Traditional authority and transnational religious networks in contemporary Shi'i Islam: Results from recent empirical research

Mirjam Künkler and Morgan Clarke

Within Shi'i Islam, the *marja' al-taqlid* ('source of emulation') remains the predominant model of religious authority. Select grand ayatollahs provide religious, cultural and political guidance to their followers, sometimes numbering millions. This project addresses how recent political transformations in the Middle East are affecting these networks across Asia, the Middle East and the West.

The unfolding political situation in the Middle East is obviously of enormous significance for us all. Islamic ideals and networks are and will clearly continue to be a crucial element within this developing situation. That includes those of Shi'i Islam, given the Islamic Republic of Iran's importance as a major actor in the region and beyond, and the well-known communitarian tensions in, for instance, Iraq, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Syria and Lebanon.

The continuing importance of the predominant, albeit challenged model of religious authority within the Usuli Twelver Shi'i tradition, the *marja'* (pl. *maraji'*) *al-taqlid*, or 'source of emulation', is well recognised. Select grand ayatollahs provide religious, cultural and political guidance to their followers, sometimes numbering millions, across the world, far beyond the Middle East region where most are based. They can also draw on religious tithes from those followers, making the leading figures, such as Ayatollah Sistani of Iraq, potentially able to draw on resources in the millions if not billions of dollars. They are, therefore, political actors of note, whose authority is transmitted through networks of local representatives, organisations and relatives, as well as through mass communications such as satellite television, the internet and smart phones. The Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic, Ayatollah Khamenei, has used the resources of the state at whose head he stands to transform his *marja'*-ship into a major arm of the Republic's foreign policy.

Despite the obvious importance of these institutions, empirical research into them remains comparatively rare. This is, we contend, in many ways due to the relatively minor status of the study of Shi'i Islam – especially, non-Iranian Shi'ism - within Islamic and Middle Eastern studies. Specialists in the field are few, and relatively isolated, dispersed between different departments and disciplines, as well different institutions. It is for this reason that we argue for the added value, as well as the strategic importance, of this collaboration. By bringing together scholars of Shi'i Islamic religious networks from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds (anthropology, political science, history and Islamic and Middle Eastern studies) in Princeton and Oxford in workshops to meet, discuss their research and develop new research themes and collaborative funding proposals, we can lay the foundations for a research cluster that would be otherwise impossible in those individual universities and departments given the minority and fragmented status of the field.

The core group for this project is made up of six individuals associated with the two institutions (3 from each). As regards leadership positions, the two co-PIs (Morgan Clarke from Oxford and Mirjam Künkler from Princeton) are both early-stage academics. The other core members comprise two post-docs, one from Oxford and one from Princeton (Elvire Corboz), and two PhD/DPhil candidates (Simon Fuchs from Princeton; and Mohammadjavad Ardalan from Oxford). One of the PhD/DPhil candidates would also like to take part in the graduate semester-long exchange program. This project thus has a strong early career researcher development component. Senior figures will be invited to the proposed meetings to provide constructive criticism, feedback and advice.

Princeton and Oxford Universities are among the handful of world centers of research on Shi'i religious authority. Yet unfortunately, to date no institutionalized collaboration between researchers from both universities on this topic exists, even though, as argued above, the disciplinary and institutional dispersal of the small number of researchers working in this important field handicaps efforts at cumulative, collaborative research. Through this project, we hope to lay the groundwork for innovative, institutionalized forms of new collaboration that will, we hope, expand and continue beyond the duration of this two-year project.

This proposed collaboration is not, however, merely speculative. We build on one larger and two smaller past initiatives around similar themes (see below), none of which, however, was located at Princeton or Oxford, although researchers from both institutions were involved in all three projects. We hope that with our proposed initiative we can tie the institutions of Oxford and Princeton more closely to the study of Shi'i politics and Shi'i religious networks, pooling the resources we have, and forming the springboard for a more enduring shared capacity in this research area.

With regard to these precedents, the British Academy funded a three-year research project on Clerical Authority in Shi'i Islam ('The Hawza Project') from 2009-2012. The project was administered by Professor Robert Gleave at the University of Exeter in the UK and provided 4-6 small grants per year for small research projects on Shi'i religious authority, both historical and contemporary. One PI (Künkler) was the recipient of two of the Hawza project's small grants and both PIs have presented papers at the annual meetings of the Hawza Project Research Community and have publications forthcoming in the edited volume series resulting. The final meeting is being convened at the college (Keble) of PI Morgan Clarke. We have informed Professor Gleave of this proposal and hope to draw on the contacts we have made through the Hawza project in expanding and consolidating our Oxford/Princeton program.

We also build on two smaller networks dealing with transnational religious authority in the Middle East and Asia. One is situated at CERI, Paris (Centre d'études et de recherches internationales) and deals with 'Les relations entre le Golfe Persique et l'Asie du sud', in particular the movements of people and ideas between the two regions. The other project is a workshop funded by the Social Science Research Council (SSRC) as part of its Inter-Asia Initiative and is convened by Christophe Jaffrelot and Mirjam Künkler. The workshop will be held in June 2012

and brings together several researchers (including from Princeton and Oxford) to discuss recent research on religious networks.

The new collaboration proposed here aims to unite for the first time a core of early career researchers at Oxford and Princeton through two workshops, one at Oxford University, to be held in the fall of 2012, and one at Princeton University to be held fall 2013, where researchers can present and exchange results from recent fieldwork, and develop ideas and proposals for applications for funding for further research in order to ensure the longer term future of this shared research nexus. Beyond the core group identified above, we will invite two or three additional researchers per meeting who have undertaken recent field research, thus gradually expanding the project's scope. As discussants, we will invite senior colleagues from the workshop venue.

Questions that will guide comparative discussions at the two workshops include:

- How do the *maraji*' attempt to project their influence transnationally and how prevalent are socio-political messages in this influence?

- To what extent do the activities of networks and personalities associated with individual *maraji*'s reflect a settled 'policy' on their part, or are they rather semi-autonomous actors exploiting the legitimacy associated with the *marja*'?

- How have recent political developments (the Arab spring, intensifying competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia for influence in the region) affected these networks of Shi'i religious authority worldwide?

- How are the *maraji*' attempting to position themselves with regard to movements for political liberalization in the Middle East and what will be the consequences for global Shi'i Islam?