

Iran's Relationship to Yemeni Zayidis

Question 10:¹ Do views of the Velayat-i-Faqih (in Yemen) present challenges to Iranian influences among holders of Zayid views?

Question 11: Do divergent religious views/practices present challenges among the Iranian populace in relation to presentation of the Iranian government as protectors of Yemeni Zayidis?

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Before delving into the questions, it is important to delineate the differences (and similarities) between Zaydi Shi'a Islam and Imamiyya Shi'a Islam. Both are, today, considered sub-branches of Shi'a Islam, with the Imamiyya (also called the Jafari school of Ithna'Ashari, or 12ers) much more widespread while the Zaydi (sometimes known as Jafurdiyya) are largely located in northwestern Yemen and southwestern Saudi Arabia. Both share the first four Imams in the lineage from Muhammad, those being as follows:

1. Ali ibn Abi Talib, called "The Beloved" and for Sunnis considered the legitimate 4th Caliph of the Rashidun Caliphs (Rightly Guided Successors). His wife was Fatima az-Zahra, youngest daughter of Muhammad (considered by Shia to be the only daughter of Muhammad) and mother of Hasan and Husayn. He is buried at Najaf.
2. Hasan ibn Ali, called "The Chosen," first son of Ali and oldest surviving grandson of Muhammad. He is buried at Medina.
3. Husayn ibn Ali, called "Master of the Martyrs," second son of Ali, grandson of Muhammad. He is buried at Karbala.
4. Ali ibn Husayn, called "One who constantly Prostrates" and/or "Ornament of the Worshippers." He is buried at Medina.

And here is where the split occurs. For the majority of Shia in the world, the Imamiyya and the Isma'ili (7ers), the next Imam in line is:

5. Muhammad ibn Ali bin Husayn, called "The Revealer of Knowledge." His mother was Fatimah bint al-Hasan ibn Ali, daughter of the second Imam Hasan and great-granddaughter of Muhammad. The marriage of these two united the Hasan and Husayn branches of the family, which brought great legitimacy with it. He is buried at Medina.

For Zaydi, they consider Zayd ibn Ali, called "Ally of the Quran," as the true fifth Imam. His mother was Jayda al-Sindhi, thus making a half-brother to Muhammad ibn Ali. He led a revolt against the Umayyids and failed, therefore he is buried in two places; his body in Kufa (Iraq) and his head at Karak (Jordan). He is also called "Zayd al-Shaheed" (Zayd the Martyr).

¹ The author addressed these two CCJs-IO questions together as "they are essential two sides of the same question and thus it is easier to answer them together."

² Analysis submitted on 21 September 2018

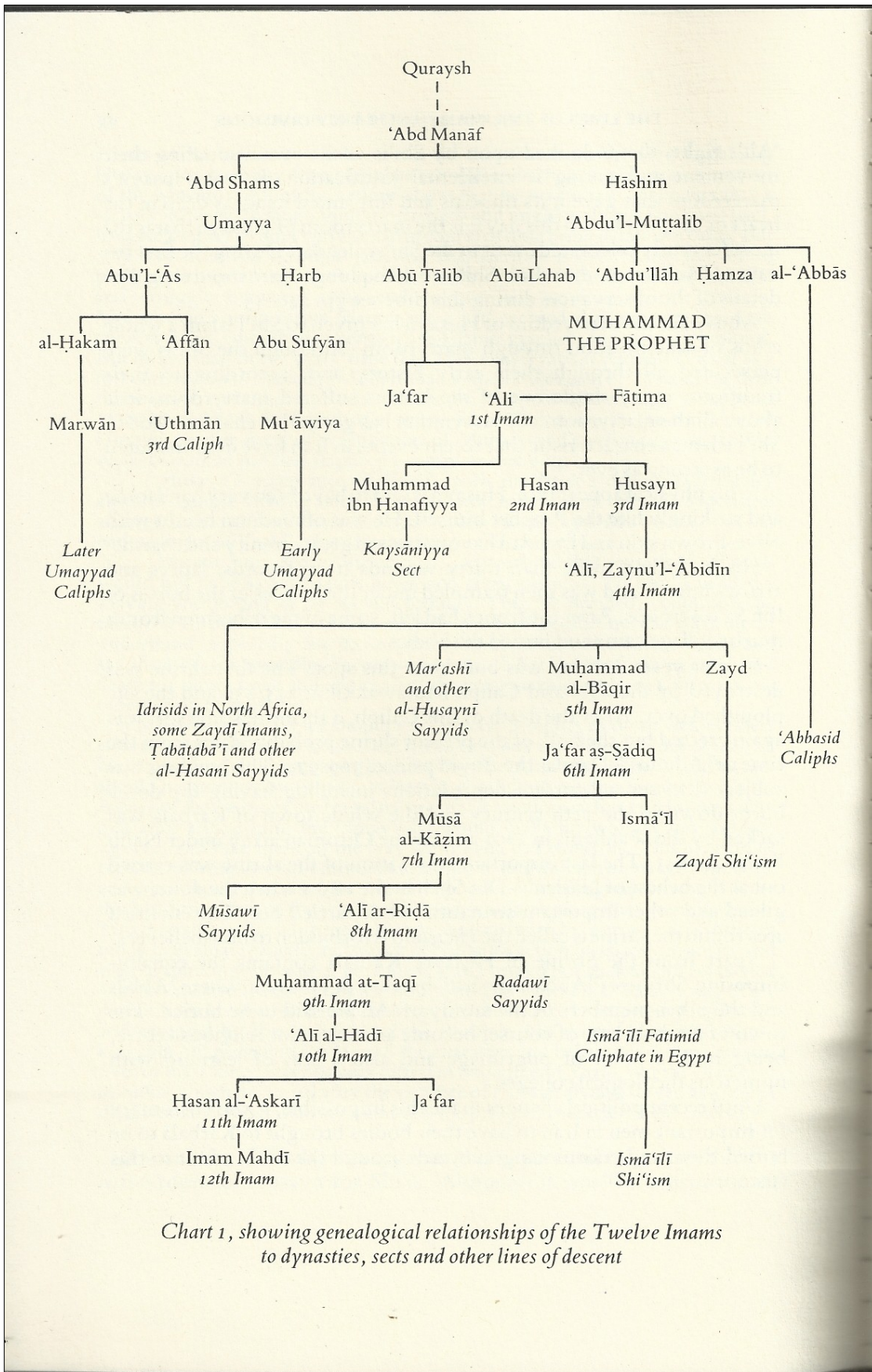


Chart 1, showing genealogical relationships of the Twelve Imams to dynasties, sects and other lines of descent

Figure 1 Chart Showing Shia Imams and Sects

Chart showing the genealogical relationships of the Twelve Shia Imams to dynasties, Shia sects and other lines of descent

A 12er Shia would keep you thinking that their 12 Imams are the only Shia Imams the only descendents of Ali Ibn Abi Talib. However the history proves it otherwise.

Kaysaniyyah: They were the Shia of Ali who believed that Muhammad ibn Hanafiyyah, the son of Ali from a Hanafi woman was the rightful Imam of his time.

The Zaidi Shias: They believed that Zayd, the son of Ali Zaynul Abidin (4th Shia Imam) was the rightful 5th Imam. The Shias in fact deserted him in battle field when he stood up against the tyrant rulers of his time because he did not believe that Omar and Abu Bakr (ra) were apostates. Where as the 12er Shias claim that the brother of Zayd, Muhammad Al Baqir was the rightful 5th Imam. (see [The Zaidi Shias, The Deserters of Husayn and Zayd](#))

The Ismaili Shias: Ismail the oldest son of Jafar is unanimously agreed to be Imam after his father Jafar As Sadiq by the various Shia sects. However when he died soon, the shias divided into many sects, some claiming his son to be the Imam stating that Imamatus continues in the progeny and can not be transferred to the brother after Hasan and Husayn, where as some claimed his younger brother Musa Al Kazim to be the next Imam (12 er Shia). Ismailis further broke up into many sects such as Bohra, Dawoodi Bohra, Agha Khani Bohra, Druze, Sevener etc. [This chart](#) explains their divisions.

There arose many other sects and sub sects after the death of each imam, some do not exist any more and some still do such as the Alawi of Syria to which Bashar Al Asad belongs to. These sects will be discussed later in some other post InshaAllah.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT:

All these Shia sects are agreed upon the initial historical events which a 12er Shia presents to you such as Ghadir Khumm, Story of Pen and Paper, the issue of Fadak and all the topics a 12er loves to discuss with the Sunnis. How ever the question to the 12er Shia is.. can you prove that your 12Imams were the divinely chosen right ones?

Image Source: The History of Shia Islam by Moojan Momen

Zayd ibn Ali is considered by both Sunni and Shia as a righteous martyr against what was regarded as the corrupt leadership of the Umayyids. It is even reputed that Mujtahid Imam Abu Hanifa (founder of the Hanafi madhhab, or school of theological jurisprudence) gave financial support to Zayd's revolt and called others to join the rebellion. His followers believe he was the rightful Imam and a Caliph, and adopted his name for their sect. It is also believed that his revolt is where the term "Rafida" or rejectors, is where the pejorative term used for all Shia today by some Sunnis.

Both the Zaydi and the Imamiyya consider that the qualification to be the leader of the Umma (community of believers) is one who is a descendent of Ali ibn Abi Talib and who demonstrates knowledge of matters of religion. However, for the Zaydi, a further qualification is that only descendants through the line of Husayn qualify as a descendent of Ali, any one descended from the line of Hasan is not legitimate. This clearly eliminates the Imamiyya (and Isma'ili) from any leadership role over the Umma. From the perspective of the Zaydi, the other Shia are not sinful and heretical but rather just misguided (and it is not the role of the Zaydi to bring them back from their error) while Sunnis are also just misguided in their rejection of Ali, not in sinful error.

There is no need to define the divergence of the Zaydi theological development from Imamiyya theological development, suffice it to say that when the Zaydi followers fled from Iraq they established themselves in the Yemeni highlands, bringing the Zaydi doctrine to the native Yemeni Muslims, who were largely converted within 50 years. The majority was of the Hisham and Bakil tribal confederations but only true descendants of Ali, called “Sada” (sayyid), could be leaders of the religious community. In this way, a series of Sada families succeeded one another over the centuries, providing leadership to the Zaydi. The ruling dynasties in the Yemeni highlands indicate this, starting with the Rassid family, followed by the Najahids, Sulayhids, Zuray’ids, Halimids, Qassimids (a branch of the Rassids) and ultimately the Mutawakkilites (a joint descendent branch of the Rassid and Qassimid), which was overthrown by non-Zaydis in 1962.

All of these Zaydi dynasties, from the original Iraqi Sada, ruled Yemen as an Imamate. This Imamate (Imamates are restricted only to the Shia branch of Islam, Sunnis have a Caliphate while the now largely extinct Khwarijite branch, now restricted to just the Ibadis of Oman, have a Sultanate) provides religious leadership to the Umma. However, unlike in the Caliphate, the Zaydi Imamate also provided political leadership, united in the same person. Thus, in reality, from the 900s through to 1962, the Zaydi Imams embodied what in 1979 the Imamiyya (12ers) created as the Velayat-i-Faqih. This is Zaydi-Hadawi doctrine.

For the Imamiyya, there is a long historical development which culminated in the concept of Marja’-i Taqlid (the Supreme Exemplar), developed in Shiraz in the late 1800s. This was then quickly followed by the idea of Marja’iyat-i Taqlid-i Tamm (complete authority over the community [by the supreme exemplar]). While this established the union of religious and political leadership within the Imamiyya Umma, it was defined by the withdrawal of the designated (and there was no method of choosing of such a personage) supreme exemplar from leadership. Thus, while the doctrine was there, finally, all the senior Imamiyya clerics refused to step up and exercise leadership in a true Imamate.

It was not until Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini used the Iranian Revolution to oust the Shah in Iran in 1979 that an Imamiyya cleric stepped forward and took the Marja’iyat-i Taqlid-i Tamm doctrine was carried to its full impact, which was now called Velayat-i Faqih. It has also been characterized as religious authoritarianism but in Iran it is actually expediency cloaked in religious themes and executed by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards at the behest of the leading Ayatollah.

Amazingly, in Yemen, once the Zaydi Imamate was overthrown after a decade-long struggle, Yemenis, both Zaydi and the Shafi’i Sunni, tried to create a national Yemeni narrative based on the “sons of Qahtan”, meaning native Yemenis, in order to create a single Yemen. Yemen has historically not been unified, the few times it was united was by a strong conqueror, but it rarely lasted longer than a century, usually much less. This “Sons of Qahtan” disempowered the Sada to a large degree, divorcing the religious leadership from political leadership. Post-1972 this saw the rise of non-religious leaders, under this pan-Yemeni rubric.

Those leaders were:

- Abdul Rahman al-Iryani – Nov 1967 to June 1974 (deposed), a Zaydi
- Ibrahim al-Hamdi – Jun 1974 to Oct 1977 (assassinated), non-Zaydi
- Ahmad al-Ghashmi – Oct 1977 to Jun 1978 (assassinated), non-Zaydi
- Ali Abdullah Saleh – Jun 1978 to Feb 2012 (deposed), Zaydi
- Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi – Feb 2012 to present (in exile), non-Zaydi

The Zaydi leaders Iryani and Saleh were both non-Sada but had legitimacy because they were Zaydi.

So, Zaydi Muslims are fine working with and around Iranian Imamiyya Muslims, as the Yemenis consider the Iranians as just misguided Muslims. And Yemenis feel no obligation to correct the Iranians as Zaydism has not encouraged proselytization for centuries. As for Imamiyya Muslims, they consider Zaydis as misguided Shias who retain some Sunni fiqh. For instance, Zaydi perform wudu (ablution) like Sunnis vice like 12er Shias. Zaydi use

qiyas similar to Hanafi Sunni. Zaydi reject an Imamiyya concept called mot'ah (temporary marriage) and consider it haram. So, while there are clear differences, the Iranians can function quite well around Yemeni Zaydis.

What makes the Zaydi and Imamiyya able to easily work together is the over-arching Saudi Sunni Wahhabi conflict with Shias. This conflict is largely conduct via proxies, thus Saudi supported operations against the Yemeni Zaydis is executed because the Saudis believe the Zaydis are Iranian Imamiyya fellow travelers. This enables Iranian support to flow to Yemen, creating a self-fulfilling fact, despite the fact the Zaydis are actually closer to the Sunni Shafi'i in most of the rest of Yemen.

I will not address the rise of the Houthi (Huthi) movement as an anti-Wahhabi and anti-Islah (Muslim Brothers) struggle, because that was not stipulated in the questions. Please contact me if you would like a follow on brief covering this topic.

Biography

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Areas of Interest:

- Culture and History of Middle East
- Culture and History of South Asia
- Culture and History of Islam

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Prior to joining CAOCL, Mr. Liebl worked with the Joint Improvised Explosives Device Defeat Organization as a Cultural SME, and before that with Booz Allen Hamilton as a Strategic Islamic Narrative Analyst. He has also published extensively on topics ranging from the Caliphate to Vichy French campaigns in WW2.

Mr. Liebl has a Bachelors degree in political science from University of Oregon, a Masters degree in Islamic History from the University of Utah, and a second Masters degree in National Security and Strategic Studies from the Naval War College (where he graduated with "Highest Distinction" and focused on Islamic Economics).