadi (est. 1974) and Shiite (Anjuman-e Hussaini, est. 1975). In 2013, about 120,800 people were members of a Muslim organization and in Oslo, approximately 8 percent of total population are members of such organizations (Leirvik, & Jacobsen, 2014). The organizations in question are most essentially prayer locations, henceforth designated as mosques. Among the forty mosques in Oslo, nine are Shiite and one is Ahmadi. Seven mosques are so-called purpose-built, including the Ahmadi mosque and the Shiite Tauheed mosque. It should be noted that this particular mosque has a tripartite ethnic character and that sermons are given in Arabic, Urdu and Norwegian.

In addition to differences based on ethnic background and the three major forms of Islam described above, Norwegian Sunnis and Shiites are also further stratified doctrinally. Whereas the Sunnite mosques may be characterized very roughly by their affiliation to

various forms of Sufism or Islamism, the Shiite mosques may be distinguished by their connection to different *marja*, but also to Shiite Islamism (Vogt, 2012b). In addition, a few of the mosques can also be differentiated by their loose connections to either Saudi Arabia or Iran. For instance, while the imam in the Sunnite-orientated Tawfiiq mosque was educated at the Saudi Arabian University of Medina (Bangstad & Linge, 2013), the imam in Tauheed-center sympathises with the "Iranian line" and Hezbollah (Vogt 2000; 2012b).

Despite such connections and the fact that many of the first Muslims who came to Norway have their origins in Pakistan, a country that has been host to widespread Sunnite-Shiite related violence for the last three decades (e.g. Zaman, 1998), Norwegian mosques have historically treated the conflict as a taboo counterproductive to an ideal of a unified minority.[7] In 1997, this "unity-diversity dichotomy" manifested itself in practice when the Sunnite-Pakistani dominated Islamic Council of Norway (IRN), after a heated internal debate, voted in favor of accepting the Tauheed mosque's application for membership in the council (Vogt, 2000). Publicly however, few indications of polemics between the Sunnite and Shiites mosques surface in Norway. For instance, the polemical *dawah*-material that circulated in the Sunnite mosques during the 1990s such as Ahmed Deedat's videocassettes, challenged Western Christianity rather than Shiism (Linge, 2013). In Sweden, however, a translation of the anti-Shiite booklet "The difference between the Shiites and the majority of Muslim scholars", written by a certain Dr. Ali Omar, circulated in the country during the 1990s (Roald, 2004).[8] Nonetheless, it is important to note that the sense of pan-Islamism in Norway context excludes the Ahmadis. When Bosnian and Kosovo-Albanian refugees arrived in Norway as a result of the Balkan War during the 1990s, for instance, several mosques coedited an anti-Ahmadi pamphlet as a means of preventing the Ahmadi mission from attracting the "non-practising Muslim newcomers" (Personal communication with the former *dawah* responsible in the ICC mosque, February 28, 2012).

In sum, it should be emphasized that in a context of immigration, the fragmentation of an Islamic landscape such as the Norwegian one, is also a matter of time and numbers. For instance, while Norway's first Pakistani labour migrants were affiliated with different Islamic traditions in Pakistan, they initially practised Islam altogether, first within the framework of Pakistani welfare organizations and then in Norway's first mosque, the Sunnite and Deobandi orientated ICC. As both Sunnite-Barelwis and Shiites gradually became more numerous in Norway, however, they established their own mosques (Vogt, 2000).

Norwegian Sunnite-Shiite polemics, a youth phenomenon

In fact, Sunnite-Shiite polemics in the Norwegian public sphere is somewhat of a youth phenomenon, which first surfaced during the early 2000s in Muslimsk Studentsamfunn (The Muslim Student Society: MSS, est. 1995) and Norges Muslimske Ungdom (The Muslim Youth of Norway: NMU, est. 1996), Norway's first Muslim youth organizations. Paradoxically, a premise for such tensions was a heightened sense of solidarity, notably as a result of a shared Norwegian upbringing and a common opposition to a public debate that was increasingly critical of Islam. However, in their quest for "Islamic authenticity" and identity, these youth also became receptive to essentialist and exclusivist forms of Sunnite- and Shiite-Islam. For instance, Zakir Naik became popular among Norwegian-Pakistanis at the University of Oslo (UiO) and in the MSS during the 2000s (Jacobsen, 2011).

In the MSS and the NMU, whose members were both Sunnis and Shiites, many youth simply identified themselves as Muslims and denounced what they referred to as "sectarianism". Others acknowledged the differences to an extent that they found it

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7 Interview with Kari Vogt, Oslo, 2013.
8 For the translation, see: http://www.islamiska.org/ftp/shia.pdf

problematic to organize religious activities across the Sunnite-Shiite divide. Thus, before conflict erupted in the NMU in 2002 across Sunnite-Shiite lines and membership in the organization became reserved for Sunnite Muslims, mixed membership had been a controversial issue among a few of the Sunnite members for some time. More specifically, the conflict was triggered by the question of whether a girl who had converted to Islam should be taught Sunnite- or Shiite-Islam (Jacobsen, 2011). This fact is noteworthy, because in the beginning of the 2010s, proselytization, or so-called street-*dawah*, became an important source of the Sunnite-Shiite polemic in Norway.

Towards the end of the 2000s, polemics between young Norwegian Sunnis and Shiites became more pronounced, especially after the establishment of a group of new youth organizations with much more exclusivist doctrinal orientations, notably the Shiite-orientated Den Islamske Ungdomsorganisasjonen i Norge (The Islamic Youth Association in Norway: DiN, est. 2007) and Stand4Hussain (est. 2011), and the Sunnite-orientated Det Islamske Nettverket (IslamNet: est. 2008) and Profetens Ummah (the Prophet's Ummah: est. 2012). While these four organizations differ radically doctrinally, they also share a few important traits: their composition is relatively multiethnic; their principal focus is proselytization; they mobilize extensively through social media; they refer in their narratives of mobilization to news media that are critical of Islam; and they are linked to more or less antagonist transnational Islamic networks (Linge, 2013).

DiN was apparently established as an inclusive multiethnic Shiite organization that claimed doctrinal and political neutrality and devotion to democracy and tolerance (Strandhagen, 2008). Accordingly, when an open conflict broke out in the Norwegian press between IslamNet and DiN in 2011, notably based on a disagreement about the death penalty in the Quran, DiN took the more moderate position (Olsen & Færaas, 2011). The press also portrayed DiN as the more moderate organization, based on DiN's organization of several demonstrations against the "use of terror in the name of Islam" and so-called "Wahhabi extremism".[9] However, the demonstrators were predominately Shiite, and according to Sunnite observers, their slogans were also anti-Sunnite (Personal communication with a young Sunnite activist, August 23 2012). More specifically, anti-Sunnism in DiN is promoted by a group of Shirazi "hardliners" who are influenced by Yasser al-Habib. In fact, one of these "hardliners" who has worked with al-Habib in London also appears on Fadak TV's YouTube portal, where he occasionally delivers extremely provocative anti-Sunnite sermons in Norwegian. While such activism is not representative of DiN as a whole, the "hardliners" are currently the most vocal members of the organization. Correspondingly, in DiN's Facebook group and in its affiliated Facebook group "Shia-Sunni Debatt", these activists consistently publish anti-Sunnite posters and videos in which the *Sahaba*, and more specifically the three first Sunnite "rightly guided Caliphs and Aishah, the Sunnite "mother of believers", are labeled as the "leaders of Satan". While these discourses and images purport to target principally "Wahhabi-extremism", as illustrated by the propaganda-poster below which portrays Abdul Aziz Al-Shaykh (1941-), the current Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia, as the architect behind brainless Salafi suicide-bombers, they also portray the Wahhabis as "the real Sunnis" (Shiite-Sunnite Debate, 2014).[10]

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9 http://mindin.no/newsite/2013/06/protest-marsj-mot-wahabi-terroristene/, accessed 27 June 2015.
10 https://www.facebook.com/groups/381882578616056/, accessed 20 June 2014.

Source: DiN's Facebook group (date accessed: 27. June 2015).

Finally, bearing in mind that various agents of intolerance often borrow narratives from each other, it is striking that the propagators of contemporary Western anti-Sunnite rhetoric recycle Islamophobic prejudices against Muslims. For example, based on the assertion that "all terrorists are Muslims", one of DiN's followers posted a diagram on Facebook that characterizes "all Muslim terrorists as Sunnis".

From an examination of Stand4Hussain's homepage and Facebook group, it appears that the organization and its members are loosely affiliated with the Tawhid-center,[11] a Norwegian Shiite mosque with links to the international Iranian *dawah* organization Ahl al-Bayt (Vogt, 2000). Nonetheless, reflecting the post-Islamist paradigm which postulates that individualized forms of Islam that incite spirituality, morality and universalism (Moss, 2009) are increasingly superseding the revolutionary Islamism of 1970s, Stand4Hussain engages in street-*dawah* with slogans such as "Karbala; a message of humanity".[12] In fact, rather than representing a local concept, Stand4Hussain's sophisticated marketing strategies seem to be inspired by global actors such as the London-based organization "Who is Hussein".[13] In spite of Stand4Hussain's moderate approach to *dawah*, however, the organization's activists are occasionally labeled "dirty Shiite pagan" (*kuffar*) in the street, particularly by Sunnite "hardliners" who disapprove of Shiite proselytization (Acharki & Mordt, 2013).

Finally, while DiN and Stand4Hussain are very different Shiite organizations, they sometimes cooperate, notably when several Shiite mosques and organizations assemble in the annual Ashura procession in the streets of Oslo.[14] The processions, which according to

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11 See: https://www.facebook.com/groups/40markering/, accessed 27 June 2015.

12 https://www.facebook.com/groups/40markering/, accessed 9 January 2013.

13 http://www.whoishussain.org/the-organisation/about-us/, accessed 27 June 2015.

14 *Ibid*.

DiN's members were first organized in Oslo by Shirazis in 2001,[15] are quite spectacular and attract about two thousand Norwegian Shiites each year, much to the discontent of Salafi-oriented bystanders.[16]

IslamNet, which is the largest Islamic youth organization in Norway, is part of a transnational network that may be characterized in doctrinal terms as puritan-Salafi. As such, rather than engaging in politics or jihad as a means of returning Islam to the per-ceived practices of the Prophet Muhammad, IslamNet and its mentors preach the virtues of *dawah.* IslamNet's proselytization is explicitly public, notably in terms of its street- *dawah* as well as the virtual-*dawah* that it carries out via social media. In these spaces, IslamNet aims to counter the "misconceptions about Islam" they claim are promulgated by Western media (Bangstad & Linge, 2013). However, IslamNet's Salafi-*dawah* also targets other Muslims, notably Shiites who are accused of innovation *bidah*, paganism *shirk* and *kufr* on the organization's digital forums.[17] Nonetheless, while conflict did break out in national news media between IslamNet and DiN in 2011 (Linge, 2013), IslamNet's leadership doses not engage in so-called *takfirism* directed towards Norwegian Shiites.

Profetens Ummah, a much smaller and rather loosely-organized group, is part of an increasingly well-organized transnational network that may be defined doctrinally as Salafi-jihadi. While Profetens Ummah engages in virtual-*dawah* and occasionally in street-*dawah*, the fact that some of its members fight in the ranks of the IS in Syria and Iraq also confirms the group's proclaimed commitment to jihad (Lia, 2014). Moreover, in light of Profetens Ummah's links to this fiercely anti-Shiite "state", its adherents understandably engage in anti-Shiite *takfirism* in Norway. A striking example occurred in June 2014 when a Norwegian IS so-called foreign fighter posted on DiN's Facebook forum in June 2014 that "Shiites commit *shirk* and *bidah*", that they are not Muslims and that he hoped that "all Shiite *rawafid* will be butchered".[18] Another Norwegian IS sympathizer posted the image shown below on Facebook, claring that Shiites, or more specifically Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and Ayatollah Muhammad-Sadiq al-Sadr (1943-1999), were "non-Muslims" and the "enemies of Islam" (Private Facebook profile).

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15 Conversation with a Stand4Hussain activist, 9 June 2015.
16 Conversations with a Salafi orientated bystanders 1 November 2014.
17 http://www.islamnet.no/forum/indeks, accessed 20 August 2014.
18 https://www.facebook.com/groups/8213894359/, accessed 27 June 2014.

Source: Profile picture on a private Facebook account (date accessed, 25. September 2014).

Lastly, while IslamNet officially condemns Profetens Ummah's jihad orientation, there is a certain flow of both ideas and people between the two organizations, notably in terms of anti-Shiite rhetoric. For instance, on the Facebook page of Tawfiiq Youth, where members from both groups are active, one of the most profiled Norwegian Profetens Ummah activists and a central IslamNet member each posted YouTube videos from an incident in Iraq's eastern Diyala province where seventy Sunnis where killed by Shiite militias in a mosque during Friday prayers 23 august 2014.

Antagonist visions of Islamic unity in Norway

On 25 August 2014, about 40 Norwegian NGOs and religious organizations mobilized thousands of Norwegians in the city center of Oslo in a protest entitled "Demonstration against ISIS – not in the name of Islam". Not only was the event initiated by three young Sunnite and Shiite Muslims, but it also grew into a multi-denominational demonstration that united both Sunnis and Shiites, as well Christians, Jews and atheists in a common cause. In addition to a speech delivered by Methab Afsar (1972-), IRN's secretary general who is affiliated with the Sufi and "Shiite-friendly" Minhaj ul-Qur'an organization, both Sunnite and Shiite leaders made appeals. Notably, one of these leaders sympathizes with the Muslim Brothers and another sympathizes with Hizbollah. Nonetheless, while a representative of the think-tank Minotenk (est. 2009) correctly pointed out that "the demonstration erased differences between Sunnite, Shiite and other minority-groups within Islam",[19] both Norwegian Sunnite and Shiite activists condemned the demonstration, especially on social media. In online discussions before and after the demonstration, such condemnations were widespread on the Facebook pages of both Tawfiiq youth and DiN.

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19 https://www.facebook.com/yousef.assidiq?fref=ts, accessed 29 August 2014.

On the Facebook page of Tawfiiq youth, participants argued that the Shiites who were part of the event "curse the *sahaba* and the Prophet Muhammad's wives".[20] They also claimed that while "Muslims demonstrate along with *kuffar*, they have been passive with regard to the Shia-kuffar killings of Sunnis the last ten years", an allegation that most likely refers to the sectarian politics in Iraq after the American invasion in 2003. Based on these sentiments, a few of the polemicists even engaged in *takfirism*, notably by characterizing those who demonstrated "against their brothers and sisters as a means to please *kuffar*" as "hypocrites (*munafiq*) and *kuffar*".[21]

Within DiN, the demonstration was described as a Sunnite plot. On the group's Facebook page, this claim was supported by screenshots of anti-Shiite statements that were purportedly made on Facebook in early 2014 by one of the young Sunnite initiators of the demonstration. In the thread, the activist in question had stated that the "Shiites worship humans", that they "crawl like Catholics" and that the "majority of Shiis are and will remain *kuffar*".[22] The conspiracy theory was further supported with references to media reports of IS members and sympathizers praying in Norwegian mosques (e.g. Torset & Kramviken, 2014). Based on these statements, the "hardliners" in DiN claimed that "many Wahhabi sympathizers were obliged to change their strategy, notably by denouncing ISIS (the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) publicly and by concealing their true agenda".[23] Then, by requesting a "written condemnation of Al-Qaida from the mosques and the IRN",[24] DiN indirectly accused all the Norwegian Sunnite mosques of supporting extremism. Nonetheless, when the demonstration proved to be a success and members of both Stand4Hussein and DiN criticized the boycott, the DiN "hardliners" changed their anti-Sunnite rhetoric. By pointing out that Methab Afsar, the IRN secretary general heading the demonstration was flanked by four Norwegian Shiite leaders, the "hardliners" alleged that Norwegian Sunnis stayed in their homes because "they are flirting with the extremists" and because they are "supporting the atrocities of Sunnite-terror groups".[25] As a small Muslim "minority within a minority", the Shiites were in fact proportionally overrepresented in the demonstration, notably in terms of the reportedly high number of Shiite volunteers.[26] Keeping in mind that most of the Arab-Iraqi immigrants in Norway are probably Shiites[27] and that they are the principal victims of IS' religious cleansing, it does not come as a surprise that the Shiite mobilization was particularly successful.

However, this explanation should not distort the fact that many "moderate" Sunnite activists claimed that the demonstration came across as addressing only Shiite victimhood. For instance, one Sunnite activist requested a condemnation of the "Shiite treatment of the Sunnis after the fall of Saddam Hussein" in Iraq (Private Facebook profile). Another Sunnite activist emphasized "the double standards in condemning IS without denouncing (Bashar al-) Assad's killing and raping" in Syria (Private Facebook profile). With regard to the Norwegian situation, he pointed out that the "media did not interrogate the Hizbollah linked Shiite imam with a single critical question" (Private Facebook profile). Finally, it is noteworthy that a third Sunnite activist referred to an article published by Hege Storhaug (1962-), Norway's most profiled anti-Islamic activist, to support his own concerns about the Shiites "representing Islam" in Norway. In addition to relating Storhaug's warnings about

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20 https://www.facebook.com/groups/8213894359/, accessed 25 August 2014.
21 *Ibid.*
22 https://www.facebook.com/groups/8213894359/, accessed 23 August 2014.
23 *Ibid*.
24 *Ibid*.
25 *Ibid*.
26 https://www.facebook.com/groups/8213894359/, accessed 28 August 2014.
27 While there are no statistics avalible, all of my Sunnite and Shiite informants claim that the great majority of Norwegian-Iraqi Arabs are Shiites.

the Shiite protesters' supposed loyalty to Khomeinism, the Sunnite activist added that the Shiites in question "curse our mother Aishah, make *takfir* on the *sahaba*, support the genocide on Syrian Sunnis and [have] thus been partly responsible for the establishment of the IS" (Private Facebook profile).

Concluding remarks: the local dynamics of Sunnite-Shiite polemics

Historically, Sunnite-Shiite polemics have not defined the Norwegian Islamic landscape. Partly as a result of the sectarian dimension of the current crises in the Middle East however, frictions along such lines have become more articulated. This increased factionalism has several aspects. First, some of the most vocal Muslim polemicists have backgrounds from states that are divided along confessional lines, such as Iraq. Second, it may be argued that this geographical transference is inspired by the sectarian violence that is accessible on YouTube, a new media phenomenon that in effect encourages war refugees to remain emotionally attached to the conflicts in their countries of origin. Third, Sunnite-Shiite tensions in Norway arise along the lines of specific Islamic movements, notably between networks that are embedded in religiously divided states like Iraq.

In addition, however, Sunnite-Shiite polemics in Norway is also a relatively recent multi-ethnic youth phenomenon that appears as deterritorialized, particularly in digital spaces. In this "mediascape", European-based polemicists such as Anjem Choudary and Yasser al-Habib offer sectarian and supranational Islamic identities to young Muslims of various origins, notably by making new sense of pre-modern Sunnite-Shiite polemics. More specifically, it is noteworthy that the fiercest anti-Shiism in Norway is voiced by Sunnis connected to the IS, a multi-ethnic organization with deep roots in Iraqi sectarianism. Moreover, the microanalysis of the Norwegian Demonstration against the IS shows that Sunnite-Shiite relations are also shaped locally.

In addition to the public narrative of Islamic unity, which in this case is a matter of "speaking for Islam" with one voice against the IS, this representation of "good and bad Muslims" (Mamdani, 2002) is also contested and defined alternatively, most notably on social media where such dichotomies are substantially shaped by the dynamics of national news media. As this case shows, the persistent negative focus on Islam in the media is rationalized by many Norwegian Muslims in terms of the "moderate Muslim self" versus the "extreme Muslim other", notably across the Sunnite-Shiite divide.

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