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PO Box 117
221 00 Lund
+46 46-222 00 00



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Oliver Scharbrodt

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Contesting ritual practices in Twelver Shiism: modernism, sectarianism and the politics of self-flagellation (*tatbīr*)

Oliver Scharbrodt

Centre for Theology and Religious Studies, Lund University, Lund, Sweden

ABSTRACT

Shiis perform a number of rituals on the first 10 days of the Islamic month of Muḥarram to mourn the killing of the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, Husayn, in Karbala in southern Iraq in 680CE. Among the most controversial rituals is the practice of blood-letting self-flagellation (*tatbīr*). This article provides a comprehensive discussion of debates around this ritual among prominent Shii clerical figures of the 20th and 21st centuries. While the vast majority of senior clerics is either sympathetic to *tatbīr* or retains an indifferent attitude, clerical interventions critical of it are informed by the discursive parameters of Islamic modernism and emphasize the universal moral and socio-political message of Husayn's revolt. These debates also point at concerns over inter-sectarian relations between Sunnis and Shiis and efforts to discard Shii ritual practices that could antagonize Sunni Muslims. Finally, these debates contain an important political dimension reflecting contestations around Iran's aim to exercise hegemony over Shii communities across the world. The 1994 fatwa by the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic 'Ali Khamenei (b. 1939) in which he declared *tatbīr* prohibited (*ḥarām*) has hardened existing cleavages between those supporting and those rejecting this practice, as this article illustrates.

Introduction

Shiis performed a number of rituals on the first 10 days of the Islamic month of Muḥarram to mourn the killing of the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, Husayn, in Karbala in southern Iraq in 680CE during his revolt against the Umayyad dynasty. This period in the Shii calendar and the ritual activities accompanying it play a central role in consolidating, maintaining, articulating and performing Shii communal identities.¹ Among the most controversial rituals is the practice of blood-letting self-flagellation (*tatbīr*) which this article discusses. This ritual is usually performed on the morning of the 10th day of Muḥarram ('Āshūrā'), the day when the events around Karbala culminate in remembering the murder of Imam Husayn. *Tatbīr* (*qama-zanī* in Persian) is usually performed by men

CONTACT Oliver Scharbrodt  oliver.scharbrodt@ctr.lu.se  Lund University, Helgonavägen 3, LUX - Hus B, Lund, Sweden

¹For a comprehensive historical overview, see Ali J. Hussain, 'The Mourning of History and the History of Mourning: The Evolution of Ritual Commemoration of the Battle of Karbala', *Comparative of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 25 (2005): 78–88.

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and has been characterized as a public spectacle of virility with Shii women traditionally being delegated to the role of mere spectators.² Men dress in white burial shrouds (*kaffan*) to demonstrate their willingness to die as martyrs for the ‘master of martyrs (*sayyid al-shuhadāʾ*)’—Husayn. During a public procession, men strike the top of their heads with a sword or other sharp objects to cause intense bleeding in order to re-enact and partake in the suffering of Imam Husayn and his family in Karbala.

Despite being among the most well-known and most controversial rituals performed by Shiis not much research has been undertaken on it, in particular on the contestations around it within modern and contemporary Twelver Shiism.³ This article provides a discussion of debates around this ritual and the different views around its permissibility, investigating fatwas, other writings and lectures by prominent clerical figures. Efforts by reformist clerical leaders to modernize Shii ritual practices by emphasizing the universal moral and socio-political message behind Husayn’s martyrdom in Karbala are also considered. The article equally illustrates that the vast majority of senior clerics are either sympathetic to *tatbīr* or retain an indifferent attitude towards its practice.

This article demonstrates that modern and contemporary debates around the ritual of self-flagellation revolve around three issues. First, clerical interventions critical of it or rejecting it as a blameworthy innovation (*bidʿa*) are often informed by the discursive parameters of Islamic modernism. Reforms of Islamic doctrines and practices are meant to align them with modern values and post-Enlightenment paradigms of religiosity, which emphasize interiorized faith and ethical self-cultivation, rationalize religious beliefs and practices and denigrate emotional articulations of religious experiences as anti-modern.⁴ Modernist discourses within Shii jurisprudence accordingly seek to rationalize Shii practices and beliefs by opposing *tatbīr* and other public spectacles of Shii communal assertion and use the events around Karbala and ritual practices to commemorate them in order to emphasize the universal moral and socio-political message of Husayn’s revolt against the Umayyads.

The second issue evident in these debates points at concerns over inter-sectarian relations between Sunnis and Shiis. The notion of causing harm to the reputation (*sumʿa*) of Shiis in their interaction with Sunnis initiated discussions in the early 20th century to outlaw the practice of *tatbīr*. Shii Islamist actors who have promoted pan-Islamic solidarity between Shiis and Sunnis since the latter half of the 20th century seek to downplay and discard Shii ritual practices that could antagonize Sunni Muslims. The

²Mary Elaine Hegland, ‘Shiʿa Women of Northwest Pakistan and Agency through Practice: Ritual, Resilience and Resistance’, *Political and Legal Anthropology Review* 18 (1995): 65–79. For a different view on the role of women in this ritual, see Yafa Shanneik, *The Art of Resistance in Islam: The Performance of Politics among Shiʿi Women in the Middle East and Beyond* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 15–6.

³For previous work referring to some of the jurisprudential contestations, see Werner Ende, ‘The Flagellations of Muharram and the Shiʿite “Ulamāʾ”, *Der Islam* 55 (1978): 20–36; Sabrina Mervin, ‘Les larmes et le sang des chiites: corps et pratiques rituelles lors des célébrations de ‘Āshūrā’, *Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée* 113–114 (2006): 153–66; Ingvild Flakerud, ‘Ritual Creativity and Plurality: Denying Twelver Shia Blood-Letting Practices’, in *The Ambivalence of Denial: Danger and Appeal of Rituals* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2016), 109–34; Edith Szanto, ‘Beyond the Karbala Paradigm: Rethinking Revolution and Redemption in Twelver Shiʿa Mourning Rituals’, *Journal of Shiʿa Islamic Studies* 6 (2013): 80–2; and Edith Szanto, ‘Challenging Transnational Shiʿi Authority in Baʿth Syria’, *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 45 (2018): 11–12.

⁴On the intellectual paradigms of Islamic modernism, see, for example, Monica M. Ringer, *Islamic Modernism and the Re-Enchantment of the Sacred in the Age of History* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020).

potential reputational damage such rituals could cause to Twelver Shiism also moves debates among Shii minority communities in the West. Practices like *taṭbīr* seem to confirm existing stereotypes around Islam as a religion particularly prone to violence.

Finally, these debates contain an important political dimension reflecting personal rivalries between different clerical figures and contestations around Iran's aim to exercise hegemony over Shii communities across the world. The 1994 fatwa by the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic 'Ali Khamenei (b. 1939) in which he declared the practice of *taṭbīr* prohibited (*ḥarām*) has hardened existing cleavages between those supporting and those rejecting this practice. Religious institutions and political movements associated with the Islamic Republic have rejected its practice and sought to prevent its performance in various contexts.⁵ Shii clerical figures opposed to the Iranian regime and their networks and institutions have promoted *taṭbīr* to articulate their resistance to Khamenei's clerical leadership, to the hegemonic role of Iran in defining Shii orthopraxy and to the ideological reading of Twelver Shiism, provided by Khamenei's predecessor and leader of the Islamic Revolution of 1979 Ayatollah Khomeini (1902–1989).⁶

This article first introduces the origins of self-flagellation within the wider context of various rituals performed during Muḥarram emphasizing the political significance of these rituals as means to articulate and perform Shii communal identities in the public. The article then follows a chronological line investigating initial contestations around *taṭbīr* in the early 20th century and responses by senior clerical figures at the time, which have set the legal precedents for debates until the present. The diversity of views on *taṭbīr* which emerged after World War II is then explored illustrating how clerical leaders in Najaf and Qom mostly approved of this practice, while reformist and Islamist clerical actors rejected it to promote pan-Islamic solidarity. Finally, the article discusses the aftermath of Khamenei's 1994 fatwa against *taṭbīr*. Ensuing controversies demonstrate how debates around *taṭbīr* reflect concerns about adequate public articulations of Shii communal identities in light of increasing Sunni-Shii sectarian tensions and the competition of different clerical and political actors within contemporary Twelver Shiism.

Muḥarram rituals: origins and developments before the 20th century

The events around the martyrdom of Husayn, grandson of the Prophet Muhammad and third Shii Imam, and his family and entourage on the plains of Karbala in southern Iraq in 680CE is the foundational mythico-historical event of Twelver Shiism. Husayn refused to give legitimacy to the dynastic succession within the Umayyad clan from Mu'awiya to his son Yazid and launched a revolt to reclaim the right of the family of the Prophet (*ahl al-bayt*) to exercise leadership over the Muslim community. According to the Shii tradition, Husayn and his entourage were intercepted by Yazid's army in Karbala and engaged in a battle on the first 10 days of Muḥarram during which many of Husayn's supporters and family members and, finally, he himself were killed. Husayn was willing to engage in the asymmetric battle—around 70 men from Husayn's camp faced an Umayyad army of

⁵Sabrina Mervin, "'Āshūrā': Some Remarks on Ritual Practices in Different Shiite Communities (Lebanon and Syria)', in *The Other Shiites: From the Mediterranean to Central Asia* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007), 146–7; and Flakerud, 'Ritual Creativity and Plurality', 112–3.

⁶Hasan al-Islami, 'Al-'Azā: Sunna Dīniyya am Fi'l Ijtīmā'i', in *Jadal wa-Mawāqif fi al-Sha'ā'ir al-Husayniyya* (Beirut: Dār al-Hādī, 2009), 334.

around 1,000 men—in order to illustrate the illegitimacy of Umayyad dynasty and accepted that he either had to pledge allegiance to Yazid or be killed by refusing to do so. His death is also understood to follow a divinely ordained pattern, maintained in the Shii tradition, that every Shii Imam died as a martyr.⁷ Other interpretations suggest that his martyrdom was an intentional sacrifice to send a moral message to his followers and to other Muslims.⁸

The rituals which developed to commemorate the events of Karbala are meant to keep their memory alive, to re-enact and re-experience them and to partake in Husayn's suffering. Participating in events commemorating his martyrdom during 'Āshūrā', mourning his and his supporters' and family's deaths and crying for them fulfil a salvific function, as the mourners engage in a meritorious act for which they will be rewarded in the hereafter.⁹ More modern interpretations emphasize the universality of the moral and socio-political message Husayn's uprising communicates: a righteous man withstands the forces of tyranny to uphold justice. This 'Karbala paradigm' has been given a particularly revolutionary understanding in more politicized readings of Twelver Shiism in the latter half of the 20th century to encourage political activism against oppressive regimes.¹⁰ Hence, the meaning of the events around Karbala and their commemoration in ritual activities have experienced a shift from fulfilling a soteriological purpose to a narrative of revolutionary activism.¹¹

Five major rituals developed out of the commemoration of Karbala and are performed in various ways within contemporary Shii communities.¹² A central element is the memorial service (*majlis al-'azā'*) which includes recounting the events in Karbala and homiletic lectures drawing moral, spiritual or political lessons from Husayn's martyrdom and often applying them to current issues. Public mourning processions (*mawkib*) are performed on 'Āshūrā' and on the fortieth day after Husayn's death (*arba'īn*). Pilgrimages (*ziyāra*) to the shrine of Imam Husayn in Karbala on both days constitute another central ritual of public communal assertion. Other rituals include the representation of the battle in the form of a play (*tashbih* or *tamthil* in Arabic, *ta'ziyya* in Persian) and rhythmic chest-beating (*latam* in Arabic, *sīna-zanī* in Persian) that accompanies the recitation of lamentation poetry in honour of Husayn and the family of the Prophet. Self-flagellation (*tatbīr*, *qama-zanī*) involves striking the top of the head with a sword or flagellating the back with sharp razors attached to chains. A milder form involves the rhythmic hitting of one's back with a chain (*sanjīr-zanī*).

The performance of these rituals in various contexts possesses immense 'diversity'¹³ and 'fluidity'¹⁴ and is adapted to local cultures and customs and vernacularized. The lamentation poetry is recited, respectively, in Urdu, Persian, Turkish and various colloquial Arabic dialects to popularize these rituals. These practices allow for the development of

⁷Mahmoud M. Ayoub, *Redemptive Suffering in Islam: A Study of the Devotional Aspects of Ashura in Twelver Shi'ism* (New York: De Gruyter, 2011), 97–124.

⁸S. Hussain M. Jafri, *Origins and Early Development of Shi'a Islam*, 2nd ed. (Qum: Ansariyan Publications, 1989), 202.

⁹Ayoub, *Redemptive Suffering in Islam*, 142–96.

¹⁰Michael Fisher, *Iran: From Religious Dispute to Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980).

¹¹Lara Deeb, 'Living Ashura in Lebanon: From Mourning to Sacrifice', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 25 (2005): 122–37. See also Szanto, 'Beyond the Karbala Paradigm', 75–91.

¹²Itzhak Nakash, 'An Attempt to Trace the Origins of the Rituals of "Āshūrā"', *Die Welt des Islams* 33 (1993): 161–81.

¹³Flaskerud, 'Ritual Creativity and Plurality', 111.

¹⁴Morteza Hashemi, 'Could We Use Blood Donation Campaigns as Social Policy Tools?: British Shi'i Ritual of Giving Blood', *Identities* (2020): 8. DOI: 10.1080/1070289X.2020.1856538.

new ritual forms and for adapting them to different socio-cultural and political contexts. For this reason, they are particularly demotic (lit. 'of the people'). The sociologist Gerd Bauman understands demotic as denoting processes and forces that constitute counter-discourses and practices that challenge dominant discourses, reveal cleavages that exist in ethno-religious communities and create new understandings of communal identities.¹⁵ In the context of religious communities, demotic processes and discourses constitute individual and collective religiosities which challenge normative discourses and practices promulgated within organized communities and their formal and official religious authorities.¹⁶

Due to their demotic nature, the various rituals performed by Shiis during Muḥarram are particularly contested and pose a challenge to the reach and extent of clerical authority. Twelver Shiism possesses a more formalized structure distinguishing between 'ulamā' entitled to arrive at independent legal judgements (*mujtahid*) and lay Shi'i followers (*muqallid*) who need to follow the legal rulings of a particular scholar, referred to as grand ayatollah (*ayat allāh al-'uzmā*) or source of emulation (*marja' al-taqlid*, pl. *marāji'*).¹⁷ This system of clerical authority and allegiance leads to rivalry and competition of clerics over followers but also dependency on them, as individual Shiis in theory decide which senior cleric to follow. Clerics need to address the expectations and needs of their followers to a certain extent and cannot antagonize them by rejecting beliefs and practices that enjoy wide popularity. For this reason, clerical interventions—if not supported by the legal coercion of the state—have often had limited impact in changing popular practices such as *tatbīr*.

The public performance of these rituals during 'Āshūrā' equally possesses an important political dimension. They were initially introduced by the Shii Buyid dynasty (934–1062) and gained particular prominence when the Safavids conquered Iran in 1501, declared Twelver Shiism as the official state religion and used these rituals to consolidate the Shiitisation of Iran.¹⁸ In the modern period these rituals also experienced periods of their performance being prohibited such as under Ottoman rule over Iraq in the 19th century, as part of the secularizing policies of the Pahlavi Shahs in early and mid-20th century Iran and most lately in Baathist Iraq under Saddam Hussein (1937–2006). The prohibition of the public performance of these rituals—to minimize or prevent Shii communal mobilization and the influence of religious authority figures—usually caused a backlash and reinvigorated their performance and combined them more strongly with a dissident political stance to the ruling regime.¹⁹

It is not quite clear when blood-letting self-flagellation emerged. The Syrian Sunni scholar Ibn Tulun al-Salihi (d. 1546) witnessed this practice among Shiis in Damascus.²⁰ Travel reports from the 17th century observed it among Turkoman Shiis in Azerbaijan and

¹⁵Gerd Baumann, *Contesting Culture: Discourse of Identity in Multi-ethnic London* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

¹⁶Seán McLoughlin and John Zavos, 'Writing Religion in British Asian Diasporas', in *Writing the City in British Asian Diasporas* (London: Routledge, 2014), 161.

¹⁷Linda Walbridge (ed.), *The Most Learned of the Shi'a: The Institution of the marja' taqlid* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

¹⁸Babak Rahimi, *Theater State and the Formation of Early Modern Public Sphere in Iran* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 199–234.

¹⁹Ibrahim Haydari, 'The Rituals of 'Ashura: Genealogy, Functions, Actions and Structures', in *Ayatollahs, Sufis and Ideologues: State, Religion and Social Movements in Iraq* (London: Saqi, 2002), 105–7.

²⁰Ibn Tulun al-Salihi, *Ḥāṣṣat al-Warā' bi-man Wali Nā'iban min al-Atrāk bi-Dimashq al-Shām al-Kubrā* (Cairo: Maṭba'at Jāmi'at 'Ayn Shams, 1973), 147–8.

the Caucasus who then spread it to other parts of Iran, the shrine cities of Najaf and Karbala in Iraq²¹ and the Shii stronghold of Nabatiyya in south Lebanon in the 19th century. Initially, the performance of *taṭbīr* in the Iraqi shrine cities was restricted to Turcoman and Kurdish Shiis who performed it when stopping in the shrine cities on their way back from the *hajj*. Arab tribes in Iraq that had only converted to Twelver Shiism in the 19th century did not participate initially in many of these rituals, neither rhythmic self-beating nor self-flagellation, perceiving them contrary to their tribal values. However, in the early 20th century these rituals began to enjoy wider popularity, being seen as a rite of masculinity and an initiation ritual for young male Shiis.²²

Despite late historical records attesting the practice of *taṭbīr*, proponents of this ritual provide scriptural justification for it using certain traditions that describe the manner in which members of the family of the Prophet mourned the death of Husayn. Zaynab, his sister, plays a prominent role, as she is considered to be the originator of many traditions and rituals associated with 'Āshūrā'. Certain traditions suggest when seeing her brother's severed head, she hit her head out of sorrow against a saddle or the pillar of her tent causing severe bleeding.²³ Her act is then considered to be emulated when performing *taṭbīr*.²⁴ Other traditions state that Husayn's son, the fourth Imam 'Ali Zayn al-'Abidin, hurt his head when hearing about the death of his father and started bleeding. The 12th and final Imam al-Mahdi is reported to have cried so intensely out of grief that his eyes started bleeding.²⁵ Other traditions highlight the cosmic significance of Husayn's martyrdom describing how it rained blood after his death, how the earth released blood to its surface or how the sun was tainted in blood.²⁶

Most of these traditions are taken from the encyclopaedic collection of Shii traditions (*akhbār*), *Bihār al-Anwār*, collected by the Safavid-era scholar Muhammad Baqir al-Majlisi (d. 1699/1700). While al-Majlisi claims to have put the collected traditions under scrutiny to determine their authenticity, Shii scholars have debated to what extent all of its traditions can be considered reliable. Al-Majlisi's vast collection has been particularly important to the *akhbārī* school of Twelver Shiism which adopts a more scripturalist approach and delimits the interpretative scope of Shii clerics.²⁷ The *akhbārī* school prefers a tradition when establishing a particular Shii doctrine or practice rather than the independent reasoning (*ijtihād*) of a scholar. For this reason, the *akhbārī* school tends to have a less stringent approach to determining the authenticity of traditions and is willing to include traditions as reference points even if their reliability cannot be completely established. References by supporters of *taṭbīr* to traditions mentioned above reveal an *akhbārī* approach and less concern for questions of authenticity.²⁸ Opponents of *taṭbīr*

²¹Husayn Mu'tamadi, 'Azādārī-yi Sunnatī-yi Shī'iyyān, vol. 7 (Qom: I'timād, 1383 SH [2005]), 438–40; and idem, 'Azādārī-yi Sunnatī-yi Shī'iyyān, vol. 2 (Qom: I'timād, 1379 SH [2000/1]), 578.

²²Ibrahim Haydari, *Trājiyya Karbalā': Sūsyūljīyya al-Khitāb al-Shī'i*, 2nd ed. (London: Saqi, 2015 [1999]), 456–7; and Yitzhak Nakash, 'Muharram Rituals and the Cult of Saints among Iraqi Shiites', in *The Other Shiites*, 122–6.

²³Muhammad Baqir al-Majlisi, *Bihār al-Anwār*, vol. 45 (Beirut: Dār Ihyā' al-Turāth al-'Arabi, n.d.), 115.

²⁴See Shanneik, *Art of Resistance*, 135–7.

²⁵Muhammad Baqir al-Majlisi, *Bihār al-Anwār*, vol. 98 (Beirut: Dār Ihyā' al-Turāth al-'Arabi, n.d.), 238–9. See also Nasir al-Mansur, *Al-Taṭbīr: Ḥaqīqa, lā Bid'a* (n.p.: Mu'assasat Taḥqīqāt wa-Nashr Ma'ārif Ahl al-Bayt, n.d.), 20–39. For a critique of these traditions legitimizing *taṭbīr*, see al-Islami, 'Al-'Azā', 318–32.

²⁶*Ma'ātim al-Damm* (n.p.: 1430 H [2009]), 24.

²⁷Robert Gleave, *Scripturalist Islam: the History and Doctrines of the Akhbārī Shī'i School* (Leiden: Brill, 2007).

²⁸Al-Islami, 'Al-'Azā', p. 317. For the explicit adoption of an *akhbārī* approach by a scholar supporting *taṭbīr*, see Muhammad Jamil Hamuda al-'Amili, *Al-Sha'a'ir al-Husayniyya: As'ila wa-Ajwaba ḥawl al-Taṭbīr*, 2nd ed. (Karbala: Mu'assasat al-Imām al-Hādī, 2013), 29–32.

question the reliability of these traditions²⁹ and also the correlation made between them and the ritual of *taṭbīr*: even if Imam al-Mahdi cried blood or the earth was filled with blood after Husayn's martyrdom, how do such occurrences justify blood-letting self-flagellation on the day of 'Āshūrā'?³⁰

First contestations around *taṭbīr* in the early 20th century

Critical views opposing the practice of *taṭbīr* and other rituals during 'Āshūrā' that emphasize emotionality and exhibit a strong Shii sectarian character were put forward by reformist Shii scholars who were influenced by discourses coming from Islamic modernist reformers in the Sunni context such as Muhammad 'Abduh (1849–1905) or Muhammad Rashid Rida (1865–1935). In Iraq, Hibat al-Din Shahristani (1884–1966) was one of the leading reformist Shii scholars who criticized in his journal *al-ʿIlm* in 1911 senior clerics more generally for their failure to oppose popular practices in Shii Islam.³¹ The interventions by Muhsin al-Amin (1865–1952) in Syria and Lebanon to reform 'Āshūrā' rituals in the 1920s and 30s had the widest repercussions leading to polemical exchanges between different Shii scholars, known as 'the great conflict (*al-fitna al-kubrā*)'³² and triggering two influential, yet contradictory, fatwas by the two leading senior clerics at that time. Muhsin al-Amin sought to integrate a modernist reading into Shii ritual practices by formalizing memorial lectures and emphasizing the socio-moral message that speakers should convey to the congregation.³³ These reforms in ritual practices were meant 'to refine morals'³⁴ and to be inclusive of Sunni Muslims.³⁵ In order to minimize the emotionality of Shii ritual practices, Muhsin al-Amin rejected passion plays and other rituals as innovations (*bida*'),³⁶ characterized chest-beating and self-flagellation as 'manifestation of barbarity (*waḥshiyya*) and ridicule (*sukhriyya*) in front of the people'³⁷ and prohibited them because of the harm (*ḍarar*) they cause.³⁸

In response to the activities of Muhsin Al-Amin and his followers, leading scholars of the time were asked to issue their verdicts on *taṭbīr* and other practices in the 1920s. In Najaf, the two most senior clerical figures became involved in these debates and issued fatwas. Abu al-Hasan al-Isfahani (1861–1946) was one of the most widely followed *marja' al-taqīd* and made a legal ruling in 1926 that confirmed Muhsin al-Amin's stance:

The use of swords, iron chains and trumpets and whatever is used during the day at mourning processions on the day of 'Āshūrā' in the name of expressing grief for Husayn is prohibited (*muḥarram*) and un-Islamic (*ghayr sharʿī*).³⁹

²⁹Muhsin al-Amin, *Risālat al-Tanzīh li-A'māl al-Shabīh* (Sidon: al-'Irfān, 1347 H [1928/9]), 8–11.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 21–2.

³¹Haydari, *Trājiyya Karbalā'*, 448; Ende, 'Flagellations of Muharram', 31–2. On Shahristani, see Orit Bashkin, 'The Iraqi Afghans and 'Abduhs: Debate over Reform among Shi'ite and Sunni 'ulamā' in Interwar Iraq', in *Guardians of Faith in Modern Times: 'ulamā' in the Middle East* (Leiden, 2008), 141–69.

³²Among the most prominent rebuttals were 'Abd al-Husayn al-Hilli, *Al-Sha'ā'ir al-Husayniyya fi al-Mizān al-Fiqhī*, 2nd ed. (Damascus: Al-Taff, 1995), and Hasan al-Muzaffar, *Nuṣrat al-Mazlūm* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, n.d.). See also Ende, 'Flagellations of Muharram', 30–1.

³³Max Weiss, 'The Cultural Politics of Shi'i Modernism: Morality and Gender in Early 20th-Century Lebanon', *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 39 (2007), 253–4.

³⁴Al-Amin, *Risālat al-Tanzīh*, 30.

³⁵*Ibid.*, 29–30.

³⁶*Ibid.*, 3.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 8.

³⁸*Ibid.*, 14–9.

³⁹Quoted in Haydari, *Trājiyya Karbalā'*, 451.

The endorsement by one of the most senior clerics strengthened the reformist stance of Muhsin al-Amin and other opponents of *taṭbīr*. However, his colleague and contemporaneous *marja' al-taqlīd* Muhammad Husayn al-Na'ini (1860–1936) issued a fatwa in response to a request from Shiis in Basra in the same year. In his fatwa, he allows public processions, the use of musical instruments, the performance of passion plays and chest-beating. In relation to *taṭbīr*, al-Na'ini comes to the following conclusion⁴⁰

With regards to bleeding from the forehead resulting from using swords or knives, the permission is upheld as long as the person is protected from harm (*ḍarar*) (i.e. causing death or disease with severe chronic pain one cannot normally bear, or the removal (or permanent disfiguration) of body parts). The forehead should just bleed without breaking the skull. Normally one does not seek bleeding that causes harm or anything similar, as experienced performers of blood-letting self-flagellation know how to hit oneself and how one is normally protected from harm. But causing a level of bleeding that causes harm does not require its prohibition. This is like someone who performs ritual ablutions or is fasting in manner protected from harm, and then it becomes evident that it causes harm to him ... However, caution is required so that none other than experienced performers embark on it, in particular young men who are not concerned about what happens to them in order to increase the agony and pain they feel in their hearts out of love for Husayn.⁴¹

Al-Na'ini's fatwa is not an unconditional endorsement, as he sets legal parameters within which the practice is permitted. *Taṭbīr* must not cause death, lead to any permanent physical harm or bodily damage. At the same time, the possibility of causing bleeding that can have more permanent harmful effects is not sufficient ground for al-Na'ini to prohibit it as pre-cautionary measure. He compares *taṭbīr* with the practise of fasting. Fasting within the parameters of Islamic law is not harmful—it just might turn out to be harmful for an individual because of some pre-existing, unknown, health conditions, which only become evident while fasting. The same applies to *taṭbīr*. Like fasting, it causes temporary discomfort, but done within the parameters defined by him it is permissible and remains so even if individual performers accidentally exceed the boundaries set by him.⁴² Concerns about an exaggerated and harmful performance of *taṭbīr* were not completely unfounded as some of its performers collapsed and died.⁴³ As public spectacles of virility and initiation rituals for young male Shiis, al-Na'ini addresses the potential and actual harm *taṭbīr* could cause to its performers.

The fatwas by two of the most important senior clerics in the first half of the 20th century set quite contradictory legal precedents and are cited by supporters and opponents of *taṭbīr* to support their particular stances until today. Referring these precedents back to al-Isfahani and al-Na'ini also creates an important scholarly lineage within the clerical establishment of Najaf: both were the teachers of Abu al-Qasim al-Khoie (1899–1992), the most widely followed Shii cleric in the world until his death, who was then succeeded as pre-eminent cleric by his own disciple 'Ali al-Sistani (b. 1930). Yet, the legal precedents set by al-Isfahani and al-Na'ini are not free of ambiguities. The authenticity of al-Isfahani's fatwa has been contested by supporters of *taṭbīr* who point out that despite the prohibition of processions with music, passion plays and self-flagellation that is

⁴⁰For senior clerics and their fatwas, see Rābiṭa 'Fa-Dhakkir' al-Thaqāfiyya, *Fatāwā al-Fuqahā' wa-l-Marāji' fi-l-Sha'a'ir al-Husayniyya* (Beirut: Mu'assat al-Fikr al-Islāmi, 2016), 11–79; *Ma'ātim al-Damm*, 172–91.

⁴¹Quoted in Haydari, *Trājiḍiyya Karbalā'*, 452–3.

⁴²For a similar argument, see also al-Hilli, *Al-Sha'a'ir al-Husayniyya*, 74–96.

⁴³Haydari, *Trājiḍiyya Karbalā'*, 116–7.

attributed to him, he did not prevent their performance in Najaf during his lifetime.⁴⁴ The popularity of these rituals and the demotic forces supporting them coming from lay Shiis and other clerics made any attempt to ban them pointless.⁴⁵ This was also recognized by another leading *marja' al-taqlid*, 'Abd al-Karim Ha'eri (1859–1937), founder of the modern Shii seminary institutions in Qom, who confirmed the permissibility of *taṭbīr* and the futility of banning it.⁴⁶ Equally, al-Na'ini does not provide an unconditional endorsement of self-flagellation and sets certain parameters within which it is permissible. These parameters have been used by later scholars to argue for its prohibition.

Apart from the impact of Islamic modernism on these legal debates around *taṭbīr*, these contestations reflect wider geopolitical and sectarian developments. The period was marked by the emergence of two forces threatening traditional Shii patterns of authority, doctrine and practice. The rise of the Wahhabism with the establishment of the Saudi kingdom in 1925 gave a virulent anti-Shii movement political momentum, which representatives of Islamic modernism like Rashid Rida viewed with sympathies.⁴⁷ In Iran, its new ruler, Reza Shah Pahlavi (1878–1944), who was crowned in 1925, implemented a radical secularization policy that included banning the public performance of rituals during 'Āshūrā' to minimize their mobilizing force and the influence of religious authorities.⁴⁸ Reformist activists like Muhsin al-Amin responded to these challenges by trying to minimize the spectacular and emotional character of Shii rituals and by turning them into occasions for ethical self-cultivation. Figures opposing his stance felt motivated by the secularization policies of the new Pahlavi dynasty in Iran and the strident anti-Shii sectarianism of the Wahhabi movement to espouse the particular character of Shii ritual practices more explicitly.⁴⁹

Debates on *taṭbīr* and the rise of Islamist politics after World War II

The majority of senior clerics in the aftermath of the debate on the permissibility of *taṭbīr* in the 1920s and 30s followed the argumentation and ruling of al-Na'ini often explicitly referring to the precedent he has set with his fatwa. Most senior clerics in both major seminary cities of Qom in Iran and Najaf in Iraq declared the practice along with other rituals permissible, in a number of cases even recommended (*mustahabb*).⁵⁰ Muhsin al-Hakim (1889–1970), al-Isfahani's successor as most senior cleric in Najaf, cited the precedent set by al-Na'ini concluding in 1948 that 'what our greatest teacher [al-Na'ini] has ruled in absolute conciseness and utmost clarity is sufficiently clear and does not require supporting it by issuing another fatwa in agreement with it'.⁵¹ The statement by al-Hakim is carefully worded. First, he does not see the need to issue another fatwa on this matter considering it sufficiently resolved by al-Na'ini. Secondly, he does not explicitly endorse

⁴⁴This is corroborated by one of al-Isfahani's student, Muhammad Rida Tabasi al-Najafi. See Mu'tamadi, *'Azādāri-yi Sunnatī-yi Shī'iyān*, vol. 7, 426.

⁴⁵Haydari, *Trājidiyya Karbalā'*, 445–6.

⁴⁶Mu'tamadi, *'Azādāri-yi Sunnatī-yi Shī'iyān*, vol. 7, 392–3; Rābīta, *Fatāwā al-Fuqahā'*, 82–3.

⁴⁷Muhammad Rashid Rida, *Al-Wahhābiyyūn wa-l-Hijāz* (Cairo: al-Manār, 2000).

⁴⁸Ende, 'Flagellations of Muḥarram', 34–6.

⁴⁹Mervin, 'Les larmes et le sang des chiites', 2; Yitzhak Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq*, 2nd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 154–6.

⁵⁰For a representative list with facsimiles of handwritten fatwas, see Mu'tamadi, *'Azādāri-yi Sunnatī-yi Shī'iyān*, vol. 7, 392–428.

⁵¹Rābīta, *Fatāwā al-Fuqahā'*, 11; Fasihi, *Commemorating Imam Husein*, 19.

the practice but considers the debate concluded by al-Na'ini's ruling. Al-Hakim tried to balance the various views on *taṭbīr* by his followers and the polemic nature of contestations around it in the aftermath of debates in the 1920 and 30s.

Not all senior clerics with the status of *marja' al-taqlīd* in Najaf were willing to endorse al-Na'ini's fatwa. Muhammad Husayn Kashif al-Ghita' (1877–1953) did not possess the same level of seniority as al-Isfahani, al-Na'ini nor as their successor Muhsin al-Hakim. He was involved in Sunni-Shii dialogue and hence like Muhsin al-Amin disavowed ritual practices that exhibited high emotional intensity, articulated a strong sense of Shii sectarian identity and antagonized Sunni Muslims. As such he also rejected *taṭbīr*.⁵² Other influential figures in the seminary institutions of Najaf at the time of al-Hakim and Kashif al-Ghita' such as Muhammad Rida al-Muzaffar (1904–1964) were equally involved in reformist activities and promoted 'Islamic unity' to overcome sectarian hostility between Sunnis and Shiis.⁵³ Al-Muzaffar was also critical of many rituals performed during 'Āshūrā' and criticized *taṭbīr* in particular.⁵⁴ Criticism of such rituals came from second-tier clerical figures like him who played a central role in reforming traditional Shii educational institutions but had not ascended to the position of supreme source of emulation. While Kashif al-Ghita' joined other reformist clerics banning its practice, al-Hakim's cautious endorsement of al-Na'ini's fatwa seeks to find a balance between the continuous popularity of *taṭbīr* and the reformist trend within the seminary institutions rejecting it.

Criticism of *taṭbīr* also came from figures involved in Islamist mobilization in the 1960s and 1970s. The influential Iraqi cleric and founder of the Shii Islamist Hizb al-Da'wa al-Islamiyya, Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr (1935–1980) expressed sceptical views around the excessive performance of Shii ritual practices and encouraged their refinement more generally. In the memoirs of one of his contemporaries Baqir al-Sadr is quoted as characterizing 'hitting the bodies and letting blood [as] the actions of the general populace (*'awwām al-nās*) and those ignorant among them (*juhālīhim*). None of the '*ulamā'* performs such acts. They are rather devoted to banning and prohibiting it'.⁵⁵ One of the chief ideologues of the Islamic Revolution in Iran and close associate of Khomeini, Morteza Motahhari (1919–1979) attributes the origins of *taṭbīr* to passion rituals performed by Orthodox Christians, which 'has infected Iran'.⁵⁶ In Lebanon, Muhammad Jawad Mughniyya (1904–1979) who was the head of Shii judiciary in the country equally condemned *taṭbīr* and other rituals. In a book written for a Sunni readership, Mughniyya characterizes *taṭbīr* as 'scandalous innovation'⁵⁷ which only few scholars are able or willing to combat because of its popularity. They fear by taking a strong stance against *taṭbīr*, they will lose their popular appeal and source of income.⁵⁸

Despite the clear rejection of *taṭbīr*, by '*ulamā'* involved in reformist activities, intra-faith Sunni-Shii dialogue or Islamist mobilization, al-Hakim's ambivalent stance, which does not contradict his teacher nor explicitly endorses the ritual would become

⁵² Muhammad Husayn Kashif al-Ghita, *Al-Firdaws al-A'lā* (n.p.: uḥūr, 1426H [2005/6]), 58.

⁵³ Muhammad Rida al-Muzaffar, *Al-'Aqā'id al-Imāmiyya* (Qom, 2001/2002 [1951]), 147–52. See also Rainer Brunner, *Islamic Ecumenism in the 20th Century: The Azhar and Shiism between Rapprochement and Restraint* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 125, 213, 369.

⁵⁴ Haydari, *Trājidiyya Karbalā'*, 447.

⁵⁵ Muhammad al-Tijani, *Kull al-Ḥulūl 'inda Āl al-Rasūl*, 2nd ed. (Beirut: al-Mujtabā, 1996), 150. If al-Tijani's attribution to Baqir al-Sadr is correct, he quotes verbatim Muhsin al-Amin. See al-Amin, *Risālat al-Tanzīh*, 21.

⁵⁶ Morteza Motahhari, *Jādhība wa-Dāf'a-yi 'Alī* (Tehran: Nasīm-i Muṭahhar, 1971), 147.

⁵⁷ Muhammad Jawad Mughniyya, *Al-Shi'a fi al-Mizān* (Beirut: Dār al-Shurūq, n.d.), p. 14.

⁵⁸ See also Haydari, *Trājidiyya Karbalā'*, 446.

characteristic for the attitude the senior clerical leadership in Najaf would take towards *taṭbīr*. The ambition to provide the most widely followed senior cleric in the Shii world requires a certain amount of discursive ambiguity in order not to antagonize either side: those rejecting *taṭbīr* and those supporting its performance. Al-Hakim's successor al-Khoie cites the precedent ruling by al-Na'ini and concludes that 'there is nothing bad in performing it'.⁵⁹ For al-Khoie, *taṭbīr* is permissible as there is no textual evidence rejecting it, but 'there is no way to arrive at a ruling that performing it is recommended'.⁶⁰ Al-Khoie also refers to the reputational implications of *taṭbīr* in his fatwas adding it as another condition delimiting and potentially banning its practice. For al-Khoie, *taṭbīr* becomes impermissible when 'it causes degradation and insult'⁶¹ by which he means 'whatever leads by necessity to the humiliation and abasement of this school of thought (*madhhab*) in the light of prevailing custom (*'urf sā'id*)'.⁶² By introducing the criterion of reputation and making it dependent on the specific context in which Shiis live al-Khoie adds a new condition and responds to concerns raised by opponents of *taṭbīr*. However, his condition remains vague as 'prevailing custom' is not further defined. For Shii Muslims living in the West or in a multi-religious society like Lebanon, the public performance of *taṭbīr* could be harmful to the reputation of Twelver Shiism or relations with Sunni Muslims. In addition, one could argue in line with modernist Shii clerical reformers that practices like blood-letting self-flagellation do not conform to the value-system of the modern world more generally and should therefore not be performed. However, al-Khoie leaves this conclusion to his followers and does not provide any further specification, allowing for opponents and supporters of the practice to draw their own conclusions from his fatwas.

The Islamic Revolution of 1979 not only changed the political landscape of Iran and the wider Middle East and led to a global political mobilization of Shii communities, it also challenged traditional patterns of Shii clerical authority by fusing clerical and political authority in the state with the concept of *wilāyat al-faqīh* (guardianship of the jurisconsult).⁶³ According to this theory the supreme source of emulation is not only the ultimate source of religio-legal guidance but also the head of an Islamic state. Once he emerged as leader of the Islamic Revolution, Khomeini assumed this position when the new constitution of the Islamic Republic was implemented in 1979. The Islamic Revolution also led to a wider mobilization across sectarian boundaries including Sunnis and Shiis. In efforts to export the revolution, propagandists invoked its pan-Islamic appeal as successful Islamic movement in overthrowing a Western-backed, secular autocratic ruler. This aspiration for a leadership role of Iran in the wider Muslim world also required reconsidering the various rituals commemorating the martyrdom of

⁵⁹ Abu al-Qasim al-Khoie, 'Fatāwā al-Sayyid al-Khū'ī: Masā'il Mutanawwi'a 2, Su'āl 32', <https://alseraj.net/17519/> (accessed September 17, 2021).

⁶⁰ Ibid., 'Su'āl 33', <https://alseraj.net/17519/> (accessed September 17, 2021).

⁶¹ 'Fatāwā al-Sayyid al-Khū'ī: Masā'il Mutanawwi'a 8, Su'āl 211', <https://alseraj.net/17525/> (accessed September 17, 2021).

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ On this concept, see Norman Calder, 'Accommodation and Revolution in Imami Shi'i Jurisprudence: Khumayni and the Classical Tradition', *Middle Eastern Studies* 18 (1982): 3–20; and Hamid Enayat, 'Iran: Khumayni's Concept of the "Guardianship of the Jurisconsult"', in *Islam in the Political Process* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 160–80.

Husayn. This view is, for example, expressed by the Iranian *marja' al-taqlid* Mohammad Fazel Lankarani (1931–2007). While his earlier fatwas declared its performance permissible,⁶⁴ after the Islamic Revolution he arrived at a different assessment:

Consider the development that can be found in relation to Islam and Shiism after the victory of the Islamic Revolution in Iran in most parts of the world: Islamic Iran has been recognised as the pivot of the world of Islam (*umm al-qurrā-yi⁶⁵ jahān-i islām*), and the actions and conduct of the people of Iran have become the role-model and exemplar of Islam. Therefore, it is necessary that grieving and mourning for the Master of Martyrs Abu 'Abdallah Husayn is done in a manner to strengthen the connection and the loyalty to him and to his sacred purpose. It is evident, based on these conditions, that blood-letting self-flagellation (*qama-zadan*) not only plays no such a role but will also have a negative result, as it is devoid of acceptance and does not enable understanding in the eyes of our opponents in any way. Therefore, it is necessary for Shiis, loyal to the school of Imam Husayn, to abstain from it.⁶⁶

The leader of the Islamic Revolution Khomeini equally changed his views on *taṭbīr*. In his youth, he referred in one of his poems to Zaynab hitting her head in the saddle and the intense bleeding it caused.⁶⁷ However, the religious dynamics of the Islamic Revolution and the aspiration to assume both a religious and political leadership in the Muslim world made it necessary to reform Shii ritual practices that might stoke sectarian tensions. In fatwas issued in 1979, Khomeini recognizes the popularity of the ritual and also falls short of prohibiting it: 'When it does not lead to harm (*ḍarar*), it is not banned (*mānī' nadārad*)'.⁶⁸ However, as he states in another fatwa 'in this time and in the current conditions and circumstances, one should abstain from performing blood-letting self-flagellation (*qama-zadan*)'.⁶⁹ Khomeini reiterates the mainstream ruling by the most senior clerics but also issues a recommendation not to perform it out of political exigencies.⁷⁰

⁶⁴Mustafa Fasihi, *Commemorating the Martyrdom of Imam Husein (as): Innovation or Tradition?* (Dresden, n.d.), 24.

⁶⁵*Umm al-qurrā* (lit. 'mother of dwellings') is one of the designations for Mecca. Lankarani implies here that Iran has become the new symbolic centre, the 'new Mecca', of the Muslim world after the Islamic Revolution.

⁶⁶Mohammad Fazel Lankarani, *Jāmi' al-Masā'il*, vol. 1 (Qom: Amīr, 1383 HS [2004/5]), 582.

⁶⁷Khomeini makes this reference in a poem that critiques the introductory couplets of Rumi's *Mathnawī*:

Do not listen to the reed flute as it tells a story, listen to the heart as it narrates a tradition

...

When I see the reed flute I remember Nineveh, while the heart becomes sorrowful in the memory of Karbala
From the reed flute's oppression my heart catches fire, if only the reed flute were to be completely subsumed by fire
On top of the reed flute Husayn's head full of blood went, while under the reed flute was Zaynab in misery and shame

The reed flute drew blood from Husayn's throat, while under the reed flute was Zaynab devastated

She saw the top of the reed flute and then her head worshipped the truth, she hit her head at a saddle and broke her forehead

...

Khabarguzārī-yi Rasmī-yi Hawza, 'Shi'r Mawlawī dar Būta-yi Naqd-i Imam Khumaynī', <https://www.hawzahnews.com/news/343846/%D8%B4%D8%B9%D8%B1-%D9%85%D9%88%D9%84%D9%88%DB%8C-%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D8%A8%D9%88%D8%AA%D9%87-%D9%86%D9%82%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%85-%D8%AE%D9%85%DB%8C%D9%86%DB%8C-%D8%B1%D9%87> (accessed September 24, 2021).

⁶⁸Ruhollah Khomeini, *Istiftā'āt-i Imām Khumaynī*, vol. 10 (Tehran: Mu'assasa-yi Tanzīm wa-Nashr-i Āthār-i Imām Khumaynī, 1392 HS [2013/4]), 655.

⁶⁹Ibid., 654.

⁷⁰Khomeini already expressed critical views of excessive commemorative practices in 1944. See Ruhollah Khomeini, *Kashf al-Asrār* (n.p. [1944]), 173–4.

Khamenei's prohibition in 1994 and its impact

The 1994 fatwa on *taṭbīr* of the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic Khamenei became a turning point in contestations around *taṭbīr*, further politicizing debates around this ritual. Khamenei reiterates in this fatwa the arguments of previous scholars in relation to *taṭbīr* that 'any action that causes harm (*ḍarar*) or leads to a degradation of the religion (*dīn*) and the school of thought (*madhhab*) is prohibited (*ḥarām*)'.⁷¹ This argumentation mirrors the precedents set by al-Na'ini and al-Khoie but rewords it to imply a prohibition. While, for previous scholars, permission was given to *taṭbīr* if it does not harm a person or damages the reputation of Twelver Shiism, Khamenei articulates these conditions in categorical terms: any action that potentially does so, including *taṭbīr*, is prohibited by default.

Khamenei's second fatwa which explicitly outlaws *taṭbīr* engages in three arguments without containing any reference to harm.⁷² First, blood-letting self-flagellation is not recognized customarily as a sign of grief and mourning, while other rituals performed during 'Āshūrā' such as crying and chest-beating are. Secondly, the practice lacks a scriptural precedent: the Imams did not perform it and existing traditions supporting this practice are not sufficiently strong to declare it permissible. Khamenei adopts the notion articulated by Muhsin al-Amin that *taṭbīr* constitute an innovation (*bid'a*). Khamenei implies this in his fatwa without brandishing this ritual as innovation explicitly. The third and final argument refers to the reputational damage acknowledging that this is time and context dependent. Perhaps in the past, performing *taṭbīr* did not harm the reputation of Twelver Shiism, but 'in the present times',⁷³ it does so and will be exploited by opponents of Shiism and Islam in general. By implication, Khamenei like Lankarani and Kashif al-Ghita' acknowledges that its prohibition is grounded to a significant extent on political considerations.⁷⁴

The politics behind Khamenei's fatwas is also apparent in its timing. In 1994, Khamenei sought to become the most widely followed *marja' al-taqlīd* in the Shii world trying to combine his political clout as Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic and scholarly credentials in order to make a claim to global clerical pre-eminence. His appointment as Supreme Leader of Iran after Khomeini's death in 1989 contravened the initial conception of the position and required a constitutional change: initially, the supreme leader had to be a *marja' al-taqlīd*. In recognition that finding suitable candidates for this political position who possessed the required scholarly credentials would be difficult, this precondition was removed from the constitution in 1989 paving the way for Khamenei's appointment who at that time was a middle-ranking scholar (*ḥujjat al-islām*). In 1994, the time appeared opportune to make a claim to global clerical pre-eminence. Al-Khoie had died in 1992, and 'Abd al-A'la Sabziwari (1910–1993) briefly succeeded him as head of the seminaries in Najaf before his demise. The vacuum of clerical leadership left after his death led to a competition between different senior clerics in Najaf and Qom for global pre-eminence. Al-Sistani emerged as new head of the seminaries in Najaf and by the mid-

⁷¹Ali Khamenei, 'Istiftā'āt: Marāsim-i 'Azādāri, Su'āl 1460', <https://farsi.khamenei.ir/treatise-content?id=131#1460> (accessed September 19, 2021).

⁷²Ibid., 'Su'āl 1461', <https://farsi.khamenei.ir/treatise-content?id=131#1461> (accessed September 19, 2021).

⁷³Ibid.

⁷⁴See also 'Ali Aqanuri, 'Bar-Rasī wa-Naqd-i Didgāh-hā-yi 'Ālimān-i Shī'i dar Bāb-i Laṭam wa-Qama-Zanī, *Shī'a Pazūhī* 2 (2015/6): 41–7.

1990s also succeeded al-Khoie as most widely-followed senior cleric in the world.⁷⁵ It was in this period, between 1993 and 1995, that efforts were made to place Khamenei as the pre-eminent senior cleric in the Shii world.⁷⁶ These efforts ultimately failed: while Khamenei is now considered a *marja' al-taqlid* his scholarly authority is not sufficiently widely recognized by the clerical establishments in both Qom and Najaf to give him the pre-eminence figures like al-Khoie or al-Sistani have enjoyed.

Khamenei's fatwas to outlaw *taṭbīr* were part of his bid to find followers among opponents of this practice. While Khamenei has been one of the few *marāji' al-taqlid* after al-Isfahani and Kashif al-Ghita' who declared it prohibited, his fatwas did not advance his claims to scholarly pre-eminence and perhaps even harmed them given the continuous popularity of the practice. However, as Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran his political office allowed him to amplify his scholarly credentials. It equally provided him with the opportunity to enforce the prohibition which has been done in Iran since his fatwa.⁷⁷ More significantly, it further politicized debates around *taṭbīr* and demarcated the cleavages between supporters and opponents more explicitly. A cleric's stance towards this practice was seen as the litmus test for their loyalty to the Iranian regime and its leader, as contradicting his fatwas could be interpreted as an attempt to undermine Khamenei's scholarly standing and his position as Supreme Leader.

The politicized nature of the debate has required al-Sistani to strike a delicate balance between different expectations. In 1995, he considered performing various rituals during 'Āshūrā'—without mentioning *taṭbīr* explicitly—as 'recommended (*mustahabb*)'⁷⁸—in contradistinction to his teacher al-Khoie who just viewed them permissible. Echoing al-Nā'ini, al-Sistani equally confirmed in 2008 that 'whatever does not cause multiple harm (*ḍarar*) to the body, there is no problem in performing it'.⁷⁹ However, given the increasing contestations around this practice following Khamenei's fatwa, al-Sistani has refrained from issuing any fatwas on *taṭbīr*. In 2010, he simply suggested that on this issue Shiis should follow the specific rulings of their respective source of emulation.⁸⁰ Representatives of his office have more recently characterized Sistani's stance towards *taṭbīr* as 'neutral' neither allowing nor prohibiting it. Given the antagonism between supporters and opponents of *taṭbīr* that have been further exacerbated by Khamenei's intervention, al-Sistani refuses to be drawn into these debates.⁸¹ As late as 2016 representatives from his office made it clear that he will not rule on this issue.⁸²

This neutral stance is partially motivated to ensure his global following: his earlier ambivalent statements on *taṭbīr* can be read by his followers as either endorsing or banning it. A clear stance in favour or against it potentially antagonizes significant constituencies among his followers on either side of the debate. His stance of ambiguity

⁷⁵Sajjad Rizvi, 'The Making of a *Marja'*: Sistani and Shi'i Religious Authority in the Contemporary Age', *Sociology of Islam* 6 (2018): 165–89.

⁷⁶Saskia Gieling, 'The *marja'iyā* in Iran and the Nomination of Khamenei in December 1994', *Middle Eastern Studies* 33 (1997): 777–87.

⁷⁷Self-flagellation was performed the last time in public in Qom in 1993. See Mu'tamadi, '*Azādāri-yi Sunnatī*', vol. 2, 91–5.

⁷⁸Mu'tamadi, '*Azādāri-yi Sunnatī-yi Shi'iyān*', vol. 7, 400.

⁷⁹*Ma'ātim al-Damm*, 191.

⁸⁰Fasihi, *Commemorating Imam Husein*, 17.

⁸¹For his fatwa of 2013, see Rābita, *Fatāwā al-Fuqahā'*, 128. See also Munir Khabbaz, 'Ākhir Maqāl Tahaddathu fihī Samāhat al-Sayyid 'an al-Tatbīr', <https://www.almoneer.org/?act=art&id=36> (accessed September 20, 2021).

⁸²Ali Muhsin Radi, 'Al-Sayyid al-Sistani (Dāma illahū) al-Wārif wa-Qadiyyat al-Tatbīr', Buratha News Agency, October 16, 2016, <http://burathanews.com/arabic/islamic/303,070> (accessed September 20, 2021).

and neutrality is also the result of political considerations. While he does not adhere to the ideological doctrine of the Islamic Republic, he and his office are equally eager not to appear antagonistic to the political establishment of Iran. Given the symbolic value the issue of *taṭbīr* has assumed as a marker of one's loyalty of Khamenei's political and clerical leadership, issuing any fatwa on this issue will be potentially interpreted as taking side either in favour or against the Iranian regime. Remaining neutral on the issue of *taṭbīr* also articulates a neutral stance towards the Islamic Republic, its current political leadership and ideological foundations.

Other scholars broadly aligned to Iran have embraced Khamenei's verdict. The Lebanon-based Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah (1935–2010) was a prominent senior cleric most vocal in his opposition to *taṭbīr*. Being a student of Muhsin al-Hakim and given the prestige of the seminaries in Najaf, he uses the precedent set by al-Khoie to support his views on *taṭbīr*. Equally, given the influence of Hizbollah among Shii communities in Lebanon and their allegiance to Khomeini and Khamenei, Fadlallah also refers to their judgements on blood-letting self-flagellation.⁸³ In order to support a prohibition, Fadlallah in his legal argument revisits the issue of harm and suggests that there are two viewpoints on this question among prominent Shii clerics. Scholars like al-Na'ini, Muhsin al-Hakim and al-Khoie only prohibit harm or self-harm when it leads to death. The other view to which Fadlallah subscribes and dates back to the prominent Shii cleric Morteza Ansari (1781–1864) prohibits any form of harm unless it brings a specific benefit (*maṣlahah*), such as being wounded when engaged in *jihād*.⁸⁴ The latter view considers deliberately causing self-harm as 'oppression of the self (*ẓulm al-nafs*)'⁸⁵ and therefore impermissible. Fadlallah considers both viewpoints as a legal differences among modern Shii scholars and respects their dissenting views given their prominence. However, he uses this legal difference to undermine the permission of *taṭbīr* by other scholars. For him, their fatwas allowing *taṭbīr* approach this issue 'in its specific angle (*fī-dā'iratihā al-dhātīyya*)'⁸⁶ as a limited legal problem: is harm prohibited *per se* or only when it causes death? In this sense, they were disinterested in the wider repercussions of their permissions of *taṭbīr* given the specific legal argument they pursued.

In this respect, the reputational damage *taṭbīr* causes is equally picked up as a crucial line of argumentation by Fadlallah. He praises al-Khoie in particular for being the first *marja' al-taqlīd* making the performance of *taṭbīr* conditional on not bringing Shiism into disrepute⁸⁷ and attributes Khamenei's prohibition to his particular concern for the global standing of Shiis.⁸⁸ For Fadlallah as for other scholars *taṭbīr* is 'a manifestation of backwardness (*mazhar al-takhalluf*)'⁸⁹ and hence unsuitable in the modern age to communicate the message of Husayn and of his martyrdom in Karbala. Mirroring

⁸³Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah, 'Istiftā'āt: "Āshūrā" wa-l-Umūr al-Muta'allīqa', <http://arabic.bayynat.org/ListingFAQ2.aspx?cid=119&Language=1> (accessed September 19, 2021).

⁸⁴The Bahraini pro-*taṭbīr* scholar Muhammad al-Sanad (b. 1961) develops a completely different line of argumentation suggesting that, on the contrary, self-flagellation only re-enacts Husayn's suffering if it causes harm. See Muhammad al-Sanad, *Ramziyyat al-Damm fi al-Sha'ā'ir al-Ḥusayniyya*, vol. 4 (Tehran: Nashr-i Ṣādiq, 2018), 347–51.

⁸⁵Ja'far al-Shakhuri, 'Al-Taṭbīr wa- arb al- uhūr bi-l-Salāsīl: Munāqisha Fiqhiyya', September 15, 2018, <http://arabic.bayynat.org/ArticlePage.aspx?id=27282> (accessed September 17, 2021).

⁸⁶Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah, "Ādāt Tasī'u ilā "Āshūrā" al-Ḥusayn' (video), <http://arabic.bayynat.org/VideoPageM.aspx?id=19,337> (accessed September 19, 2021).

⁸⁷Ibid.

⁸⁸Al-Shakhuri, "Al-Taṭbīr'.

⁸⁹Ibid.

concerns of modernist reformers like Muhsin al-Amin, Fadlallah encourages forms of remembering ‘Āshūrā’ that present it as ‘a civilised, Islamic, humanistic movement (*ḥaraka ḥadāriyya, islāmiyya, insāniyya*)’⁹⁰ and promote its socio-moral and political message. Husayn made a stance against oppression and tyranny and ‘fought for the sake of justice and truth’.⁹¹ Hitting one’s head and letting blood is ‘meaningless (*bi-lā-ma’nā*)’⁹² in perpetuating the political message of Husayn’s uprising: those who fight against Israel or other imperialist powers are more faithful to his martyrdom. They do not spill blood in vain but to withstand oppression and tyranny and their contemporary manifestations in Zionism and imperialism.⁹³ Such a reading and commemoration of the socio-moral and political message of ‘Āshūrā’ equally transcends sectarian boundaries and turns Husayn into ‘a symbol for Islamic unity (*ramz li-l-waḥda al-islāmiyya*)’.⁹⁴

Fadlallah opposed *taṭbīr* as an independent clerical figure outside of the clerical establishment in Najaf and without the political power Khamenei holds as Supreme Leader of Iran. A number of factors account for his stance. The influence of the Lebanese reformist school from Muhsin al-Amin to Mughniyya is evident and one of the antecedents Fadlallah refers to in his argumentation against it. Like his predecessors, for Fadlallah, the multi-sectarian context of Lebanon requires the public assertion of Shii identity that does not antagonize Sunni Muslims but facilitates rapprochement with them. Another factor is the sway Iranian-backed Hizbollah holds over large segments of the Lebanese Shii population. Members of Hizbollah have been most active in preventing the performance of *taṭbīr* following Khamenei’s fatwa.⁹⁵ Fadlallah, as the only Lebanon-based *marja’ al-taqlīd*, could not alienate the stance of a movement which possesses significant power in the country. Another reason lies in the specific characteristics of Fadlallah’s primary constituency: his followers mostly came from middle- and upper-class Lebanese Shiis who would find rituals like *taṭbīr* unsuitable in any case and from minority communities in the West who share a particular concern for the reputational integrity of Shiism and the damage the global broadcasting of *taṭbīr* might cause.

Opposition to Khamenei’s Fatwa

Other senior clerics both in Iran and Iraq lend unequivocal support to the practice of *taṭbīr*, considering it ‘recommended’. It is not a coincidence that these scholars also entertain a distant if not antagonistic relationship to the Islamic Republic and its clerical and political establishment such as the centenarian Iranian *marja’ al-taqlīd* Vahid Khorasani (b. 1921). For him, the precedents set by al-Na’ini and Ha’eri are still the main reference points—as also confirmed by Mushin al-Hakim.⁹⁶ In a two-volume collection of

⁹⁰Fadlallah, “Ādāt Tasi’u ilā “Āshūrā” al-Ḥusayn’.

⁹¹Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah, ‘Tatwir Asālib Iḥyā’ Dhikrā ‘Āshūrā’, November 10, 2012, <http://arabic.bayynat.org/ArticlePage.aspx?id=5901> (accessed September 19, 2021).

⁹²Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah, “‘Āshūrā” bayna-l-Jihād wa-l-Taṭbīr’ (video), <http://arabic.bayynat.org/VideoPage.aspx?id=14,286> (accessed September 19, 2021).

⁹³Fadlallah, “Ādāt Tasi’u ilā “Āshūrā” al-Ḥusayn’.

⁹⁴Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah, ‘Al-Imām al-Ḥusayn: Risāla Shāmila wa-Ramz li-l-Waḥda’, <http://arabic.bayynat.org/ArticlePage.aspx?id=7984> (accessed September 19, 2021).

⁹⁵Augustus Richard Norton, ‘Ritual, Blood, and Shiite Identity: Ashura in Nabatiyya, Lebanon’, *TDR* 49 (2005), 149.

⁹⁶Vahid Khorasani, *Misbāḥ al-Hudā*, vol. 1 (Iqom?), n.d., 246. See also Mu’tamadi, ‘Azādāri-yi Sunnatī-yi Shī’iyyān, vol. 7, 397.

his lectures, given from 1995 onwards at the Great Mosque in Qom, adjacent to the shrine of Fatima Ma'sumeh,⁹⁷ Khorasani discusses various aspects around the significance of the martyrdom of Husayn. He highlights the moral message of the events around Karbala and also confirms their wider socio-political significance. Husayn's uprising instigated 'the reform of this community (*islāh-i in ummat*)'⁹⁸ and by making a stand against tyranny, 'the master of martyrs radically changed the world and showed humanity a model of political leadership (*rāh-i siyāsat-i mudun*)'.⁹⁹

Khorasani equally defends the centrality of various rituals performed during 'Āshūrā' as fulfilling a salvific function for the individual believer: Husayn is 'the arc of salvation' and 'the gate and intermediary between humanity and God'.¹⁰⁰ In contradistinction to modernist clerics such as Muhsin al-Amin and Khamenei's fatwas who present these rituals as innovations, Khorasani emphasizes how they are embedded in the scriptural sources of Islam, in particular traditions attributed to the Shii Imams, and are therefore an acceptable and praiseworthy religious tradition (*sunnat*).¹⁰¹ He directs clear criticism at those propagating more sober forms of performing various 'Āshūrā' rituals:

Woe to those people who cause commotion around these rituals! Be alert! People of Iran! Know that the smallest word that weakens the rituals to commemorate Husayn breaks the backbone of the Seal of Prophets! This mourning, this chest-beating (*sīna-zanī*), this hitting oneself with a chains (*sanjīr-zanī*) must be preserved at all cost . . . These illiterate people (*bī-sawād-hā*) make a mistake, saying: 'Be quiet when crying . . . ' Who is a jurisconsult (*faqīh*)? They pretend to be jurisconsults! Na'ini is a jurisconsult! Borujerdi is a jurisconsult! Ha'eri is a jurisconsults! They are jurisconsults who say: 'Hit your chest, hit yourself with chains. Let blood flow as well, let it flow!'¹⁰²

While Khorasani does not mention the ritual of blood-letting self-flagellation (*qama-zanī*) explicitly, his final exclamation provides an implicit endorsement of this ritual. In another lecture, he also refers to traditions describing how it rained blood following Husayn's murder¹⁰³—a tradition important to justify the spilling of blood through self-flagellation on the day of 'Āshūrā'. Khorasani also praises in one lecture Mulla Aqa Darbandi (d. 1869/70) who was known in Qajar Iran for his emotionalized memorial lectures on 'Āshūrā' and is considered to be one of the figures who popularized self-flagellation in Iran.¹⁰⁴

While Khorasani is circumspect in his endorsement of *tatbīr*, Muhammad Sadeq Rohani (b. 1926) is more explicit. Rohani has remained a staunch critic of the political regime in the Islamic Republic and was one of the first senior clerics placed under house arrest because of his anti-regime stance. He provides unequivocal support for rituals such as *tatbīr* during 'Āshūrā': 'it is among actions that are recommended (*min al-mustahabbāt*)'¹⁰⁵ and 'among

⁹⁷Khorasani, *Miṣbāḥ al-Hudā*, vol. 1, 21.

⁹⁸Vahid Khorasani, *Miṣbāḥ al-Hudā*, vol. 2 ([Qom?], n.d.), 34.

⁹⁹*Ibid.*, 432.

¹⁰⁰*Ibid.*, 480.

¹⁰¹*Ibid.*, 405–6.

¹⁰²Khorasani, *Miṣbāḥ al-Hudā*, vol. 1, 243.

¹⁰³*Ibid.*, 284.

¹⁰⁴Khorasani, *Miṣbāḥ al-Hudā*, vol. 2, 103–5. On Darbandi and his role in popularising self-flagellation in Iran, see Muhsin Husam Zahiri, 'Ta'rikh al-Ma'ātim al-Husayniyya fi al-'Asr al-Qājārī', in *Jadal wa-Mawāqif*, 72–4.

¹⁰⁵Sadeq Rohani, 'Al-Istiftā'āt al-'Aqā'idīyya, Masā'il 'an "Āshūrā"', <http://www.rohani.ir/ar/ideat/7875/%d8%b9%d9%86-%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%aa%d8%b7%d8%a8%d9%8a%d8%b1-%d9%81%d9%8a-%d8%b9%d8%a7%d8%b4%d9%88%d8%b1%d8%a7>— (accessed September 19, 2021).

the best acts of worship (*'ibādāt*) and rituals commemorating Husayn, which are central to the survival of Islam (*baqā' al-Islām*).¹⁰⁶ Rohani elevates this practice to an act of worship (*'ibāda*) such as the ritual daily prayer or fasting during the month of Ramadan. In addition, it is 'one of the doors to the arc of salvation'¹⁰⁷ and hence plays a crucial salvific function in concert with another rituals performed on 'Āshūrā'. While the Imams did not perform this ritual themselves, 'they gave the permission to shed blood in mourning for Imam Husayn'.¹⁰⁸ However, given the significance of this ritual, 'it does not require a special tradition [in its support]'.¹⁰⁹

Rohani qualifies reservations around the potential health risks of performing *taṭbīr*. On the contrary, controlled blood-letting contains health benefits as old and contaminated blood is released allowing the body to produce fresh blood.¹¹⁰ The reputational argument is equally rejected by him because of the centrality of *taṭbīr* in ensuring the continuity of Islam.¹¹¹ *Taṭbīr* does not harm the reputation of Islam (*sum'at al-Islām*), but on the contrary, 'enjoins affection for Shiism among its opponents, as they will view it with appreciation and respect'.¹¹² In response to another enquirer who points out how opponents of Twelver Shiism use the ritual and the global dissemination of its performance to tarnish its image, Rohani argues that such attacks should not impinge on which rituals Shiis perform and how to perform them: the opposition to or dislike of non-Muslims for the headscarf (*hijāb*), for example, does not change its legal requirement for Muslim women.¹¹³

¹⁰⁶Sadeq Rohani, 'Al-Istiftā'āt al-Shar'iyya, al-Sha'ā'ir al-Husayniyya', <http://www.rohani.ir/ar/idetail/5344/%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%aa%d8%b7%d8%a8%d9%8a%d8%b1-%d8%ba%d9%8a%d8%b1-%d8%a7%d9%84%d9%85%d9%88%d8%ac%d8%a8-%d9%84%d9%87%d9%84%d8%a7%da%a9%d8%a9-%d8%a7%d9%84%d9%86%d9%81%d8%b3%d9%87-%d8%ac%d8%a7-%d8%b2>—— (accessed September 19, 2021).

¹⁰⁷Sadeq Rohani, 'Al-Istiftā'āt al-Shar'iyya, al-Sha'ā'ir al-Husayniyya', <http://www.rohani.ir/ar/idetail/5214/%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%aa%d8%b7%d8%a8%d9%8a%d8%b1-%d9%88%d8%b3%d9%8a%d9%84%d8%a9-%d9%85%d9%86-%d8%a7%d9%84%d9%88%d8%b3%d8%a7-%d9%84-%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%ad%d8%b3%d9%8a%d9%86%d9%8a%d8%a9>—— (accessed September 19, 2021).

¹⁰⁸Sadeq Rohani, 'Al-Istiftā'āt al-Shar'iyya, al-Sha'ā'ir al-Husayniyya', <http://www.rohani.ir/ar/idetail/5334/%d9%87%d9%84-%d9%83%d8%a7%d9%86-%d8%a7-%d9%85%d8%aa%d9%86%d8%a7-%d9%8a%d9%85%d8%a7%d8%b1%d8%b3%d9%88%d9%86-%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%aa%d8%b7%d8%a8%d9%8a%d8%b1>—— (accessed September 19, 2021).

¹⁰⁹Sadeq Rohani, 'Al-Istiftā'āt al-Shar'iyya, al-Sha'ā'ir al-Husayniyya', <http://www.rohani.ir/ar/idetail/5291/%d9%87%d9%84-%d8%b1%d9%88%d8%a7%d9%8a%d8%a9-%d8%a8%d9%86%d9%8a-%d8%b3%d8%af-%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%b0%d9%8a%d9%86-%d8%ae%d8%b1%d8%ac%d9%88%d8%a7-%d9%83-%d9%88%d9%84-%d9%85%d9%88%d9%83%d8%a8-%d9%84%d9%84%d8%aa%d8%b7%d8%a8%d9%8a%d8%b1-%d9%85%d9%84%d8%b9%d8%aa> (accessed September 19, 2021). For a similar argument, see also al-Muzaffar, *Nusrat al-Mazlūm*, 75.

¹¹⁰Sadeq Rohani, 'Al-Istiftā'āt al-Shar'iyya, al-Sha'ā'ir al-Husayniyya', <http://www.rohani.ir/ar/idetail/5274/%d8%b9%d9%86-%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%aa%d8%b7%d8%a8%d9%8a%d8%b1-%d9%88-%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%b1%d9%88%d8%a7%d9%8a%d8%a9-%d9%86-%d8%b2%d9%8a%d9%86%d8%a8-%d8%b9%d9%84%d9%8a%d9%87%d8%a7-%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%b3%d9%84%d8%a7%d9%85-%d8%b6%d8%b1%d8%a8%d8%aa-%d8%b1> (accessed September 19, 2021).

¹¹¹Sadeq Rohani, 'Al-Istiftā'āt al-Shar'iyya, al-Sha'ā'ir al-Husayniyya', [http://www.rohani.ir/ar/idetail/5319/%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%aa%d8%b7%d8%a8%d9%8a%d8%b1-%d9%85%d9%86-%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%b4%d8%b9%d8%a7-%d8%b1-%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%ad%d8%b3%d9%8a%d9%86%d9%8a%d8%a9-%d8%a7%d9%84%d9%8a%d9%88%d8%aa%d8%a7-%d9%84%d8%a8%d8%a7-%d9%84%d8%a8%d9%82%d8%a7-%d8%a7">http://www.rohani.ir/ar/idetail/5319/%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%aa%d8%b7%d8%a8%d9%8a%d8%b1-%d9%85%d9%86-%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%b4%d8%b9%d8%a7-%d8%b1-%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%ad%d8%b3%d9%8a%d9%86%d9%8a%d8%a9-%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%aa%d8%b7%d8%a8%d9%8a%d8%b1-%d9%88-%d8%b6%d8%b1%d8%a8-%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%ac%d8%b3%d8%af-%d8%a8%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%b2%d9%86%d8%ac%d9%8a%d9%84-%d9%85%d9%86-%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%b4%d8%b9%d8%a7-%d8%b1-%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%ad%d8%b3%d9%8a%d9%86%d9%8a-%d8%a9-](http://www.rohani.ir/ar/idetail/5319/%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%aa%d8%b7%d8%a8%d9%8a%d8%b1-%d9%85%d9%86-%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%b4%d8%b9%d8%a7-%d8%b1-%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%ad%d8%b3%d9%8a%d9%86%d9%8a%d8%a9-%d8%a7%d9%84%d9%8a%d9%88%d8%aa%d8%a7-%d9%84%d8%a8%d8%a7-%d9%84%d8%a8%d9%82%d8%a7-%d8%a7) (all accessed September 19, 2021).

¹¹²Sadeq Rohani, 'Al-Istiftā'āt al-Shar'iyya, al-Sha'ā'ir al-Husayniyya', <http://www.rohani.ir/ar/idetail/5248/%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%a8%d8%b9%d8%b6-%d9%8a%d8%af%d8%b9%d9%8a-%d8%a7%d9%86-%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%aa%d8%b7%d8%a8%d9%8a%d8%b1-%d8%a8%d8%af%d8%b9%d8%a9>—— (accessed September 19, 2021).

Other requests for fatwas to which Rohani has responded clearly refer to the politicized controversy as a result of Khamenei's 1994 fatwa and the framing of any opposition to his fatwa as a sign of disloyalty to the Islamic Republic. One enquirer asks Rohani whether 'blood-letting self-flagellation is counted among matters that weaken the Islamic government'.¹¹⁴ In response Rohani affirms that undermining an Islamic government is impermissible but its survival depends on its internal constitution. It is not a ritual like *taṭbīr* that weakens an Islamic government—on the contrary it affirms allegiance to such a government—but the leadership style of those who possess power.¹¹⁵ In another fatwa, Rohani denies that the Supreme Leader's ruling as holder of jurisprudential authority is binding to all Muslims. As a ruling on a secondary matter, it can be contradicted and does not have universal validity.¹¹⁶ While Rohani does not challenge Khamenei's status as ruler (*ḥākim*), he does not recognize his legal authority to be in any sense more binding to that of other scholars as a result of his political office. Rohani implicitly challenges Khamenei's authority when he outlines the philosophy behind self-flagellation (*falsafat al-taṭbīr*). The purpose of *taṭbīr* is 'to manifest the spirit of sacrifice, which the individual believer needs to demonstrate in front of the Imam of the age (*imām al-'aṣr*) and ruler of the time (*sultān al-zamān*)'.¹¹⁷ While Rohani merely reiterates standard Shii theological doctrines that the Hidden Imam is the actual ruler over all Muslims—a point also affirmed by the Iranian constitution¹¹⁸—its framing in support of a ritual practice opposed by Khamenei can also be read as a challenge to his authority. The Hidden Imam is the actual ruler of the time and not Khamenei. By performing *taṭbīr*, the individual believer expresses their loyalty to their real sovereign and can therefore defy the ruling of a person who holds a political office without legitimacy.

Self-flagellation as marker of Shii 'authenticity': the Shirazis

One group in contemporary Twelver Shiism is particularly prominent in its promotion of *taṭbīr*.¹¹⁹ The Shirazi movement includes a loose network of political groups, religious organizations and transnational communities that follow the leadership of Muhammad al-Shirazi (1928–2001) and his brothers Hasan (1935–1980) and Sadiq (b. 1942). Stemming from a family of Iranian descent, the Shirazi brothers began their activities in Karbala in Iraq in the mid-1950s, using the symbolic capital of the city that hosts the shrine of Imam Husayn. Muhammad al-Shirazi declared himself to be a *marja' al-taqlīd* at

¹¹³Sadeq Rohani, 'Al-Istiftā'āt al-Shar'iyya, al-Sha'ā'ir al-Husayniyya', <http://www.rohani.ir/ar/idetail/5205/-%d8%ad%d9%83%d9%85-%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%aa%d8%b7%d8%a8%d9%8a%d8%b1-%d9%81%d9%8a-%d8%b2%d9%85%d8%a7%d9%86%d9%86%d8%a7-%d9%87%d8%b0%d8%a7> (accessed September 19, 2021).

¹¹⁴Sadeq Rohani, 'Al-Istiftā'āt al-Shar'iyya, al-Mawāqif al-Siyāsiyya', <http://www.rohani.ir/ar/idetail/6083/%d8%ad%d9%88%d9%84-%d8%a7%d9%84-%d9%85%d9%88%d8%b1-%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%aa%d9%8a-%d8%aa%d8%b6%d8%b9%d9%81-%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%ad%d9%83%d9%88%d9%85%d8%a9-%d8%a7%d9%84-%d8%b3%d9%84%d8%a7%d9%85%d9%8a%d8%a9> (accessed September 19, 2021).

¹¹⁵Ibid.

¹¹⁶Sadeq Rohani, 'Al-Istiftā'āt al-Shar'iyya, al-Sha'ā'ir al-Husayniyya', <http://www.rohani.ir/ar/idetail/5203/%d8%aa%d8%ad%d8%b1%d9%8a%d9%85-%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%ad%d8%a7%d9%83%d9%85-%d9%84%d9%84%d8%aa%d8%b7%d8%a8%d9%8a%d8%b1-%d9%84%d8%a7-%d9%8a%d9%83%d9%88%d9%86-%d9%85%d9%84%d8%b2%d9%85%d8%a7> (accessed September 19, 2021).

¹¹⁷Sadeq Rohani, 'Al-Istiftā'āt al-Shar'iyya, al-Sha'ā'ir al-Husayniyya', <http://www.rohani.ir/ar/idetail/5201/%d9%85%d8%a7-%d9%87%d9%8a-%d9%81%d9%84%d8%b3%d9%81%d8%a9-%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%aa%d8%b7%d8%a8%d9%8a%d8%b1> (accessed September 19, 2021).

¹¹⁸See Article 5.

¹¹⁹Szanto, 'Challenging Transnational Shi'i Authority', 11–12.

a very young age in 1963 in an attempt to move the centre of gravity of Shii clerical authority in Iraq from Najaf to Karbala. He and his brothers also used the role of Karbala as a transnational pilgrimage destination for Shiis from across the world to expand their network. The Shirazi brothers initially entertained a cordial relationship with Khomeini when he arrived in Iraq in 1965 and shared an ideological affinity around the concept of *wilāyat al-faqīh*.¹²⁰ Following the suppression of Shii clerical leadership and religio-political activism under Saddam Hussein, Muhammad al-Shirazi moved to Kuwait in 1971 and settled in Qom in 1979 after the Islamic Revolution. However, he faced a similar fate as other clerics critical of the new regime and rejected the suppression of clerical opposition in the 1980s and the autocratic direction of the regime. Muhammad al-Shirazi was placed under house arrest until his death in 2001. His younger brother Sadiq al-Shirazi who resides in Qom has been the clerical leader of the Shirazi network since his brother's death.

The Shirazis are quite unique among contemporary Shii movements in their vocal opposition to the Islamic Republic of Iran, to its ideological foundation and to the leadership of Khamenei¹²¹ and have entertained close relationships with other clerical opponents of the Islamic Republic in Iran such as Khorasani and Rohani. With the latter two, they also share a particular approach to the performance of Shii rituals and have made the performance of *taṭbīr* as a key marker of Shii identity in order to portray themselves as guardians of 'authentic' Twelver Shiism, which has been watered down by Shii modernists and Islamists to appease Sunni Muslims. In 1965, Hasan al-Shirazi responded to Islamist figures in Iraq and Lebanon and their efforts to modernize Shii rituals comparing them to the unbelievers (*kuffār*) and hypocrites (*munāfiqūn*) who opposed the Prophet during his lifetime.¹²² For Hasan al-Shirazi, the preservation of these rituals is also an important instrument of anti-imperialist resistance. While it might not be possible to defeat Western hegemonic powers politically or militarily at the moment, the performance of these rituals yields in ethos in Shii societies that keeps the spirit of resistance alive. Judging Shii rituals by the cultural, religious and social values of Western hegemonic powers is meant to undermine the spirit of resistance that Husayn's martyrdom symbolizes: 'it is necessary to preserve the revolution (*thawra*) of Husayn because it represents our independent will'.¹²³

While other Shii Islamist figures have made an argument against certain elements of 'Āshūrā' rituals in the name of pan-Islamic solidarity against Western imperialism, Hasan al-Shirazi emphasizes the mobilizing force of these rituals. These include for him most importantly *taṭbīr* because of its martial character: 'the procession of blood-letting self-flagellants (*mawkib al-taṭbīr*) is the most powerful procession to bring the revolution of Husayn back to life because it contains all elements of warfare (*ḥarb*): drums, cymbals, trumpets, swords dripping with blood, heads tinged in red and blood-stained burial shrouds'.¹²⁴ The significance of *taṭbīr* lies in it being the most immediate re-enactment

¹²⁰Oliver Scharbrodt, 'Khomeini and Muhammad al-Shirāzi: Revisiting the Origins of the "Guardianship of the Jurisconsult" (*wilāyat al-faqīh*)', *Die Welt des Islams* 61 (2021): 9–38. On the use of *taṭbīr* to articulate opposition to Iran, see also Szanto, 'Beyond the Karbala Paradigm', 81.

¹²¹In 2018, Sadiq al-Shirazi's son and likely successor, Husayn al-Shirazi, was arrested by Iranian authorities after a clip of his lecture emerged on social media in which he compared Khamenei with the Qur'anic pharaoh. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xr0li4zi1GU> (accessed September 20, 2021).

¹²²Hasan al-Shirazi, *Al-Sha'ā'ir al-Husayniyya*, 5th ed. (n.p.: n.d. [1965]), 19.

¹²³*ibid.*, 22.

of the events of Karbala. Memorial lectures merely re-narrate the events. Passion plays (*tashābih*) re-enact the events, but it is obvious that they are staged, 'while the procession of blood-letting self-flagellants is pregnant with reality (*ghāniyyan bi-l-wāqī'a*)'.¹²⁵ It provides the most direct and realistic re-experience of the martyrdom of Husayn and is the most powerful tool to relive the events of Karbala.¹²⁶

Under the leadership of both Muhammad and Sadiq al-Shirazi, the Shirazi network has placed stronger emphasis on rituals such as *taṭbīr* and used their symbolic power to assert the Shirazis' claim to 'cultural authenticity'.¹²⁷ Their support for *taṭbīr* is so articulated that even women associated with the Shirazi movement have begun to perform *taṭbīr* which traditionally has been regarded as a purely male ritual.¹²⁸ Sadiq al-Shirazi like other senior clerical figures in Iran considers this practice not only 'permissible but recommended'.¹²⁹ He falls short of declaring it as an act of worship but considers *taṭbīr* to be 'among the rituals of God (*sha'ā'ir allāh*)'.¹³⁰ Sadiq al-Shirazi contradicts concerns about the reputational damage *taṭbīr* causes. On the contrary, 'many non-Muslims have converted to Islam because of it'.¹³¹ The reason for its attractiveness is the unique manner in which it allows its practitioner to re-enact, partake and embody the suffering experienced by Husayn: 'Blood-letting self-flagellation is a demonstration of oppression, which turns the hearts towards the oppressed and away from the oppressor. It is also a way to partake in the oppression of Imam Husayn'.¹³²

Given Sadiq al-Shirazi's residence in Iran when addressing the issue of *taṭbīr*, he avoids articulating an oppositional stance towards Khamenei explicitly. However, he undermines the wider applicability of Khamenei's ruling by delimiting it as an individual fatwa that stands outside of mainstream opinions of most Shii clerics. For him, 'the permission of blood-letting self-flagellation, or rather the recommendation to perform it, is firmly based on prominent and wide-spread fatwas that almost constitute a consensus (*ijmā'*)'.¹³³ However, as judgements on this issue take the form of individual fatwas they are only binding for the followers of a particular *marja' al-taqlid* and do not possess universal validity. Sadiq al-Shirazi stops short of questioning Khamenei's political authority but his clerical authority does not extend to matters like *taṭbīr* where individual Shiis are free to follow the fatwa of their source of emulation—an opinion he shares with al-Sistani.

Other scholars close to the Shirazi network residing outside of Iran are more explicit in attacking Khamenei and other clerics who have banned this practice. Muhammad Jamil Hamud al-'Amili (b. 1959) is a Lebanon-based cleric notorious for his strong anti-Sunni sectarian stance and opposition to the Islamic Republic. Al-'Amili defends Muhammad al-Shirazi's endorsement of *taṭbīr* and polemicizes against Iran aligned clerical and political

¹²⁴Ibid., 109.

¹²⁵Ibid.

¹²⁶Ibid.

¹²⁷Sajjad Rizvi, 'Political Mobilization and the Shi'i Religious Establishment (*marja'iyya*)', *International Affairs* 86 (2010): 1306.

¹²⁸Shanneik, *Art of Resistance*, pp. 128–52. For observations on the performance of *taṭbīr* among 'a few dozen, at most', of women in Lebanon, see Norton, 'Ritual, Blood, and Shiite Identity', 150.

¹²⁹Sadiq al-Shirazi, *Ajwabat al-Masā'il al-Husayniyya* (Qom: Mu'assasat al-Rasul al-Akram, n.d.), 101. See Qur'an 5:2.

¹³⁰Sadiq al-Shirazi, *Ajwabat al-Masā'il al-Husayniyya*, 115.

¹³¹Ibid., 112.

¹³²Ibid., 113.

¹³³Ibid., 109.

actors in Lebanon and Iraq who involve the local Shii communities in political schemes to advance Iranian interest in the region. These figures prohibit blood-letting self-flagellation while endorsing the transnational militant activities of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards.¹³⁴ In his assessment of Khamenei's fatwa he rejects his comprehensive legal authority by virtue of his political office. In addition, al-'Amili directly questions Khamenei's jurisprudential competence due to his attitude towards the rituals performed on 'Āshūrā':

Everybody who prohibits the rituals does not possess complete competency in jurisprudence and in undertaking independent reasoning (*ijtihād*). Rather, his experience and command are lacking in this arena ... You and all faithful brothers must know that the objective of having a legitimate ruler is that he is a jurispudent who fulfils all conditions in issuing fatwas in Islamic jurisprudence, possesses godliness and piety and dissociates from the enemies of the family of the Prophet (*ahl al-bayt*).¹³⁵

For al-'Amili, Khamenei's prohibition of *taṭbīr* demonstrates his insufficient jurisprudential expertise. Since Khamenei bans a practice that those properly versed in jurisprudence would not prohibit, his ruling is not binding. However, al-'Amili goes a step further. As jurisprudential expertise is the *raison d'être* of legitimate rule in Shii Islam, according to the notion of *wilāyat al-faqīh*, Khamenei is equally disqualified from holding his political office. While Khorasani, Rohani and Sadiq al-Shirazi implicitly question Khamenei's jurisprudential knowledge and the universal validity of his ruling, al-'Amili, as a cleric based outside of Iran, is more explicit: Khamenei's prohibition of *taṭbīr* not only disqualifies him from exercising jurisprudential authority but also from holding the office of Supreme Leader in Iran.

Conclusion

Modern and contemporary contestations around the ritual of *taṭbīr* reveal both the demotic power of Shii ritual practices and contain a strong political dimension. Efforts by reformist and modernist Shii scholars to ban this practice by characterizing it as an innovation that causes harm and damages the reputation of Twelver Shiism have only had limited success. The periodic proscription of Shii ritual practices in the past, whether by the Ottomans in the 19th century, by the Pahlavi shahs in the early 20th century or by Saddam Hussein in Iraq from the 1970s onwards, renders any effort by clerical and political leaders from within Twelver Shiism to counter *taṭbīr* and other ritual practices as potentially treacherous by their proponents.¹³⁶ For this reason, clear condemnation of *taṭbīr* has come for the most part from second-tier clerics who do not possess the level of seniority of a *marja' al-taqlid*. Senior clerical figures, however, seeking global pre-eminence within the Shii world, such as the leaders of the seminaries in Najaf, need to adopt an ambiguous and neutral stance on this question. They need to take into account the growing opposition to *taṭbīr* without alienating significant constituencies among their followers who would not accept a prohibition. Al-Khoie's fatwas contain the required ambiguity to allow for different interpretations of his stance on *taṭbīr* by his followers. Al-

¹³⁴ Al-'Amili, *Al-Sha'ā'ir al-Ḥusayniyya*, 73.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 82.

¹³⁶ *Ma'ātim al-Damm*, 7–8.

Sistani explicitly decided to adopt a neutral stance neither banning nor endorsing it. Khamenei can adopt a different approach *qua* his political office. As Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran he aspires to global leadership in the Muslim world and rejects anti-Sunni sectarianism. Equally, holding a political office, he is not reliant on securing the allegiance of a wide range of followers as other senior clerics and can therefore issue fatwas that challenge popular beliefs and practices more easily.

Modernist interventions rejecting *taṭbīr* have raised the question of what is the appropriate way of performing and articulating Shii identity in the modern world—a question relevant to Shii Muslim minorities in the West in light of negative stereotypes they encounter. For them, it is particularly important to identify ways to make the events and message of ‘Āshūrā’ meaningful to non-Muslims and to create a positive image of Twelvers Shiism and Islam more generally. For this reason, more recent initiatives have sought to replace self-flagellation with campaigns to donate blood. Campaigners in support of donating blood during Muḥarram argue that rather than spelling one’s own blood, Husayn’s sacrifice is best remembered when donating blood.¹³⁷ Blood drives are particularly promoted within minority communities in the West by institutions affiliated to the Islamic Republic of Iran such as the Islamic Centre of England in London.¹³⁸ Clerics in support of self-flagellation like Rohani or Sadiq al-Shirazi equally see the value in blood-donations but argue that they are not a substitute for *taṭbīr* and cannot be considered as one of the rituals performed on ‘Āshūrā’.¹³⁹

The article also illustrates how the contestations in modern and contemporary Twelver Shiism possess a significant political dimension. The rituals performed on ‘Āshūrā’ have exhibited a strong political nature as public performances and assertions of Shii identity since their inception and have been used by ruling dynasties, Islamist activists and statesmen to promote Shii religio-political mobilization. Disputes which emerged following Khamenei’s 1994 fatwa against *taṭbīr* show how this issue has become a symbolic site around which attitudes to the Islamic Republic, its leadership and its ideological foundations are articulated. Strongest opposition to *taṭbīr* comes from clerical and political actors and organizations aligned to Iran which have also tried to enforce Khamenei’s prohibition outside of Iran by preventing the performance of *taṭbīr*. The most explicit support for *taṭbīr* is articulated by clerical figures and networks that reject politicized readings of Twelver Shiism, as manifest in Iran. Such clerics and their associated networks have been most outspoken in their rejection of the Iranian regime and sought to undermine Khamenei’s clerical authority and political legitimacy. They have used *taṭbīr* as an apparently non-political symbolic site to articulate their opposition to the political and clerical establishment of Iran.

¹³⁷Kathryn Spellmann-Poots, ‘Manifestations of Ashura among Young British Shi’is’, in *Ethnographies of Islam: Ritual Performances and Everyday Practices* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 40–9; Hashemi, ‘Blood Donation Campaigns’; and Flakerud, ‘Ritual Creativity and Plurality’.

¹³⁸The Muslim Council of Britain. ‘North London Mosque Hosts First Ever Blood Donation Day’, November 8, 2017, <https://mcb.org.uk/community/north-london-mosque-hosts-first-ever-blood-donation-day/> (accessed September 20, 2021).

¹³⁹Sadeq Rohani, ‘Al-Istiftā’at al-Shar’iyya, al-Sha’ā’ir al-Husayniyya’, <http://www.rohani.ir/ar/ideail/5209/%d8%a8%d9%8a%d9%86-%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%aa%d8%b7%d8%a8%d9%8a%d8%b1-%d9%88%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%aa%d8%a8%d8%b1%d8%b9-%d8%a8%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%af%d9%85> (accessed September 19, 2021); and Sadiq al-Shirazi, *Ajwabat al-Masā’il al-Husayniyya*, 116.

Another area in which the politics of *taṭbīr* becomes manifest is the question of sectarianism. Opponents of *taṭbīr* in the early 20th century such as Muhsin al-Amin were eager to maintain amicable Sunni-Shii relations in multi-sectarian societies like Syria and Lebanon. Therefore, reformists promoted forms of Shii ritual practices that emphasize their moral and generic spiritual message and are not primarily means to articulate a distinct Shii communal identity in the public. This objective has been equally important to Shii Islamist actors and statesmen from Baqir al-Sadr and Motahhari to Khomeini and Khamenei. For them, Shiis need to find a way of remembering the events around Karbala without undermining Islamic unity. For the supporters of *taṭbīr*, the ritual becomes a symbolic issue to safeguard Shii cultural authenticity against those groups who are accused of watering down the sectarian differences between Sunnis and Shiis. Among the staunchest defenders of *taṭbīr* are figures that have espoused strong anti-Sunni sectarianism like al-'Amili. Hence, the contestations around *taṭbīr* also reflect ongoing inner-Shii debates on how to define relations between Sunnis and Shiis and how to articulate and assert Shii identity through ritual practices in the context of heightened sectarian tensions.

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