

Catalytic Converters

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Articles & Testimony

The Middle East is abuzz with talk of "Shiitization." Since the war in Lebanon last summer, newspapers, TV news channels and Web sites in Egypt, Saudi Arabia and elsewhere have reported that Sunnis, taken with Hezbollah's charismatic Shiite leader Hassan Nasrallah and his group's "resistance" to Israel, were converting to Shiite Islam. When I recently visited the semi-arid plains of eastern Syria, known as the Jazeera, Sunni tribal leaders whispered stories of Iranians roaming the Syrian countryside handing out bags of cash and macaroni to convert families and even entire villages to Shiite Islam.

Much of the buzz is surely propaganda from the region's Sunni governments, which are known to whip up fears of Shiite plots when it suits them. But there are signs in Syria of a possible shift. Over time, could this predominantly Sunni country change its religious orientation -- solidifying its ties to Iran and creating strong repercussions throughout the Middle East? Pinning down facts is complicated not just by Syria's restrictions on the press but also by growing Sunni-Shiite violence in Iraq, which has made normally hospitable Syrians wary of prying questions about sectarian issues. Furthermore, Syria is an authoritarian state that strictly enforces Ba'athism -- a secular ideology that subsumes sect and religion under a pan-Arab identity. In most of the Arab world, meddling in sectarian issues is discouraged. In Syria, it is illegal.

Although the regime of President Bashar al-Assad hails from an obscure offshoot of Shiism -- the Alawites -- Syria is nearly three-quarters Sunni, with Alawites, members of other Muslim sects and a considerable number of Christians making up the rest. The country's leading Islamic institutions reflect conventional Sunni beliefs and traditions. Over the last five years, however, Iranian donors have financed the restoration of half a dozen Shiite tombs and shrines in Syria and built at least one Shiite religious school near Damascus; the school is named after Iran's supreme leader, Ali Khamenei. Meanwhile, Iran and the Shiite militias it supports in Iraq now sponsor a number of Arabic-language Internet portals as well as satellite TV stations broadcasting Shiite religious programming into Syria.

Direct inquiries into Shiite numbers in Syria raise more questions than answers, as the sensitive topic gives observers complex incentives to round up or down. When I asked Sayyid Abdullah Nizam, leader of Syria's Shiite community, to estimate the size of his flock, he put it at less than 1 percent of the population of 19 million. Asked the same question, the leader of Syria's Sunnis, Grand Mufti Sheik Ahmad Badr Eddin Hassoun, replied carefully; he said that 6 to 8 percent of Syrians now adhere to the "Jaafari school," the school of Islamic jurisprudence followed by

mainstream Shiites in Iran and Lebanon.

It was only when I met an actual convert that the mufti's words began to make sense. Louay, a 28-year-old teacher in Damascus wearing jeans, a wool sweater and a close-cropped beard, seemed the epitome of the capital's Sunni middle class. Yet within the last year, as Hezbollah rose to national prominence in the Lebanese government, he -- along with his mother -- began practicing Shiite Islam. He changed the wording of his prayers and his posture while praying, holding his arms at his sides instead of before him, and during Ramadan he followed Shiite customs on breaking the fast. In many Middle Eastern countries, his conversion wouldn't be possible -- it would be considered apostasy. The Syrian regime restricts its people's political liberties, but unlike most other ruling dynasties in the Arab world, it allows freedom of religion. "In Saudi Arabia, they ban books on other faiths," Louay said. "In Syria, I can buy whatever book on religion I want, and no one can say a word."

Politics, it seems, is only one of the attractions of Shiism. In addition to Louay, I spoke with four other Syrian converts, who asked not to be identified for fear of harassment by Sunni fundamentalists. Louay and the others all spoke of religious transformation as much as of Hezbollah. "Half the reason why I converted was because of Ijtihad," Louay said, using the Arabic word for the independent interpretation of the Koran and the words and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad. Suddenly the mufti's enigmatic answer became clearer. Ijtihad is practiced more widely by Shiites of the Jaafari school than by Sunnis. These Shiites believe that, on all but the largest moral issues, Muslims should interpret their faith by reading holy texts and reasoning back and forth between them and current issues. Many Sunnis say they quietly practice Ijtihad in everyday life as well, but conservative Sunnis do not encourage individual interpretation of the Koran.

For Louay, the difference is immense. "Take the Internet. Some conservative Sunni sheiks say the Internet is haram," or illegal, he said. "If I go back to Jaafar al-Sadiq" -- the eighth-century founder of the Jaafari school -- "I will not find a ruling on it. So instead I use my mind to sort it out. On the Internet, some things are positive, some negative. I choose the positive for myself."

Americans might find it surprising that the man Louay looks to for more current and oftentimes liberal guidance on controversial issues is Ayatollah Khamenei, the supreme leader of Iran. For four decades, Syrians had to rely on advice from the local Sunni clerics who appeared in state-owned media. With the advent of satellite television and the Internet, however, Louay said he is now able to keep up with his favorite scholars across the Islamic world. You could easily draw a comparison with the way Protestants in Europe were able to follow the likes of Martin Luther after the introduction of movable type.

Even if Shiitization is at this point as much a rumor as a confirmed fact, the subject is highly charged. It is part of a much larger discussion among Washington's Sunni allies about the rise of a "Shiite Crescent" -- an Iranian-backed alliance stretching westward from Iran to Syria to Lebanon that could challenge the traditional power of Sunni elites. With its Sunni masses and minority Tehran-backed regime, Syria is the weak link in the chain. Many Syrians say they are worried Iraq's sectarian strife might spread to Syria; the execution of Saddam Hussein, a Sunni, at the hands of Iraq's Shiite-dominated government, infuriated many. The conversion of Syrians to Shiism could create still more conflict.

Meanwhile, the regional politics are becoming ever more delicate. Damascus is reportedly unhappy about Iran's recent dialogue with Saudi Arabia over the future of Lebanon; Tehran, in turn, is rumored to be questioning Assad's recent peace overtures toward Israel. Both sides denied a rift when Assad visited Tehran in February. But only days later, a group of Syrian intellectuals and parliamentarians loyal to Assad lambasted an Iranian deputy foreign minister in scripted fashion in a closed-door (but widely reported) session. The point of contention? Their unhappiness with what they saw as Iranian support for the Shiitization of Syria.

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