

Religion and the region in Iraq

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Ane Mannsåker Roald
University of Oslo, Norway
a.m.roald@ikos.uio.no

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Abstract:

After decades of strained relationships with the neighbouring states, the new regime in Iraq is in the process of forming new regional alliances. The article discusses the role of religion in the possible emergence of an Iraqi-Syrian sub-region. Regionalisation processes have started in the political and economic domains, but few acknowledge the potential for regionalisation that lies in the religious networks. These seem to a certain degree to have gained strength with the increased influx of Iraqi refugees to Syria. The article concludes that the Iraqi religious networks are not strong enough to construct an Iraqi-Syrian sub-region on their own. However, they should be regarded as regionalising actors which have the potential of reinforcing and deepening regionalisation processes in other domains.

The fall of Saddam Hussein's regime has defrosted a previously static scene of regional affiliations in the Middle East. As the new Iraqi state struggles to come to grips with itself, the states in the region are jockeying for position: Regional supremacy and the enormous sums invested in the reconstruction of Iraq are among the issues at stake for both Iraq and its neighbours. New political agreements are made; the Iranian president Ahmadinejad made a historical visit to Baghdad in March 2008 as the first Iranian head of state to visit Iraq since the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979. Similarly, the borders between Syria and Iraq were reopened after having been closed since the Syrian and Iraqi regimes fell out with each other in 1984 during the Iran-Iraq war. In short, new sub- and micro-regions are in the process of being constructed, and it is yet unclear which regional projects will prevail and which will fail.

One possible regional project under construction is an Iraqi-Syrian sub-region. A number of regionalisation processes can be witnessed in the economic and political sectors at the same time as the influx of Iraqis to Syria has boosted the Iraqi refugee community to an all-time high. The refugees bring with them also religious institutions and networks which are active first and foremost in the Iraqi exile community. However, as time passes, interaction of various kinds with Syrian society is also initiated.

Religion in a regionalisation context is seldom discussed thoroughly in academic studies. In this paper I wish to discuss to which degree these Iraqi religious networks contribute to the emergence of an Iraqi-Syrian sub-region. This is important in a theoretical point of view, but also because it may help us understand and predict which regional projects will succeed and which will not among the many regional projects that are currently being constructed in the area.

Regionalisation, regionalisms and religion

Regionalism, or constructing a region, is inherently a political process. Regionalism demands political actors who seek to fulfil a regional vision. Because of this political quality of the process theoretical literature on regions and regionalism has traditionally focused on state policies and economic and security issues on the state level (see for instance Buzan 1991; Fawcett and Hurrell 1995; Nye 1968). The region building effect of processes taking place in other realms than the political, such as for instance the activities of transnational religious networks, are therefore not up for discussion in these contributions.

After the end of the cold war and the venue of globalisation as a major research field, a new branch of regionalism theory devoted its attention to analysing economic networks and investigating how economic structures on the regional scale interacted with those on the global and local scales. These studies entailed a broader scope, including state, society and economic actors in the open as well as the illicit sectors of society (see e.g. Grant and Söderbaum 2003; Hettne 2000; Marchand et al 2003; Rubin et al 2001). Within this branch of work on regionalism one could therefore envisage the theoretical possibility that religious actors might function as regionalisation actors and thereby influencing the formation of a regional project.

However, the role of religion has not been examined in further detail in empirical studies seeking to apply this theoretical literature on actual cases. One recent exception is an article by Leenders (2007) where he analyses Iraqi-Syrian-Lebanese relations through the lens of 'regional conflict formations'; a concept introduced by Ragin et al (2001). Leenders briefly discusses the alleged Shi'i ambition to promote Iran as the largest power in the region as one example of the social networks that cross the borders between the two countries. The article does not however present a thorough analysis of which role these networks play.

Nevertheless, there are good reasons to have a closer look at how and why religion may play a role in regionalisation processes. The political quality of any regional project means that it ultimately is a question of making people in the area in question accept the 'ideas, identities and ideologies' that are inherent in the regional vision (Marchand et al 1999: 900). Because of its formidable power to create a common identity and to motivate its 'adherents', religion should therefore be counted in among the ideational movements that can create regions.

Regionalisms will not gain strength and popularity, however, without visionary leaders who contribute to the expansion of these ideas and identities. Political actors may be found in many sectors of society, hence, one may also find a multitude of regionalising actors who may have differing or concurring regional visions (Marchand et al 1999). In the following sections I will argue that religious networks and institutions should be regarded as possible regionalising actors which may have their own reasons for furthering one regionalism rather than another.

Regionalisms are pursued through regionalisation processes which may or may not pull in the same direction. In the cases where several regionalisation processes are reinforcing one another, one may see the emergence of what is coined 'region-ness' or 'regionality', implying a relative similarity along several dimensions, including the cultural aspect (Ibid: 900). The development of region-ness enhances the efforts made by regional actors that share the dominant regional vision, and hamper those who foster competing ones. Again, religion is seemingly a potent instrument in order to increase the level of cultural similarity across borders. As expressed by a prominent member of the Iraqi Shi'i clergy:

The celebrations of 'Ashura are a good opportunity for Shi'a of all origins to meet and experience a common religious holiday and tie bonds¹.

Yet, one should be careful not to adopt simplistic and static explanations about religion and its potential for building regional identities. Leenders (2007) has pointed out that there is a need for providing a dynamic understanding of the mechanisms that can explain the importance of social networks, including religious ones, in a regional context. Simply identifying the cross-border linkages does not in itself offer a clarification of how and why such networks are important. Do Shi'a Muslims of various nationalities tie mutual bonds simply because they like interacting with other people who are similar to themselves, or are there other mechanisms that should be investigated in order to grasp a more complete picture? These are questions which will be discussed in the sections below.

An emerging Iraqi-Syrian sub-region?

Because of the large sums implicated in the rebuilding of Iraq and the geopolitical importance of the country, it is only natural that a series of regionalising actors vie to promote different regional projects including Iraq and various neighbouring states. In the context of religious regionalising actors, the obvious case would be Iraq-Iran and Shi'i ties across the border. Nevertheless, Iraqi-Syrian relations are interesting first because they have not been described as extensively as the Iraqi-Iranian, second, they include also Sunni Muslim and Christian actors in the religious domain.

With the reopening of the borders between Iraq and Syria and the large influx of Iraqis to Damascus and its suburbs, a range of regionalisation processes can be observed in a series of sectors. The very foundation for these processes is the large Iraqi community which is now semi-permanently settled in the country. This development is followed by the development of economic, political and military relations.

A considerable contingent of several thousand Iraqis took refuge in Syria from the former regime already in the 1980s. Representatives, *wukala'*, of several of the most important Ayatollahs in Iraq established offices in Sayyida Zeinab at the outskirts of Damascus at that point. However, it was the war in 2003 and the ensuing

¹ Interview with Jawad al-Khalisi in his apartment in Damascus 23.03.2008.

unrest and sectarian violence which spurred Iraqis in their hundred thousands to leave their homes and resettle across the border in Syria. The number of Iraqi refugees is fraught with uncertainty as no census has been made. Estimates vary between 700 000 and 1,2 million. The number is of political interest, not only to the Syrian authorities but also to various NGOs offering assistance to the refugee population. Similar claims about skyrocketing numbers of the Iraqi exile community in Amman were significantly deflated when a representative survey in 2007 showed that the group in fact counted only 161 000 individuals (UNFPA 2007: 7). This might indicate that the real number of refugees in Syria is closer to the lower estimate rather than the higher one.

Although there are no statistically sound studies to confirm this, there are indications that Iraqis settle according to sectarian affiliation also while in Syrian exile: Christians find refuge in Saidnayya just north of Damascus; an area with several churches and monasteries. Iraqi Sunnis are said to have settled mainly in the Qudissiyya area, while the vast majority of the Iraqi Shi'is are to be found in Sayyida Zeinab just outside the Syrian capital where the shrine of Zeinab, of pivotal importance in Shi'a Islam, is to be found (Haidari and Muhammad 2007).

Although plainly visible in the areas where they have settled, the Christian and Sunni communities do not constitute veritable Iraqi ghettos, in contrast with the situation in Sayyida Zeinab. The present dominance of Iraqis in this Damascene suburb is announced through the fact that one of the main streets in the area is named 'the Iraqi Street'. This is the place to go in order to buy Iraqi meat, Iraqi style bread, arrange for travels to Iraq, visit the *wakil* or representative of Iraqi Ayatollahs, or quite simply socialise with other (Shi'i) Iraqis. Posters of Iraqi political leaders and clerics are everywhere. In a regionalisation context, one may perhaps draw the conclusion that the Sunni and Christian communities are more likely to contribute to regionalisation processes in so far as such processes are contingent on a certain level of contact between groups.

In the economic sector numerous cross-border activities are surfacing; Iraqis invest in labour intensive industry in Syria, they open small-scale businesses like travel agencies, restaurants and shops, or they start one-man-businesses buying used

cars in Jordan, drive into Syria, buy clothes or other items which are cheaper there than in Iraq, and cross the border into Iraq again, often with passengers. Iraqis are not formally allowed to own businesses solely in their own name in Syria, but this limitation is circumvented by taking a Syrian partner.² This activity is followed up on by a series of economic agreements on state level facilitating economic exchange between the two countries.

On the political level the borders have reopened and diplomatic ties were re-established in November 2006, 24 years after relations were severed. Iraqi politicians now visit Damascus – a rarity only a few years ago. Political agreements are sought on complicated and sensitive issues such as border control and counter terrorist measures, as well as more prosaic agreements governing for instance schemes to prevent tax evasion or to facilitate bank transfers between the two countries (Sawt al-‘Iraq 2007).

Furthermore there are numerous reports of illicit cross-border activity such as oil smuggling and trafficking of Islamist extremists and drugs across the long border separating the two countries. Oil smuggling is prompted by the Iraqi government’s subsidies of oil which renders Iraqi oil much less costly than that of the neighbouring countries, thus providing business opportunities for some. Drug and terrorist trafficking is another presumably profitable business which presents itself because of the long border with unguarded, inaccessible areas and the volatile situation in Iraq which defies state control. Although perhaps not the typical example of regionalisation processes, such negative developments should also be regarded as part of the picture; regionalisation processes can also entail negative repercussions for society at large while yielding massive income and opportunity to some (Bach 2003).

In sum, what can be regarded as regionalisation processes tying the two neighbours together are manifold and present in various sectors; from those operating on the illicit side of society, to self employers, the middle class, large entrepreneurs and the political elites. This multitude of regionalisation processes and

² Interviews conducted in Amman during spring 2006 and Damascus during spring 2008.

actors provides the backdrop towards which we must view the Iraqi religious regionalising actors.

Religious regionalising actors

Admittedly, region formation is perhaps not the first and foremost goal neither for religious leaders nor for the believers. However, in many cases status in the religious hierarchy as well as wealth and power increases proportionally with the number of subjects or adherents. The *da'wa*, or call to Islam, is a central part of Islam, and does of course not necessarily imply any other motives *a priori* than simply propagating the religion.

However, one should not neglect the fact that the quest for power and money may also be strong motivating factors also for religious institutions. In Shi'a Islam for instance, the largest *marja'iyyas* may accumulate very important sums through the collection of the *khums* religious tax. This money will in turn enable the *marja'iyya* to open more representative offices in areas where they have followers, to undertake charitable work and to establish religious seminaries, which will again accumulate new masses of followers and subsequently power and position primarily within the religious community, but also in the political landscape in Iraq (for a good account of the intimate relations between religious status, money and power, see Nakash 1995). There are in other words ample grounds for *marja'iyyas* to expand regionally, and they should consequently be counted in among the most important regionalising actors in the religious sector.

Possibly because Iraqi Sunnis melt so easily into the already existing religious structures in Syria, there are very few Iraqi Sunni institutions established in Syria, and no purely religious institutions present. However, *Hay'at al-'ulama' al-muslimun fil-'Iraq* (Association of Muslim Scholars in Iraq) established their office in 2006, and are also present in Jordan, Turkey, Egypt and Yemen, but consider their Damascus office the most important one due to the large number of Iraqi refugees here. The director of the office insists that improving social conditions and promoting religious education are among their prime activities, and there is no reason to doubt their

sincere wish to contribute in these fields³. However, because of their position as political party as well as religious institution, it is easy to recognise the political advantages of establishing themselves in Syria. Being the largest exile community, gaining voices among the Iraqi electorate in Damascus is of vital importance and could therefore be a valuable asset in the quest for power in Iraq. Moreover, since *Hay'at al-'Ulama'* is a leading, Sunni political party in Iraq, the relationship with Syrian authorities is one of mutual potential political benefit.

Another possible regionalising actor among the Iraqi Sunni would be the Muslim Brotherhood; a trans-national religious-political movement. In the case of Iraq, however, the Muslim Brotherhood never grew to the influential movement that its sister branches was in neighbouring countries such as Egypt, Jordan and Syria, nor did it develop strong organisational ties to these sister organisations. After the venue of the Ba'th Party in 1968, the Iraqi Muslim Brotherhood worked underground, marginalised from political influence (al-'Azami 2002), but was resurrected as the Iraqi Islamist Party after 2003 (Rangwala 2008). An office in Damascus was established in 2007, presumably for the same reasons that motivated *Hay'at al-'Ulama'*, but had to close down again due to differences with Syrian authorities⁴.

The Sufi orders offer another example of transnational Sunni networks. The two most important Sufi orders in Iraq are the Naqshbandiyya and the Qadiriyya, both of which are also present in Syria as well as most other countries in the Middle East and South Asia. The Sufi orders have a very loose organisational structure with different degrees of association, ranging from full-scale initiation to an order to praying at the tombs of former Sufi shaykhs, or seeking the guidance of a living one (Koslowski 1996: 207). So loose is the structure, it is argued that the networks should only be regarded as coordinated in an organisation at the local level, where people gravitate around a certain holy place or a charismatic leader. On a regional level, however, the networks are devoid of organisational formal structures and rather held together solely by a common spiritual guidance (Koslowski 1996: 211).

³ Interview with director of Syrian office of *Ha'at al-'Ulama'*, Dr. 'Amer Salman Muhammad, 25.03.2008 in the Damascus office.

⁴ Ibid.

In the context of regionalisation, therefore, Sufi orders do not seem to be a major regionalising force. However, one might perhaps claim that the great expansion of the Sufi orders contributes to the development of a region-ness, or a sense of cultural affinity which ties populations together. This emerging regional identity is probably not particularly resilient in the event that stronger political forces choose to counteract it. However, in the case where several regionalising actors pull in the same direction, the presence of Sufi Orders may perhaps reinforce the emergence of a new region.

In sum, the Shi'i regionalising actors are stronger economically and more numerous than the Sunni actors; while *Hay'at al-'Ulama'* are more or less alone among the latter, there are a multitude of *marja'iyas* which enjoy a stable source of income from their religious followers. Each of these actors has initiated regionalisation processes which affect first and foremost the Iraqi exile community, but also the Syrian society. However, there are important differences in terms of who they influence, and in which ways.

Religious regionalisation processes

The Shi'i religious educational system

The religious seminary or *hawza* is a very central institution in terms of forging the often lifelong relations that constitute the Shi'i networks. The studies are organised in three levels which each demands several years, depending on each student's aptitude and abilities – to study for eight years in the two first levels would not be unusual. The first level, *dars al-muqaddamat*, is characterised by a large number of students. However, at the two subsequent ones, only those who are considered ready are admitted. During these years, strong ties are established between the students:

I still maintain contact with many of my fellow students of those days. Now they are established in Iraq, Kuwait and in Qom, while I am in Syria for the time being. We call each other to discuss political issues, or personal matters⁵.

Over the years, many Iraqi students of have studied far away from home. Beginning with the attempts of the British during the protectorate to minimise the

⁵ Interview with Iyad Jamal ad-Din, Shi'i cleric and member of Iraqi Parliament for the secular Iraqi National List, in Oslo 25.05.2005.

role of the mujtahids and to split the Shi'i community, the religious seminaries in Najaf, Karbala' and Baghdad lost much of their relative position vis-à-vis Qom in Iran (Nakash 1995). This development continued with the continuous onslaught on the Shi'i clergy under Saddam Hussein and caused the majority of Iraqi religious students to spend long periods of their life in Iran (Tripp 2000, Farouk-Sluglett and Sluglett 2001).

The large number of Iraqi Shi'is having lived in Iran for a number of years is often regarded as an indication of the strong bonds between the Iraqi Shi'is and Iran. However, one should not overestimate the level of integration in the Iranian society. The sheer number of Iraqi students is so large there are entire Iraqi ghettos established in Qom. Since the students stay for so many years, they bring their families, and spend their life between the seminary and the family household. Entire souqs are Iraqi, as are certain neighbourhoods, and one does therefore not really need to learn Farsi in order to survive even during a stay of several years. Also at the seminary, many classes can only be taught in Arabic, since the Qur'an and therefore also the Arabic language are very central to the studies. Furthermore, in the largest seminaries, classes are divided according to nationality, and even though a class will be given in Farsi, it will be interpreted into Arabic (or for instance Hindi) in order for the students to draw a maximum of outcome from the class. The relationships that an Iraqi student forms during these years, therefore, are perhaps more often formed with another Iraqi student than with an Iranian fellow student⁶.

The situation of being an expatriate itself is a situation that invites the forging of strong relationships between the Iraqi students, and this effect is probably enhanced by the ghetto-like community the students live in while in Qom. This has implications for what happens after they leave the seminary. The graduates will usually return to their home in order to look for a position as a teacher, an imam or a representative of their *marja' taqlid*⁷. This movement of people means that a veritable cobweb of personal and religious relations is stretched out across the whole country,

⁶ Interviews with 'Ali al-Hashimi, director of Sayyid al-Hakim's representative office in Sayyida Zeinab, in Hotel Beit al-Joury in Damascus, 23.03.2008, and with Jawad al-Khalisi in his apartment in Damascus 23.03.2008. Also interview with Iyad Jamal al-Din in Oslo, May 2005.

⁷ Interview with Interview with 'Ali al-Hashimi, director of Sayyid al-Hakim's representative office in Sayyida Zeinab, in Hotel Beit al-Joury in Damascus, 23.03.2008.

and is continuously renewed as new generations graduate. Moreover, with the difficult situation for the Iraqi Shi'a under the regime of Saddam Hussein, and perhaps particularly for the Shi'i clergy, many have been forced to take up residence in other places than their home country. Since most Iraqi Shi'is have taken refuge in Iraq's neighbouring countries, more specifically Iran and Syria, the cobweb has thereby extended into these countries, as well as to various European countries and the US.

In Syria, around 2000 students are gathered at the hawzas in Sayyida Zeinab. The majority of them are of Iraqi origin, however, there are also students of Syrian or Lebanese background⁸. For them, the presence of one of the most important *maraji'* in Shi'a Islam in their immediate proximity means they can live at home in familiar surroundings while in the initial phase of studies. Most students will, however, transfer to one of the large seminaries in Qom if they wish to pursue their studies at more advanced levels. One might suggest that this establishment of teaching institutions in Damascus represents a possibility for the Iraqi religious institutions to make a durable imprint on the local population. Studying at the *hawza* of al-Hakim means that the students, once having terminated their studies, are more likely to choose al-Hakim as their *marja' taqlid*, or source of emulation. Furthermore, the students receive a certificate upon their graduation verifying their status as *wakil* for their Ayatollah in their home region.

Religious training therefore constitutes a regionalisation process where first, Iraqi students are introduced to Lebanese and Syrian students. Because all students are native Arabic speakers, classes are not segregated according to nationality in Syria. Secondly, Iraqi religious elite has created an instrument through which they can influence the future generation of Lebanese and Syrian clerics.

The institute of wukala'

The institute of *wukala'* is founded in the need every *marja' taqlid* has to keep in touch with his mass of followers, or *muqallidun*. This is done through appointing

⁸ Interviews with 'Ali al-Hashimi, director of Sayyid al-Hakim's representative office in Sayyida Zeinab, in Hotel Beit al-Joury in Damascus, 23.03.2008 and Jawad al-Khalisi in his apartment in Damascus 23.03.2008.

representatives in order to provide guidance to these people who have chosen him as religious advisor. The need for an apparatus of *wukala'* has been somewhat mitigated by the introduction of online fatwa sites where one can obtain instant advice directly from the *mujtahid* himself. However, there is still a market for local representatives where followers can present themselves for instance in order to receive advice on a specific dilemma, or to negotiate a family conflict.

Because of the large number of Iraqi Shi'is settled in Sayyida Zeinab in Damascus, this suburb is seat for a host of representatives for ayatollahs of Iraqi and Iranian origin, the most important of which are the representative offices of al-Sistani, al-Hakim and al-Sadr. These representatives remain in contact with the ayatollah himself, as well as with the other *wukala'* of the *mujtahid*, and the other *wukala'* of other *mujtahids* situated in the same area. An exemption to this rule is the case of Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr, who was killed by Saddam Hussein in 1999, but who contrary to tradition has retained his followers after his death.

Although there is seldom direct cooperation between the various representative offices, they undertake similar work such as providing praying facilities, *housseiniyat* (schools) and welfare schemes. In addition, al-Hakim's office, as well as Lebanese Fadlallah and Iranian al-Khomeini, have established small *hawzas* for advanced religious studies in Damascus. The representatives of the various ayatollahs do not usually establish close personal relations, but the community of local religious elites is so small that most are acquainted with each other⁹.

Although open to Shi'a Muslims of all nationalities and origins, the overwhelming majority of those who make use of the services offered by the *wukala'* are Iraqi refugees settled more or less permanently in Syria. As observed by the director of al-Hakim's office in Sayyida Zeinab:¹⁰

There are several factors that come to effect in a person's choice of *marja' al-taqlid*. There are subjective factors, and there are objective factors. For instance, if a person is from a certain country, he may want to follow a *marja' al-taqlid* who comes from this place; perhaps he feels that it is easier to understand, or that he has warmer feelings attached to this *marja'iyya* than to others. The objective factors would be the level of

⁹ Interview with 'Ali al-Hashimi, director of Sayyid al-Hakim's representative office in Sayyida Zeinab, in Hotel Beit al-Joury in Damascus, 23.03.2008.

¹⁰ Interview with 'Ali al-Hashimi, director of Sayyid al-Hakim's representative office in Sayyida Zeinab, in Hotel Beit al-Joury in Damascus, 23.03.2008.

religious understanding and his 'adl. The subjective factors should not be taken into consideration. However, they often are, anyhow.

One implication of such subjective factors being taken into consideration would be that the presence of representative offices of al-Sadr and al-Hakim does not have much impact on the Syrian society or Syrian religious practice. Among Syrian Shi'a Muslims it is rather the Lebanese Sayyid Fadlallah who holds the upper hand. For the Iraqi Shi'i community on their side, bringing along their religious institutions while living in a ghetto-like environment means they in many respects have very limited interaction with the Syrian religious institutions and society. In the perspective of regionalising processes, therefore, the day-to-day religious practise of the various groups of Shi'a muslims does not seem to promote a higher degree of region-ness.

Expansion of family networks

Family relations among the Shi'i elite clergy are at times complex and interconnected, and are therefore of interest in the perspective of regionalisation processes. Although involving a very limited segment of the population, these family networks hold leading positions in their respective communities and may therefore influence larger groups. One salient example is the Sadr family which through the course of four generations has generated family connections with leading clerics in Lebanon, Iraq and Iran, including Musa al-Sadr in Lebanon, Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr and his brother Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr in Iraq, and Mohammad Khatami and Ahmad Khomeini, the son of late Ruhollah Khomeini in Iran. (Chehabi and Tafreshi 2006: 140). These strategic family alliances ties the Shi'i clergy together and renders nationality and national borders less relevant for the religious elite (Mallat 1993).

Sunni religious education in Syria

Where the Shi'i networks in Syria can lean upon the stability of strong, hierarchical structures, the Iraqi Sunni institutions are pioneers in Syria. This is reflected in the activities of *Hay'at al-'Ulama'*, who do not have the resources required for simply opening their own religious seminary as do their Shi'i counterparts. Instead, *Hay'at al-'Ulama'* base their work on cooperation with Syrian religious institutions:

We work with religious associations; Mujamma'at al-Nour, Mujamma'at al-Fatih and the Mufti of Syria. Through our relationship with these establishments we have been able to send around 20 students to study (...) in the departments of shari'a and da'wa. (...) We cover the expenses for the students during their studies. We judge this important because religious training has more or less ceased in Iraq after the occupation. It is important to avoid a full stop; therefore we try to encourage these studies here¹¹.

Because of the lacking Iraqi Sunni institutions, therefore, the regionalisation processes initiated by the Sunni networks imply the integration of Iraqis into the Syrian religious structures instead of the other way around, which is the situation for the Shi'i institutions.

Sunni integration in religious communities in Syria

One should perhaps be careful to exaggerate the importance of Iraqi students studying in Syrian religious schools, however one might assume that these students, although very limited in number, experience a deeper integration into Syrian community than do their Shi'i counterparts. This integration is also furthered by the fact that there are few differences between the religious practise of Syrian and Iraqi Sunni Muslims, as the majority in both countries adhere to the Hanafi school. For Iraqis settling in Syria, only minor variations in terms of rites and traditions are noted; for instance money for building mosques and carrying out religious work is usually collected at the end of the Friday prayers in Syrian mosques, whereas this has been forbidden in Iraq. Devout Iraqi Sunnis in Syria therefore quite simply congregate in the mosques of their new neighbourhood.¹² The interaction with Syrian society is furthermore strengthened by the settlement patterns where Iraqi Sunnis seem to avoid Shi'i dominated Sayyida Zeinab. Although the Sunni areas have quite evidently also acquired a distinctly Iraqi flair, they are less of a ghetto than Sayyida Zeinab.

Tentative conclusions

It seems warranted to start regarding the Iraqi religious networks and institutions as regionalising actors on the same level as economic or political actors. Especially the *maraji'* appear to be particularly influential because of their powerful institutions,

¹¹ Interview with director of the Syrian office of Hay'at al-'ulama' al-muslimun fil-'Iraq, Dr. 'Amer Salman Mohammad in Damascus, 25.03.2008.

¹² Ibid.

both in terms of the representative offices that are found in every nook and cranny, but also the *hawzas* which educate large numbers of religious leaders. The Sunni institutions are in a much weaker position, but nevertheless seem to be instrumental in the integration of Iraqi students into Syrian religious educational institutions. While Iraqi Shi'i religious elites influence the Syrian and Lebanese populations, therefore, Syrian Sunni religious elites draw parts of the Iraqi exile community into their sphere of influence. In both instances one might claim that the regionalisation processes result in a greater degree of cultural and religious similarity, thereby promoting a deeper sense of region-ness in an emerging Iraqi-Syrian sub-region. The religious regionalisation processes alone, however, are in all likelihood not strong enough themselves to construct this budding region; the numbers are few, and the processes are slow and intangible. Yet, in concurrence with other regionalisation processes drawing in the same direction, the Iraqi religious networks are probably the source of regional ties that should not be underestimated.

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