


RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Oral History and the Textual Archive: Contemporary Pakistani Shi'i 'Ulama's Recollections and Reflections on Politics and Sectarian Harmony

Mashal Saif 

Associate Professor of Religion (Islam), Department of Philosophy and Religion, Clemson University,  
South Carolina, USA

Email: [mashalsaif@gmail.com](mailto:mashalsaif@gmail.com)

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## Abstract

Recent scholarship on Pakistani Shi'ism draws on a historical archive that is primarily textual: books, journal articles, pamphlets, etc. authored by Shi'i 'ulama and notables. However, as the field of oral history rightly asserts, the textual archive can never capture those historical facts that are only accessible through oral sources. This article at times challenges and at other points supplements and reinforces the textual archive through the creation of a new archive: an oral history archive based on multiple interviews with two leading Shi'i 'ulama in contemporary Pakistan. At the heart of these interviews lies the question of how these 'ulama conceptualize and remember their country's political past and assess their present, considering their minority status and sectarianism. Through undertaking the above-mentioned examination, this article inaugurates the use of oral history as central to scholarship on Shi'i 'ulama and underscores the importance of the study of this overlooked primary source.

**Keywords:** Shi'i; 'ulama; oral history

Recent scholarship on Pakistani Shi'i clerics ('ulama; sing. 'alim) has masterfully excavated and narrated Shi'i religious and political thought from the birth of the country until the mid-2010s. At the heart of this scholarship lies a historical archive that is primarily textual: books, journal articles, pamphlets, etc., authored by Shi'i 'ulama and notables who wrote during the colonial period, Pakistan's early decades and up, until just a few years ago. However, as the field of oral history rightly asserts, the textual archive can never fully capture or reveal those historical facts that are only accessible through oral sources. And, as the preeminent oral historian Alessandro Portelli states: "Oral history is intrinsically different, and therefore

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specifically useful,” as a source for understanding the past and the present.<sup>1</sup> Inspired by Portelli, this article at times challenges and at other points supplements and reinforces the textual archive (that largely defines the study of Pakistani Shi‘ism to date), through the creation of a new archive: an oral history archive based on multiple interviews conducted between 2012 and 2021 with two leading Shi‘i ‘ulama in contemporary Pakistan. At the heart of these wide-ranging interviews lies the question of how these Pakistani Shi‘i ‘ulama conceptualize and remember their country’s political past and assess their present, considering their minority status and sectarianism.

The article commences with an introduction to my ‘ulama interlocutors: Ayatollah Sayyid Riyaz Hussain Najafi and his son, ‘Allama Dr. Sayyid Muhammad Najafi – two of the most important religious scholars in the country. The body of the article puts the textual archive on Pakistani Shi‘ism in conversation with oral history and reflects on resonances and dissonances that emerge between and among these sources. My examination proceeds in a roughly chronological fashion. I start with Shi‘i ‘ulama’s views on the birth of the country and Pakistan’s unique status. Next, I turn to the Zia era and the tumultuous 1980s, a period usually described as traumatic for Shi‘is in Pakistan. Ayatollah and Dr. Najafi also care deeply about the present and spoke at length about recent events. Later sections of this article discuss their concerns regarding the implementation of a single national curriculum in public schools and Dr. Najafi’s ongoing efforts to promote sectarian harmony.

In undertaking the abovementioned examination, this article makes several significant contributions:

- (1) The oral history that features in this article provides unique insight into the recollections, lives, and experiences of some of the most prominent Shi‘i ‘ulama in the country.
- (2) This is the first scholarly work to shed light on Shi‘i concerns and social engagement in the 2020s – a period when key discussions about the national curriculum are underway and significant activism is being undertaken to promote sectarian harmony.
- (3) Finally, and most importantly, this article inaugurates the use of oral history as central to scholarship on Shi‘i ‘ulama and underscores the importance of the study of Shi‘i ‘ulama’s oral recollections.

### **It Runs in the Family: Ayatollah Najafi and Dr. Najafi**

Ayatollah Sayyid Riyaz Hussain Najafi was born in 1941 in southern Punjab. In his youth he memorized the Qur’an under the guidance of Mawlana Hafiz Sayyid Ghulam Qasim Shah. At the age of seven he commenced his studies at Madrasa Muhammadiyya in Jalalpur Nangiana in the district of Sargodha, about a hundred miles from Lahore. In 1957 he arrived in Lahore and enrolled at Jami‘at al-Muntazar,

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<sup>1</sup> Alessandro Portelli, “What Makes Oral History Different,” in *The Oral History Reader, Third Edition*, eds., Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (New York: Routledge, 2016), 32.

the most important Shi'i religious seminary in Pakistan.<sup>2</sup> In 1963 he traveled to Najaf, where he studied philosophy with Ayatollah Sayyid Muhammad Taqi Qumi and Mawlana Fathullah Isfahani. He studied principles of jurisprudence (*usul al-fiqh*) with Ayatollah Sayyid Abu al-Qasim Khu'i. Ayatollah Shaykh Muhammad Jawad guided him in the study of advanced manuals of *usul al-fiqh* and jurisprudence (*fiqh*) such as *al-Rasail*, *al-Makasib*, and *al-Kifaya*. He also studied *fiqh* under the tutelage of Ayatollah Sayyid Mohsin al-Hakim and the architect of the Iranian revolution, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. Armed with these impressive credentials, in 1969 he returned to Jami'at al-Muntazar as the seminary's vice president.<sup>3</sup> In 1979 – potentially as a response to the Iranian Revolution or the initiation of the Zia era – he established the Wifaq al-Madaris al-Shi'a, an umbrella organization uniting and systematizing the curriculum of Shi'i seminaries in the country. In 1989 he assumed the presidency of Jami'at al-Muntazar.<sup>4</sup> I first met Ayatollah Najafi at Jami'at al-Muntazar in 2010, when I began researching Shi'ism in Pakistan. Since then my research has frequently focused on the *ulama* and publications of Jami'at al-Muntazar. As a result, I have interviewed Ayatollah Najafi multiple times over the past decade. Our latest meeting was at Jami'at al-Muntazar in summer 2021.

Ayatollah Najafi's son, 'Allama Dr. Sayyid Muhammad Najafi, is the second scholar who features in this article.<sup>5</sup> As a young child Dr. Najafi attended a Shi'i seminary (*madrasa*) in Khushab, in the Sargodha district. Following in his father's educational footsteps, Dr. Najafi also transitioned to Jami'at al-Muntazar where he studied from 1990 to 1998. During his time in Lahore, Dr. Najafi attained three master's degrees in Islamic Studies, Persian, and Economics. As was the norm in the 1990s for Jami'at al-Muntazar graduates seeking to further their religious expertise, Najafi traveled to Iran to study at the Hawza 'Ilmiyya Qom. He stayed in Qom for almost a decade (1998–2006), completing advanced study (the *dars-i kharij*) and earning a doctorate in Persian from Tehran University. Upon graduating, Najafi returned to Lahore and commenced teaching at his alma mater, Jami'at al-Muntazar, where his father presided.<sup>6</sup> Dr. Najafi and I initially met at Jami'at al-Muntazar in 2010. In 2011, about a year after our initial meeting, Najafi relocated to Islamabad, where he now presides over Jami'at Madinat ul-'Ilm.<sup>7</sup> Dr. Najafi is deeply committed to teaching and scholarship. He is the author

<sup>2</sup> For more on Jami'at al-Muntazar, see Mashal Saif, *The 'Ulama in Contemporary Pakistan: Contesting and Cultivating an Islamic Republic* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 186–67. Also see the seminary's website: <http://jamiatulmuntazar.com/shortintro.php>.

<sup>3</sup> The above biography of Ayatollah Najafi is condensed from his biography penned in Sayyid Hussaini 'Arif Naqvi, *Tazkira-i 'Ulama-i Imamiyya-i Pakistan* (Islamabad: Markaz-i Tahqiqat-i Farsi-i Iran wa Pakistan, 1984), 112–13. Some of this biography was also shared with me by an employee at Jami'at al-Muntazar who formally introduced Ayatollah Najafi to me in summer 2012.

<sup>4</sup> Andreas Rieck, *The Shias of Pakistan: An Assertive and Beleaguered Minority* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2015), 425, fn. 49.

<sup>5</sup> Dr. Najafi – influenced by his father's study under Ayatollah Khu'i, as well as his own work assisting his father in organizing Khu'i's lectures in Arabic – considers himself an "indirect" student of Khu'i. Dr. Najafi chose Khu'i as his religious reference (*marja-i taqlid*). Since Khu'i's passing, Dr. Najafi has turned to Ayatollah Sistani for guidance on matters that Khu'i did not address. ('Allama Dr. Sayyid Muhammad Najafi, Interview by author, Lahore, Pakistan, July 2021).

<sup>6</sup> 'Allama Dr. Sayyid Muhammad Najafi, Interview by author, Islamabad, Pakistan, May 2012.

<sup>7</sup> The Facebook page of the seminary is [https://www.facebook.com/madinatulilm14/photos/?paipv=0&eav=Afy-8-cOmOWjGXXKobj1QRpf0kprRbdj-fcQ-Cf8ztcx90P5dji7JKRfdT5ZXopHw&\\_rdr](https://www.facebook.com/madinatulilm14/photos/?paipv=0&eav=Afy-8-cOmOWjGXXKobj1QRpf0kprRbdj-fcQ-Cf8ztcx90P5dji7JKRfdT5ZXopHw&_rdr).

of multiple books and regularly addresses Shi'i audiences across the country. Dr. Najafi also remains actively involved in the affairs of a range of Shi'i seminaries. He is the chief executive of Jami'at al-Muntazar; a member of the curriculum (*nisab*) committee of Wifaq al-Madaris al-Shi'a; and the deputy director of the organization Taqrib-i Mazahib-i Islamia.<sup>8</sup> Over the past decade, I have interviewed Dr. Najafi several times in Islamabad and also continue to connect with him in Lahore when he visits Jami'at al-Muntazar and his father. Our latest meeting was at Jami'at al-Muntazar in summer 2021.<sup>9</sup>

In my most recent conversations with Ayatollah Najafi and Dr. Najafi, they spoke at length about Pakistan from its creation till the present, all with a focus on Shi'is. Given their generational difference as well as their own unique interests, at times one spoke far more than the other on a given topic. Ayatollah Najafi spoke extensively about the early decades of the country – a period that he had personally experienced and witnessed. Dr. Najafi was far more interested in speaking about the present and discussing his ongoing efforts to promote sectarian harmony. Consequently, the reader will find that Ayatollah Najafi features prominently, and at times exclusively, in the early sections of this article, while Dr. Najafi features prominently, and at times exclusively, in later sections.

### Reflecting on Pakistan's Creation

Even before the birth of Pakistan, Shi'i leaders in colonial India displayed prescient concern about the precarious position of Shi'is in a Sunni-majority state.<sup>10</sup> Tracing

<sup>8</sup> "Noor-e-Qalam | Dr. Syed Muhammad Najafi," *Youtube*, video uploaded by Hidayat TV Official UK, July 31, 2019, accessed December 28, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ec39KzjrCqo>.

<sup>9</sup> Dr. Naqvi, Interview, July 2021.

<sup>10</sup> For Shi'i opposition to Pakistan in the 1940s, see: Rajit K. Mazumder, "Muslim Minority against Islamic Nation: The Shias of British India and the Demand for Pakistan, 1940–45," *Studies in History* 38, no. 2 (2022): 133–161.

The concerns of Shi'is regarding their minority position vis-à-vis the Sunni majority were well-founded. Despite the Shi'i identity of Muhammad 'Ali Jinnah, Pakistan's revered founder, even in the early decades of Pakistani history, anti-Shi'i sentiments were evident. In the 1950s, Sunni groups criticized Shi'i mourning rituals (*'azadari*) commemorating an incident of special significance to Shi'is: the martyrdom of Hussain, the Prophet Muhammad's grandson (Andreas Rieck, "The Struggle for Equal Rights as a Minority: Shia Communal Organizations in Pakistan, 1948–1968," in *The Twelver Shia in Modern Times: Religious Culture and Political History*, eds., Rainer Brunner and Werner Ende [Brill: Leiden, Netherlands, 2001], 273). The Sunni critique of *'azadari* focused primarily on the allegation that at these ritual mournings Shi'is insulted the first three caliphs – individuals of particular importance to Sunnis. In the Shi'i narrative, these caliphs had usurped political leadership from 'Ali, Muhammad's cousin and the rightful heir to Muhammad's religio-political legacy. Despite this widely held Shi'i view, most Pakistani Shi'is denied abusing and maligning the early caliphs (Rieck, *The Twelver Shia*, 273). But the Shi'is' denial did little to assuage the Sunni majority or the predominantly Sunni state apparatus. By the 1960s, Shi'i mourning rituals began to be subject to state surveillance as sectarian clashes led to the deaths of hundreds (Rieck, *The Twelver Shia*, 277).

While such sectarian clashes were minor skirmishes compared to the violence directed against Shi'is in the 1980s. In fact, as Mariam Abou-Zahab states, most Shi'is did in the 1960s not sense prejudice (Mariam Abou-Zahab, "The Politicization of the Shia Community in Pakistan in the 1970s and 1980s," in *The Other Shiites: From the Mediterranean to Central Asia*, eds., Alessandro Monsutti, Silvia Naef, and Farian Sabahi [Bern, Switzerland: Peter Lang, 2007], 97.) Similarly, according to David Pinault, Sunni-Shi'i relations in Pakistan were relatively good until the late 1970s (David Pinault, *Notes from a Fortune-Telling Parrot: Islam*

Shi'i anxieties regarding Pakistan, Justin Jones documents that separate Shi'i and Sunni political identities have long roots in colonial India.<sup>11</sup> During the late nineteenth century and the first few decades of the twentieth century, distinct Shi'i views emerged on key "Muslim" political issues.<sup>12</sup> Within a year of the founding of the Muslim League, the political party that spearheaded the establishment of Pakistan, the All India Shi'a Conference was established as a means of challenging the League's claim to being the sole representative of Indian Muslims.<sup>13</sup> In the mid-1920s, the Shi'i newspaper *Sarfaraz* argued that "Shias are unable to succeed at elections owing to the selfishness and bias of the Sunni majority."<sup>14</sup> *Sarfaraz* also lamented that "Shia-Sunni propaganda is so mercilessly pursued that Shia candidates now hardly dare to stand for election, being sure of defeat."<sup>15</sup> In 1939, Nasir Hussain Kintori, arguably the most important Shi'i 'alim in colonial India issued an edict recommending Shi'is discontinue any association with the Muslim League.<sup>16</sup> Faisal Devji has noted that even within the Muslim League, Shi'i leaders were fearful of a Sunni majority to the same extent that they were a Hindu one.<sup>17</sup> Their fears were well-founded. There were "documented instances of anti-Shi'i rhetoric and behavior by crucial supporters of the Muslim League."<sup>18</sup>

Shi'i anxieties worsened as Pakistan's creation became imminent. In 1944, 'Ali Zaheer, president of the Shi'a Political Conference, wrote to Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the president of the Muslim League, publicly asking for clarification on the status that would be accorded to Shi'is in Pakistan, and the measures that would be taken to prevent anti-Shi'i propaganda and ensure Shi'i political representation.<sup>19</sup> The Raja of Mahmudabad's younger brother<sup>20</sup> penned a letter to Jinnah in 1940 expressing the fear that "the rule of the majority," that is, Sunnis would be applied in Pakistan.<sup>21</sup> The

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*and the Struggle for Religious Pluralism in Pakistan* [London: Equinox Pub, 2008], 66). In fact, Abou-Zahab notes that during the 1970s Zulfikar 'Ali Bhutto, a Shi'i, served as the country's president from 1971 to 1973 and then as prime minister from 1973 to 1977. Up until the 1970s, Shi'is also continued to be well-represented in the military, local and federal bureaucracies, and government ministries (Abou-Zahab, "The Politicization of the Shia Community," 97). During our conversation, Ayatollah Najafi did not comment on Pakistan's Shi'i political leaders.

<sup>11</sup> Justin Jones, "The Pakistan That Is Going to Be Sunnistan: Indian Shi'a Responses to the Pakistan Movement," in *Muslims against the Muslim League: Critiques of the Idea of Pakistan*, eds., Ali Usman Qasmi and Megan Eaton Robb (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 350–80.

<sup>12</sup> Jones, "The Pakistan That Is Going to Be Sunnistan," 359.

<sup>13</sup> Jones, "The Pakistan That Is Going to Be Sunnistan," 359.

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in Jones, "The Pakistan That Is Going to Be Sunnistan," 359–60.

<sup>15</sup> Quoted in Jones, "The Pakistan That Is Going to Be Sunnistan," 359–60.

<sup>16</sup> Jones, "The Pakistan That Is Going to Be Sunnistan," 363–64. Jones provides some background to Kintori's statement, which includes the League's "aloof response at the height of the Shi'a *tabarra* movement." (Jones, "The Pakistan That Is Going to Be Sunnistan," 363.)

<sup>17</sup> Faisal Devji, *Muslim Zion: Pakistan as a Political Idea* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 66–67.

<sup>18</sup> Simon Wolfgang Fuchs, *In a Pure Muslim Land: Shi'ism between Pakistan and the Middle East* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019), 39.

<sup>19</sup> Jones, "The Pakistan That Is Going to Be Sunnistan," 365.

<sup>20</sup> Venkat Dhulipala, *Creating a New Medina: State Power, Islam, and the Quest for Pakistan in Late Colonial North India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 207.

<sup>21</sup> Mahmudabad to Jinnah, March 29, 1940, in *Quaid-i-Azam Papers, 1940*, ed. Rizwan Ahmad (Karachi-Lahore, 1976), 101.

Raja's brother's demands included that Shi'is should have "liberty of religious observances and beliefs," and should "have a voice in the elected bodies and government institution."<sup>22</sup> The Raja himself also corresponded with Jinnah in the mid-1940s requesting confirmation that Pakistan would be fair and democratic in its treatment of Shi'i individuals.<sup>23</sup> Anxieties about the Sunni character of Pakistan were also expressed in *Sarfaraz*.<sup>24</sup> Summing up Shi'i anxieties in twentieth century colonial India, Justin Jones writes, "The idea of Pakistan was greeted with strong apprehension by a number of India's most influential Shi'a religious and political figures."<sup>25</sup>

At the same time, it is vital to acknowledge that a great many Shi'is were also in support of Pakistan. The Muslim League – the party responsible for the creation of Pakistan – "was both led and bankrolled by wealthy Shi'a families" in the key decades of the 1930s and 1940s.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, Pakistan's founder, Jinnah, was a Shi'i.<sup>27</sup> And the Raja of Mahmudabad, despite his concerns, was very strongly in favor of Pakistan. Following Jinnah's dismissal of his anxieties as unfounded, the Raja publicly stated "that if eight crore Sunni Muslims could not protect Shia interests, nobody else could be relied on to safeguard their interests."<sup>28</sup> In the Raja's own words, he "had given undivided loyalty" to Jinnah from the mid-1930s.<sup>29</sup> With regard to Pakistan, he states that it "stirred the imagination of the Muslims as nothing else had done before."<sup>30</sup> Shi'i support for Pakistan is also evident in the statements made at the Pakistan Shia Conference in Lahore in March 1948. The conference described Shi'is as having "played a prominent part in the establishment of Pakistan."<sup>31</sup> At the conference a decision was reached to attempt to convince the government that Shi'is will "play a part in the strength and defense of Pakistan."<sup>32</sup> In the same vein, an article in the Shi'i journal *Razakar* published in July 1948 discussed a speech by the prominent Shi'i scholar, 'Allama Hafiz Kifayat Hussain (d. 1968), wherein he emphasized Shi'is' immense contributions to the establishment of Pakistan.

Ayatollah Najafi's 2021 account aligned with those parts of the textual archive that report Shi'i enthusiasm and support for Pakistan. Ayatollah Najafi described widespread celebration, particularly among Shi'is, both within and beyond the subcontinent, leading up to and following the birth of Pakistan.<sup>33</sup> Per Ayatollah Najafi,

<sup>22</sup> Mahmudabad to Jinnah, March 29, 1940, 101.

<sup>23</sup> Jones, "The Pakistan That Is Going to Be Sunnistan," 368.

<sup>24</sup> Jones, "The Pakistan That Is Going to Be Sunnistan," 369.

<sup>25</sup> Jones, "The Pakistan That Is Going to Be Sunnistan," 375.

<sup>26</sup> Jones, "The Pakistan That Is Going to Be Sunnistan," 354.

<sup>27</sup> In 1940 Jinnah had written to the Raja of Mahmudabad that protecting Shi'is' freedom of beliefs and rituals was of foremost importance. This correspondence with the Raja was published in the journal *Razakar* in 1985. Muhammad Ali Jinnah, "Bani-i Pakistan Quaid-i 'Azam Muhammad 'Ali Jinnah ka Khat," *Razakar* 49, no. 25 (July 1, 1985), 12.

<sup>28</sup> Dhulipala, *Creating a New Medina*, 209.

<sup>29</sup> Raja of Mahmudabad, "Some Memories," in *The Partition of India: Policies and Perspectives 1935–1947*, eds., C. H. Philips and Mary Doreen Wainwright (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1970), 368.

<sup>30</sup> Raja of Mahmudabad, "Some Memories," 388.

<sup>31</sup> n.a., "Pakistan Shi'a Conference kay Ijlas ke Manzoor Shuda Tajawiz," *Razakar* 11, no. 18 (April 1948): 7.

<sup>32</sup> n.a., "Pakistan Shi'a Conference kay Ijlas ke Manzoor Shuda Tajawiz," *Razakar* 11, no. 29–30 (July 1948): 9.

<sup>33</sup> Ayatollah Sayyid Riyaz Hussain Najafi, Interview by author, Lahore, Pakistan, July 2021.

the renowned Iranian *'alim* 'Abd al-Karim Zanjani met Jinnah, Pakistan's first governor-general, and attempted to assist Jinnah and the nascent Pakistan to the best of his abilities. Ayatollah Najafi added, "Muhammad Taqi Falsafi, a renowned Iranian preacher (*khatib*) visited Pakistan for a week following the country's birth to offer congratulatory wishes. Iranians, Iraqis, Egyptians, Arabs – they were all very pleased with the founding of Pakistan."<sup>34</sup> In short, in Ayatollah Najafi's account, Shi'is – in South Asia and elsewhere – enthusiastically celebrated Pakistan's birth.

Ayatollah Najafi described the creation of Pakistan as an achievement and a blessing for not just South Asian Muslims, but all Muslims, and particularly Shi'is, across the world.<sup>35</sup> Per Ayatollah Najafi, Pakistan is a gift from God.<sup>36</sup> Elaborating on the religious significance of the country's founding, Ayatollah Najafi stated that God gifted Pakistanis their country on the holiest of nights, the Night of Power (*shab-i qadr*).<sup>37</sup>

Ayatollah Najafi's son, Dr. Najafi, recalled the birth of Pakistan as a joint Shi'i-Sunni effort and made no mention of sectarian tensions or Shi'i anxieties. Instead, in our conversation he asserted, "Historically there have not been any differences or discordance (*farq wa tafawut*) between Sunnis and Shi'is in South Asia. The biggest problem for us has been that there is a superpower that interferes with affairs in our country and wants our internal affairs to be different."<sup>38</sup>

What is the potential impact of Ayatollah Najafi's and Dr. Najafi's recollections and perspectives on Shi'i attitudes toward the birth of Pakistan? I contend that the Najafis', and particularly Ayatollah Najafi's, distinct recollection – which presents Shi'is as central to the formation of the country, as celebrating the birth of the country, and as having no "differences or discordance" with the Sunni majority – allows Shi'is to stake a claim to Pakistan in the same way that the Sunni majority automatically does.<sup>39</sup> Such remembrance also enables these *'ulama* to challenge any

<sup>34</sup> Ayatollah Najafi, Interview, July 2021.

<sup>35</sup> Ayatollah Najafi, Interview, July 2021. Ayatollah Najafi's stance here resonates with that of other Pakistani Shi'i scholars who also view Pakistan as having the promise of being "a gift to the world" (Fuchs, *In a Pure Muslim Land*, 5).

<sup>36</sup> Ayatollah Najafi, Interview, July 2021.

<sup>37</sup> Ayatollah Najafi, Interview, July 2021.

<sup>38</sup> Dr. Naqvi, Interview, July 2021. Dr. Najafi's comments regarding the machinations of superpowers must be understood as the product of a particular period. Rieck explains that in Pakistan's early decades, Shi'i-Sunni unity was urged by asserting that the threat from India necessitated unity within Pakistan (Rieck, *The Shias of Pakistan*, 223). The trope of interfering superpowers (i.e., the West and Israel) assumed ascendancy following the Iranian Revolution and its rhetoric. 'Arif Hussain al-Hussaini, the head of the Shi'i organization Tahrir-i Nifaz-i Fiqh-i Ja'fari (TNFJ) in the mid-1980s, consistently asserted that imperial powers fanned the flames of sectarianism in Pakistan. On May 5, 1984, the 1,400th birth anniversary of Imam Hussain, al-Hussaini remarked, "If we really want to make Pakistan an Islamic state, we have to free it from the foreign enemies and their agents, and the only way to achieve this is our complete unity . . . . Unity means that Sunnis stay as Sunnis and Shias as Shias" (Rieck, *The Shias of Pakistan*, 222–23). Sajid 'Ali, who succeeded al-Hussaini as the TNFJ leader, echoed al-Hussaini's views. In 1990 Sajid 'Ali stated, "World imperialism is using the poison of sectarianism against us" (Rieck, *The Shias of Pakistan*, 245). More recently, the prominent Shi'i activist Muhammad Amin Shahidi stated that the "use of these Sunni-Shia infighting words is a conspiracy of America and the West against Pakistan" (Rieck, *The Shias of Pakistan*, 322).

<sup>39</sup> For the argument that majoritarianism is inherent in nationalism, see: Arjun Appadurai, *Fear of Small Numbers: An Essay on the Geography of Anger* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006). Appadurai



suggestions of Shi'is' lack of belonging to the country in a milieu that has been quite inhospitable to Shi'is for several decades, including by attempting to criminalize Shi'i ritual practices.<sup>40</sup> Additionally, Dr. Najafi's comments in particular serve to promote Shi'i belonging to Pakistan by asserting that any assumption to the contrary is driven by external superpowers who seek to undermine Islam.

While contrasting with sections of the textual archive of the 1920s–1940s, which reveal deep Shi'i concerns regarding the birth of Pakistan, Ayatollah Najafi's and Dr. Najafi's recollections are in line with those elements of that textual archive that embrace and celebrate Pakistan, as well as Shi'i writing from the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>41</sup> Among these writings is *Tashkil-i Pakistan mein Shi'an-i 'Ali ka Kirdar (The Role of the Shi'as of Ali in the Creation of Pakistan)*.<sup>42</sup> The detailed work, which contains photographs and extensive selections from a range of primary sources, highlights the role of prominent and forgotten Shi'is in the establishment of Pakistan. The author of the work laments his times (the 1980s), which have compelled him to assume the task of underscoring the role of Shi'is in Pakistan's formation. He writes that this task would have been completely unnecessary several decades ago when all were aware of Shi'is' significant contributions to the country's creation.<sup>43</sup> In the same vein, a detailed collaborative Shi'i report from the 1990s asserted that the creation of a Pakistani Islamic state "had once been an ecumenical Islamic project" and Shi'is had been involved in the project from its inception.<sup>44</sup>

Additionally, in thinking of why the Najafis remember Shi'i joy and participation in the achievement of Pakistan, the dominance of the Pakistani state's narrative of the country's history should also be considered. Nation-states are deeply invested in molding their citizenry, or in Foucauldian terms, turning citizens into subjects.<sup>45</sup> In this process of molding or domesticating citizens, memory and forgetting are tools of power used by both totalitarian and democratic governments.<sup>46</sup> Dexterously wielding these tools, states aim to quash dissenting narratives by minority groups and promote an official narrative to secure national allegiance. The Pakistani state's narrative – evident in its textbooks – describes Pakistan as a deeply desired nation by *all* Muslims

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writes, "Minorities, in a word, are metaphors and reminders of the betrayal of the classical national project. And it is this betrayal – actually rooted in the failure of the nation-state to preserve its promise to be the guarantor of national sovereignty – that underwrites the worldwide impulse to extrude or to eliminate minorities. And this also explains why state military forces are often involved in intrastate ethnocide" (Appadurai, *Fear of Small Numbers*, 43).

<sup>40</sup> In recent decades Pakistani Shi'is' loyalties to Pakistan have been called into question by hostile Sunnis who assert that Pakistani Shi'is' foremost loyalty is to Iran and not their own homeland. The claim that Shi'is are "foreign" or not native to Pakistan has also been leveled. See Saif, *The 'Ulama in Contemporary Pakistan*, 214–15 and 241–54.

<sup>41</sup> Simon Wolfgang Fuchs, "Reclaiming the Citizen: Christian and Shi'i Engagements with the Pakistani State," *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 43, no. 1: 107–108.

<sup>42</sup> Muhammad Vasi Khan, *Tashkil-i Pakistan mein Shi'an-i Ali ka Kirdar* (Karachi: Mirza 'Ali Sa'id, 1982.)

<sup>43</sup> Khan, *Tashkil-i Pakistan mein Shi'an-i Ali ka Kirdar*, 14.

<sup>44</sup> Fuchs, "Reclaiming the Citizen," 108.

<sup>45</sup> Michel Foucault, "Governmentality," in *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*, eds., Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon, and Peter Miller (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 87–104.

<sup>46</sup> Maria Paula Nascimento Araújo and Myrian Sepúlveda dos Santos, (trans.) Sheena Caldwell, "History, Memory and Forgetting: Political Implications," *RCCS Annual Review* 1, no. 1 (2009): 82.



of the subcontinent who constitute a separate nation from Hindus.<sup>47</sup> One wonders if the Najafis' recollection of Shi'i enthusiasm and participation in the project for Pakistan is, in part, a result of the dominance of this state narrative, which has worked to erase competing facts and memories.

### Pakistan as Iran's Elder

Naveeda Khan describes Pakistan as suspended in a constant state of aspiring and striving for the achievement of its *raison d'être*, that is, Islam in Pakistan is always in a state of becoming. Simon Fuchs, inspired by Khan, argues that Shi'a 'ulama also see Pakistan as having immense *unrealized* potential.<sup>48</sup> Per Fuchs, Shi'i 'ulama wanted to "claim for themselves ownership over the promise of Pakistan as a gift to the world."<sup>49</sup> Fuchs adds that Pakistani Shi'i 'ulama underscored the many past academic achievements of South Asian scholars in order to "speak on an equal footing with Iranians and Iraqis."<sup>50</sup>

Contrary to Fuchs' account of Pakistani Shi'i 'ulama highlighting Pakistan's unrealized potential for being a gift to the world, Ayatollah Najafi, in a section of our 2021 conversation, which is detailed below, described Pakistan *in its current manifestation* as a gift to the world and as Iran's equivalent, and even its elder in some fields. A milder form of these sentiments was visible even a decade ago in our summer 2012 conversation when Ayatollah Najafi dismissed the possibility of Iranian financial assistance to Pakistan and noted the ways in which Pakistan was superior to Iran. He stated: "The difference between our money and Iranian money is night and day. One thousand in Pakistani currency is twelve thousand in Iranian currency! So what can Iran give us? Our doctors are good. Our 'ulama are good. I accept that in matters of religion, they are far advanced than us, but [our] doctors, engineers," are good.<sup>51</sup> He repeated: "As I was saying, Iran cannot assist us."<sup>52</sup>

Ayatollah Najafi's sentiments on the hierarchy between Iran and Pakistan had reached a peak that I had not previously encountered by the time of our July 2021 conversation. During our meeting, Ayatollah Najafi criticized Pakistanis for not recognizing and lauding the advancements and achievements that the country had already attained. He narrated an incident from the 1980s, where he found his fellow countrymen underselling Pakistan. Specifically, Ayatollah Najafi stated that he arrived in Iran soon after the revolution. Once there, some Pakistani students told a young Ayatollah Najafi that they wanted to take him to meet an Iranian scholar advanced enough in training to issue independent legal opinions (*mujtahid*). In this *mujtahid's* presence, the Pakistani students started endlessly praising Iran stating that Pakistanis are in need of Iran's assistance (*aap kay mohtaj hain*) in knowledge (*'ilm*) and economics (*iqtisadiat*). Agha Mudarris, a renowned 'alim who was at the gathering,

<sup>47</sup> Jon Dorschner and Thomas Sherlock, "The Role of History Textbooks in Shaping Collective Identities in India and Pakistan," in *Teaching the Violent Past: History Education and Reconciliation*, ed., Elizabeth A. Cole (New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2007), 275–316.

<sup>48</sup> See, Fuchs, *In a Pure Muslim Land*, 14, 150, and 184.

<sup>49</sup> Fuchs, *In a Pure Muslim Land*, 5.

<sup>50</sup> Fuchs, *In a Pure Muslim Land*, 5.

<sup>51</sup> Ayatollah Sayyid Riyaz Hussain Najafi, Interview by author, Lahore, Pakistan, May 2012.

<sup>52</sup> Ayatollah Najafi, Interview, May 2012.

looked at Ayatollah Najafi with a scowl on his face, displeased that the entire country of Pakistan was being insulted.<sup>53</sup> Ayatollah Najafi explained to me that, so as not to offend, he did not offer a scathing rebuke of his fellow Pakistanis' views. However, he offered an alternative opinion – one that made his point clear yet avoided confrontation and saved the face of his fellow Pakistani students. He informed the gathering that Pakistanis have many laudable intellectual achievements and that Pakistanis are ahead of Iranians in the fields of medicine and engineering. Providing a concrete example of Pakistanis' achievements, Ayatollah Najafi shared that he had been to Chicago, where he had seen the then-tallest building in the world. The building was inscribed with the name of its architect: Muhammad Khan, an East Pakistani.<sup>54</sup>

Ayatollah Najafi's account highlights not some past glories of the subcontinent (as in the case of the *'ulama* Fuchs mentions), but the present achievements of the country and its citizens. Instead of according revolutionary Iran a status higher than Pakistan, Ayatollah Najafi announced to an Iranian audience of renowned religious elite that Pakistan was ahead of Iran in fields ranging from medicine to engineering. Moreover, Ayatollah Najafi made it a point to note that Pakistan's formidable status in comparison to Iran was not news for his esteemed Iranian audience. In fact, it had been an Iranian *'alim* himself who could not stand for Pakistan to be undersold and had prompted Ayatollah Najafi to speak up. Implicit in that interaction was the message that Ayatollah Najafi need not have come to his country's defense; the more knowledgeable among the audience, such as Agha Mudarris, already knew of Pakistan's unique status and its many achievements. It was the less informed that needed to be corrected.

Pushing this account of Pakistan's *already achieved* unique and elevated status further, Ayatollah Najafi commented on Pakistan's successful nuclear tests in 1998. Ayatollah Najafi recalled that Pakistan's new status as a nuclear power was celebrated by Muslims across the world.<sup>55</sup> When Pakistan conducted its tests, Ayatollah Najafi was in Turkey. He recounted that whenever anyone in Turkey heard that he was Pakistani, that individual would embrace Ayatollah Najafi declaring them brothers and sharing his happiness at Pakistan's newfound nuclear capabilities.<sup>56</sup> Explaining the depth of Muslim joy at Pakistan's achievements, Ayatollah Najafi stated, "Iranians, Iraqis, Muslims in Europe would all be happy and would bow their head in thankfulness to God that Pakistan had made such advancements. Even today, the hearts of all the world's Muslims beat alongside that of Pakistan. They think of Pakistan as their elder (*apna bara samajhtay hain*)."<sup>57</sup>

<sup>53</sup> Ayatollah Najafi, Interview, July 2021.

<sup>54</sup> Ayatollah Najafi, Interview, July 2021. It appears that Ayatollah Najafi was referring to Fazlur Rahman Khan, who designed the Sears Tower in Chicago.

<sup>55</sup> Ayatollah Najafi, Interview, July 2021.

<sup>56</sup> Ayatollah Najafi, Interview, July 2021. The Turks' warm sentiments, which Ayatollah Najafi recounted are likely inflected by a longer history of mutual admiration and association with Pakistan, which was particularly pronounced in the 1940s and 1950s. Jinnah was an admirer of the Turkish republic's founder Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. The Turks reciprocated with an admiration of Jinnah; a major road in the Turkish capital Ankara is named after Jinnah.

<sup>57</sup> Ayatollah Najafi, Interview, July 2021.

Ayatollah Najafi's comments evidence that for him Pakistan has *already* achieved a status on par with Iran in some fields and even higher than Iran in others. Such comments stand in contrast to the sentiment expressed in secondary literature on Pakistani Shi'i 'ulama, wherein these 'ulama are described as constantly turning to Iran for inspiration and viewing post-revolutionary Iran as having attained goals that are not yet realized in Pakistan.<sup>58</sup>

### Zia ul-Haq as a Champion of Muslim Unity

Zia ul-Haq, a military dictator, assumed power via a coup in 1977 and ruled till 1988. His era has been described in virtually all scholarship on that period as one in which Shi'is experienced unprecedented marginalization. Andreas Rieck, like many others, describes the advent of the Zia era as a "shift from secularism to Islamism."<sup>59</sup> Rieck details that Zia's Islamization efforts "were strongly influenced by his political alliance with parts of the Sunni religious lobby, [and] came as the most important challenge to the Shias' legal status since the country's foundation."<sup>60</sup>

Zia's Islamization measures, enacted soon after he assumed power, included a variety of laws based on the Sunni Hanafi legal school. From the Shi'i perspective, the most controversial of these laws was the mandatory collection and distribution of religious alms (*zakat*). Pakistani Shi'is adhere to the Ja'fari school of Islamic law. The Hanafi and Ja'fari schools differ in their views on the collection and distribution of *zakat*. With the implementation of the Hanafi position on the collection of *zakat*, Shi'is found themselves subject to Islamic laws to which they did not religiously adhere.

The 1979 Islamic Revolution in Shi'i majority Iran had a profound impact across the border.<sup>61</sup> Emboldened by the revolutionary spirit and political activism of Iranian Shi'is, Pakistani Shi'is responded to Zia's Sunni *zakat* laws by taking to the streets. Protests swept the nation. Shi'i leaders convened to assert a united front against the Sunni majority. They demanded that Shi'is be judged by their own legal school. Reacting to the *zakat* laws, Shi'i leaders founded the Tahrir-i Nifaz-i Fiqh-i Ja'fari (The Movement for the Implementation of Ja'fari Law, TNFJ). A mass movement spearheaded by the TNFJ laid siege to state buildings in the summer of 1980. Zia eventually capitulated and acceded to the Shi'i request for exemption from the *zakat* laws.<sup>62</sup>

Despite this settlement, Shi'i-Sunni tensions continued to mount, and Sunni militant groups germinated.<sup>63</sup> Abou-Zahab asserts that Pakistan's intelligence

<sup>58</sup> My comments here are not meant to imply that Ayatollah Najafi thinks that Pakistan has fully realized its potential. At other points in our conversation, Ayatollah Najafi mentioned that Pakistan could progress further than it has and noted some areas in which Pakistan could improve. Moreover, Ayatollah Najafi also shared that he is impressed by many of post-revolutionary Iran's achievements. For additional guidance on how to analyze oral history data, see the conclusion of this article.

<sup>59</sup> Rieck, *The Shias of Pakistan*, 197.

<sup>60</sup> Rieck, *The Shias of Pakistan*, 197.

<sup>61</sup> The impact of the 1979 revolution on Pakistan's Shi'i 'ulama is discussed in more detail in the next section of this article. For a detailed treatment of the Iranian Revolution's impact on Pakistani 'ulama, see Fuchs, *In a Pure Muslim Land*, chapters 4 and 5.

<sup>62</sup> Pinault, *Notes from a Fortune-Telling Parrot*, 66.

<sup>63</sup> For a detailed treatment of sectarian violence in Pakistan, see Muhammad Qasim Zaman, "Sectarianism in Pakistan: The Radicalization of Shi'i and Sunni Identities," *Modern Asian Studies* 32, no. 3 (1998): 689–716.

agencies and the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) were instrumental in organizing and funding these groups.<sup>64</sup> Prime among these groups was the Sipah-i Sahaba (Soldiers of the Prophet's Companions, SSP), founded in 1985.<sup>65</sup> The SSP, a militant organization whose roots can at least partly be traced to the Deobandi Islamic Reform movement, condemned Shi'ism and Sufism. Ahmad Rashid describes the SSP as an, "extreme splinter faction of the JUI [Jami'at-i 'Ulama-i Islam]," a Sunni Deobandi Islamic political party.<sup>66</sup> The SSP advocated the establishment of an Islamic state in Pakistan along Sunni lines where Shi'is would be classified as a non-Muslim minority.

Key Shi'i figures of the era were not shy about declaring that the Zia regime was blatantly anti-Shi'i. In an address delivered in 1984, following arson at a Shi'i mosque and homes in Karachi, Sayyid 'Arif al-Hussaini, the foremost Shi'i activist of the 1980s, proclaimed that Pakistan's Shi'is "were being betrayed by their own government," which was aligned with the Saudis.<sup>67</sup> Al-Hussaini also termed Zia's political system as wrong and immoral since Western culture and laws were rife in the country. He added that the government was "nothing more than a disgrace for Islam."<sup>68</sup>

While scholars and many Shi'is hold Zia accountable for sponsoring anti-Shi'i sentiments, Ayatollah Najafi presented a remarkably different perspective. In condemning the Imran Khan government for spreading Sunnism (a topic discussed below), Ayatollah Najafi cited Zia as a shining example of someone who did *not* spread Sunnism. Ayatollah Najafi noted:

Don't spread Sunnism! . . . When Bush Sr. was the vice president of America, he had many requests for Zia ul-Haq. One of these requests was that the Pakistani troops in Saudi Arabia should be sent to Iraq to fight against Iran. Zia ul-Haq gave one answer: 'Our army is not Sunni. It is Muslim. I will not divide this army! This country is Muslim, not Sunni. It was established in the name of Islam, not Shi'ism or Sunnism. Islam should be implemented here!'<sup>69</sup>

Ayatollah Najafi is correct in stating that Zia did not support Iraq in the Iran-Iraq war. Alex Vatanka details the strategic reasons behind Zia's decision: Zia recognized that Pakistan's preoccupation with its borders with India and Afghanistan meant that it could not afford to open another hostile front. Additionally, considering that the Pakistani public largely supported Iran, Zia wanted to avoid aggravating sectarian tensions in Pakistan. Describing Zia's stance on Pakistani troops, Vatanka writes, "When the Saudis asked him to withdraw Shi'a Pakistani soldiers, ul Haq did not flinch: the Saudis could not pick and choose, he said, and Pakistani soldiers would not be dispatched based on sectarian background."<sup>70</sup>

<sup>64</sup> Abou-Zahab, "The Politicization of the Shia Community," 104.

<sup>65</sup> For more on this movement, see Muhammad Qasim Zaman, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam: Custodians of Change* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), chapter 5.

<sup>66</sup> Quoted in Pinault, *Notes from a Fortune-Telling Parrot*, 68.

<sup>67</sup> Fuchs, *In a Pure Muslim Land*, 145.

<sup>68</sup> Fuchs, *In a Pure Muslim Land*, 146.

<sup>69</sup> Ayatollah Najafi, Interview, July 2021.

<sup>70</sup> Alex Vatanka, *Iran and Pakistan: Security, Diplomacy and American Influence* (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2015), 180.

Works on Shi'ism in Pakistan, when discussing the Zia era and the treatment of Shi'is during that period frequently do not make even a passing reference to Zia's position on the Iran-Iraq war.<sup>71</sup> However, Zia's stance on the matter clearly had a profound impact on how Ayatollah Najafi views Zia. In amazing contrast to all the meticulously researched secondary literature on the era, Ayatollah Najafi lauds Zia's stance on sectarianism as an example to be emulated today.

The glaring contrast between the textual archive that attests to Zia's anti-Shi'i stances and measures and Ayatollah Najafi's oral recollection, which frames Zia as committed to sectarian harmony, underscores the importance of the new oral history archive whose collection this article has initiated. This contrast between oral and textual sources also highlights a key point about oral history, that is, "that it tells us less about events as such than about their meaning."<sup>72</sup> In this instance, Vatanka's research broadly supports Ayatollah Najafi's recollection.<sup>73</sup> However, no scholar of Pakistani Shi'ism has recognized the significance of Zia's stance on the Iran-Iraq war on Shi'is' attitudes toward Zia. The oral history that features here has uncovered the *meaning* attached to this event, that is, for Ayatollah Najafi, Zia's stance on the war evidenced his deep commitment to sectarian harmony and the promotion of Islam, as opposed to Sunnism.<sup>74</sup>

### Establishing an 'Ulama-Led Government in Pakistan: Ayatollah Najafi's Political Aspirations

The rise of Khomeini in the late 1970s and the 1979 Iranian Revolution had a profound impact across the border. Among other changes, Pakistani Shi'is reconfigured their political aspirations. Fuchs records the views of the then-principal of Jami'at al-Muntazar, Safdar Hussain Najafi, who "made a bold and polemical proposal."<sup>75</sup> Viewing Sunnis as currently incapable of providing a *mujtahid*, Safdar Hussain Najafi suggested that Khomeini should send a *mujtahid* to Pakistan to advise citizens on "the thorny social, political and economic questions of turning the country into a truly Islamic state."<sup>76</sup>

Inspired by Iran, there was also a concurrent rise in political activism in Pakistan. Studies on Pakistani Shi'i political activism in the late 1970s and 1980s repeatedly center the leaders of the TNJF: Mufti Ja'far Hussain (d. 1983) and his successor Sayyid 'Arif al-Hussaini (d. 1988).<sup>77</sup> Mufti Ja'far Hussain had a complicated relationship with

<sup>71</sup> For example, Fuchs devotes just a few sentences to the matter. Fuchs, *In a Pure Muslim Land*, 121–22.

<sup>72</sup> Alessandro Portelli, "The Peculiarities of Oral History," *History Workshop*, no. 12 (Autumn, 1981), 99.

<sup>73</sup> While Ayatollah Najafi and Vatanka appear to be discussing slightly different moments and interactions, they both state that Zia refused to divide the army along sectarian lines.

<sup>74</sup> For scholars wondering whether Ayatollah Najafi's stance on Zia as a shining example of a leader promoting sectarian harmony is unwavering, see the conclusion of this article, which discusses the unique characteristics of oral history.

<sup>75</sup> Fuchs, *In a Pure Muslim Land*, 131. Safdar Hussain Najafi desired deeply to transform Jami'at al-Muntazar into a Shi'i seminary of higher learning (*hawza*), along the lines of the grand Shi'i seminaries of Iran and Iraq (Rieck, *The Shias of Pakistan*, 202).

<sup>76</sup> Fuchs, *In a Pure Muslim Land*, 131. On Safdar Hussain Najafi, also see Rieck, *The Shias of Pakistan*, 202.

<sup>77</sup> Given his primarily textual archive and his particular research focus, Rieck's discussion of Shi'is during the 1980s is largely centered on the TNFJ, its interactions with and demands from the Zia government, and the radicalization of the TNFJ. Similarly, Fuchs' examination of this period focuses on Shi'i activism and particularly the TNFJ and al-Hussaini. Another vital component of Fuchs' examination of the 1980s is Shi'i constructions and negotiations of religious authority between the center (Iran) and

the Pakistani state and political authorities. He served as a member of the Council of Islamic Ideology in the 1970s, but resigned in protest in 1979 due the government's refusal to implement Ja'fari law.<sup>78</sup> His resignation was not accepted and he received his salary for years despite not working for the council.<sup>79</sup> In 1980, he led the Shi'is' movement that confronted the government on the issue of *zakat* collection. The Shi'is' demands were met and an amendment was introduced in the Zakat Ordinance.<sup>80</sup> While critical of the government on native soil, when speaking at a press conference in Iran in May 1981, he strategically refraining from censuring the Pakistani government, even when discussing the Zakat Ordinance issue.<sup>81</sup>

In contrast, Hussain's successor, al-Hussaini frequently directed his activism against the government.<sup>82</sup> His efforts ranged from reaching an agreement with the government regarding the legalization of mourning ritual (*'azadari*) processions,<sup>83</sup> to announcing the transformation of the TNJF into a political party whose demands included that Shi'is should be judged in Pakistani courts under Ja'fari law.<sup>84</sup> Moreover, by 1987, the TNJF demanded the implementation of an Islamic system (*Islami nizam*) and Islamic government in Pakistan.<sup>85</sup> Al-Hussaini was murdered in 1988 before he could advance his political cause. Most Shi'is of the time did not recommend "an outright overthrow of the existing structures,"<sup>86</sup> choosing instead to urge the state to solve sectarian tensions.<sup>87</sup> However, the minority view in favor of revolutionary change was occasionally expressed but in general terms that lacked specific details about Shi'i-Sunni power-sharing and the like.<sup>88</sup>

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the periphery (Pakistan). Fuchs seeks to challenge our understanding and usage of the terms "center" and "periphery," and pushes us to view Pakistani Shi'i 'ulama as agentive and commanding figures in Pakistan who did not simply defer to Shi'i clerics abroad. Fuchs also challenges the depiction of Pakistan as the backwaters of global Shi'ism (Fuchs, *In a Pure Muslim Land*).

<sup>78</sup> Ghazanfar Kazimi, *Mufti Ja'far Husayn Marhum (1914-1983): Ayam-i Raftah par Mukhtasar Nazar* (n.p., 1983), 21. Also see Afak Haydar, "The Politicization of the Shias and the Development of the Tehrik-e-Nifaz-e-Fiqh-e-Jafaria in Pakistan," in *Pakistan: 1992*, ed., Charles H. Kennedy (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1993), 79.

An article in *Razakar* provides details about the Shi'i demands, which Mufti Ja'far Hussain presented to the government. See: n.a., "Allama Mufti Jafar Hussain," *Razakar* 49, no. 30 (August 8, 1985): 5-6. Later publications by the TNJF explained the organizations' demands in detail. These included, but were not limited to, the demands that all legal disputes involving Shi'is should be judged in courts according to Ja'fari law; restrictions on *'azadari* should be removed; prominent Shi'i religious intellectuals should be invited to Pakistan; the Islam curriculum of Shi'i students should align with their theological bent; etc. (Haydar, "The Politicization of the Shias," 79).

<sup>79</sup> Kazimi, *Mufti Ja'far Husayn Marhum (1914-1983)*, 21.

<sup>80</sup> Kazimi, *Mufti Ja'far Husayn Marhum (1914-1983)*, 22 and 25.

<sup>81</sup> Kazimi, *Mufti Ja'far Husayn Marhum (1914-1983)*, 27-31. Fuchs also comments on Mufti Ja'far Hussain's deflection of critiques of the Pakistani government at this press conference. Fuchs, *In a Pure Muslim Land*, 135-36.

<sup>82</sup> Fuchs, *In a Pure Muslim Land*, 145.

<sup>83</sup> n.a., "21 May ka Samjhota," *Razakar* 49, no. 25 (July 1, 1985): ba. (The page number was not a number, but the Urdu letter "ba").

<sup>84</sup> Haydar, "The Politicization of the Shias," 79.

<sup>85</sup> Fuchs, *In a Pure Muslim Land*, 144.

<sup>86</sup> Fuchs, *In a Pure Muslim Land*, 181.

<sup>87</sup> Fuchs, *In a Pure Muslim Land*, 181.

<sup>88</sup> See, for example, the article in the Imamia Student Organization journal mentioned in Fuchs, *In a Pure Muslim Land*, 180.

In contrast to the abovementioned trends, which have been examined by scholars studying Shi'ism in Pakistan, Ayatollah Najafi shared remarkable details regarding his unique political aspirations during the Zia era.<sup>89</sup> He narrated a fascinating anecdote regarding his attempts to convince his Sunni counterparts to establish a cleric-led regime in Pakistan, inspired by the Iranian model. Ayatollah Najafi stated the following:

In 1982, after the Iranian revolution, we were traveling to Iran for the first time and with me were the president of Jami'a Ashrafia, Mawlana Abdur Rahman Ashrafi; the *khatib* of the Badshahi mosque, Mawlana Abdul Qadir Azad; and the Nila Gumbad mosque *khatib*, Ali Asghar, who after Abdul Qadir Azad's passing became the *khatib* of the Badshahi mosque. We gathered in Karachi at the Mehran hotel. We were Iran's guests and traveled on an Iranian plane. On the way, we talked. They would praise General Zia ul-Haq a lot. I said, "You are esteemed *'ulama*; you are the guides (*rahnuma*) of the nation (*qawm*); you are the nation's leaders (*rahbar*). The nation listens to you. Instead of constantly centering your conversation on Zia ul-Haq, why don't you establish your own government (*hakumat*)? All the *'ulama* can unite, like Khomeini united everyone . . . so why don't we also unite everyone. Mawlana Abdul Qadir Azad laughed and said you [Shi'is] are the ones who differ (*ikhtilaf*) with us. I said, "No. I am here, and I am the principal of a very large *madrassa*." At that time the Wifaq al-Madaris al-Shi'a had come into being, and I was the director of that as well. [I stated]: "I promise you that we will cooperate with you. There will be unity; there will be cooperation (*ittihad ho ga; ittifaq ho ga*). But please give us [Shi'is] three ministerships. You can have the presidency and the prime ministership. The commander-in-chief [of the army] will be yours as well. Everything will be yours. The ISI [Inter-Services Intelligence] leader will be yours as well. Just give us three ministerships: the Ministry of Finance; the Ministry of Education; and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. He started laughing and saying, "You are taking the important ministries." I said, "Obviously no ministry works in isolation. There will be a single national policy and we will work according to that." We kept moving and . . . [I repeated]: "We are ready to partner with you."<sup>90</sup>

The above quote is remarkable for many reasons. It provides insight into a personal conversation among the leading *'ulama* of Pakistan in the 1980s. It cannot be underscored enough that the nature of Ayatollah Najafi's proposal and the conversation – if made public at the time – would have resulted in severe consequences for the Ayatollah and possibly for the Sunni *'ulama* who entertained the

<sup>89</sup> Ayatollah Najafi's political visions might partly be explained by recognizing the general characteristics of a particular *'ulama* cohort of that period. In 1978, following the proclamation of martial law in Iran and the Jaleh Square massacre in Tehran, Khomeini's supporters became very publicly active in Pakistan. Rieck notes that at the forefront of this activism "were some hundreds of younger Shia *'ulama*' who had studied in Najaf and Qom since the mid-1960s, many of whom had personal acquaintanceship with Khomeini" (Rieck, *The Shias of Pakistan*, 201–202). Ayatollah Najafi falls squarely within this category of *'ulama* having studied in Najaf in the 1960s with Khomeini himself.

<sup>90</sup> Ayatollah Najafi, Interview, July 2021.



conversation. Ayatollah Najafi was discussing the removal of the military dictator Zia ul-Haq from the helm of power. He went so far as to negotiate exactly how power would be shared between Sunni and Shi'i *'ulama*. Even Hussain al-Hussaini had not gone this far. Al-Hussaini had once suggested to Mawlana Fazal al-Rahman of the Jam'iyyat-i 'Ulama-i Islam that they should form "a united party to advocate the Islamic revolution."<sup>91</sup> Ayatollah Najafi was not discussing the formation of a party that would work toward the establishment of an Islamic government, he was discussing the very establishment of a government that would supplant Zia's and power-sharing among Shi'i and Sunni *'ulama* in such a government.

Scholars studying Shi'ism in the 1980s in Pakistan have not been privy to such details from the textual archive. Shi'i publications from the late 1970s and 1980s do not record such intimate and deeply controversial conversations.<sup>92</sup> Thus, till now, scholarship on Pakistani Shi'ism was oblivious to what prominent Shi'i *'ulama* were discussing in intimate settings and how they imagined divvying up the governmental spoils once they overthrew Zia. Ayatollah Najafi's anecdote allows us to recover some of this historical data. Clearly, oral history enables the salvaging and centering of crucial historical data that are inaccessible to scholars privileging a textual archive.

What additional insights can be gleaned from Ayatollah Najafi's recollection of his conversation with Sunni *'ulama*? Focusing on Pakistani Shi'i *'ulama* in the wake of the Iranian Revolution, Fuchs argues that they exhibited newfound strategies to augment religious authority and found ways to carve out spaces of religious authority for themselves while not contesting, or attempting to rise to, the stature of Khomeini.<sup>93</sup> I assert that Ayatollah Najafi's anecdote reveals that elements of Fuchs' description of Pakistani Shi'i *'ulama*'s negotiation of religious authority can be applied to the realm of politics. Ayatollah Najafi did not contest Khomeini's status. Instead, he urged his Sunni colleagues to join him in being inspired by Khomeini. And, while giving Khomeini due deference and citing him as a source of inspiration, Ayatollah Najafi attempted to enter into negotiations with Sunni *'ulama* to carve out an unprecedented leadership role for Shi'i *'ulama* (presumably himself included) in the Pakistan political sphere, just as Khomeini had done in the Iranian context.<sup>94</sup>

<sup>91</sup> Fuchs, *In a Pure Muslim Land*, 140.

<sup>92</sup> Shi'i publications from the Zia era often provide us a sense of what issues united the *'ulama*. These included the desire for Shi'is to be judged under Ja'fari law and an increase in the number of Shi'is on the Council of Islamic Ideology (CII). These aspirations were discussed and passed as a resolution by more than five hundred *'ulama* who participated in the All-Pakistan Fiqh-i Ja'faria Conference in Sargodha on May 27–28, 1978 (Rieck, *The Shias of Pakistan*, 200).

<sup>93</sup> Fuchs notes that following the revolution in Iran, Pakistani Shi'a *'ulama* often emphasized their links to Iran, hoping "to syphon off some of Khomeini's luster for themselves, thereby boost their own positions of authority" (Fuchs, *In a Pure Muslim Land*, 124).

<sup>94</sup> In the contemporary landscape of Shi'i *'ulama* in Pakistan, a Shi'i *'alim* who, in some ways, most closely shares Ayatollah Najafi's political aspirations from the 1980s is Jawad Naqvi. Inspired by the Iranian model, Naqvi views *'ulama* as the rightful political authorities while the Hidden Imam is in Occultation (Fuchs, *In a Pure Muslim Land*, 148). Moreover, Naqvi aspires to political leadership in Pakistan, taking inspiration from Hezbollah in Lebanon where Shi'is were a minority, yet through advocating *wilayat-i faqih* they attained political dominance in the country (Fuchs, *In a Pure Muslim Land*, 149). For more on Jawad Naqvi, see: Saif, *The 'Ulama in Contemporary Pakistan*, chapter 5. For Naqvi's writings on *wilayat*, see Syed Jawad Naqvi, *The System of Wilayat*, trans. Bethat Islamic Research Center (Qom, Iran: MATAB Publications, 2010).

Putting this oral history in conversation with the textual archive reveals further insights into Ayatollah Najafi's political ideas and ideals. A study of Jami'at al-Muntazar's journal *al-Muntazar* reveals that forming a government is not something that Ayatollah Najafi mentioned just in his conversations with Sunni clerics in the 1980s. In a public address in May 2005 in Lahore, Ayatollah Najafi threatened the formation of an independent Shi'i government in Pakistan.<sup>95</sup> He declared the following:

All [Pakistani] Shi'is continue to think the only way to escape oppression is to establish their own government. If we rise up, and this thought of establishing our independent government takes root among us (which is only realized in the present moment at the level of aspiration), then we shall hold fast onto the Qur'an in one hand and the support of the Prophet's family (the *ahl al-bayt*) in the other hand. The beneficence [shade] of the Imam of the Times will cast upon us. If this happens, then no one will be able to block our path. If there will be a government, then it shall only be an Islamic and religious government.<sup>96</sup>

Evidently, Ayatollah Najafi's conceptions of an ideal government in Pakistan have shifted over the decades: initially he proposed a government where power was shared between Shi'i and Sunni 'ulama, and two decades later he threatened to form an exclusively Shi'i government. Despite changes in the specifics of his political aspirations, for several decades Ayatollah Najafi retained an interest in envisioning a new Islamic government in Pakistan and possibly even playing a part in such a government. In our latest meeting in summer 2021, Ayatollah Najafi informed me that he no longer holds the views that he did in 2005. At present he is content to live alongside Sunnis under the current government, despite his dissatisfaction with the Imran Khan government's Sunni leanings – an issue I examine next.

### The Single National Curriculum and State-Sponsored Sunnism

The final issue that Ayatollah Najafi talked about at length in our conversation was the Imran Khan government (2018–2022) and the Single National Curriculum (SNC). Given how recent the government and the curriculum are, there has been no scholarship published on Shi'i 'ulama's views on these issues of vital national importance. This section of the article inaugurates their study.

The general issue of sectarian leanings being manifest in the public educational curriculum is a long-standing point of Shi'i contention and activism. In what follows, I chart a history of this Shi'i struggle and then turn to Ayatollah Najafi's and Dr. Najafi's comments on the current manifestation of this problem.

Even before Pakistan's birth, Shi'is were disturbed by Sunni beliefs being imposed on Shi'i children in schools. In 1945 Jinnah was informed of concerns regarding the

<sup>95</sup> The quotation does not make clear if the government will be in all of Pakistan or in a select part of the country.

<sup>96</sup> Sayyid Fida Hussain Shirazi, "Saf-i Awwal ke do 'Azim Mubariz wa Mujahid 'Ulama ka Chahlam," *Mahanama al-Muntazar* (June 2005), 38. This quotation was also published on the front covers of the *al-Muntazar* July and August 2005 issues. This quotation also appears in Saif, *The 'Ulama in Contemporary Pakistan*, 205.

introduction of a new declaration of faith (*kalima*) for all Muslim children in municipal Urdu schools in Bombay.<sup>97</sup> This *kalima* named the four caliphs. Sunnis hold these caliphs in deep reverence while Shi'is view the first three caliphs as having usurped political authority from 'Ali, Muhammad's cousin and the fourth caliph. Fearing that Sunni religious thought would be forced upon Shi'i children in the newly founded Pakistan, Shi'i organizations such as the All Pakistan Shi'a Conference (APSC) and the Idarat-i Tahaffuz-i Huquq-i Shi'a Pakistan (Organization for the Protection of Shi'i Rights in Pakistan, ITHS) demanded a separate religion (*diniyat*) curriculum for Shi'i students just a year after Pakistan's founding. Shi'i organizations faulted the *diniyat* syllabus that was to be implemented in public schools for lacking correct mention of Shi'i sacred figures.<sup>98</sup> Additionally, they protested that schoolbooks would present biographies of Muhammad and the first four caliphs that would be riddled with controversial accounts.<sup>99</sup>

In Pakistan's early decades, Shi'i advocacy on the issue of public education continued on a variety of fronts. Shi'i demands included, but were not limited to, requesting "adequate representation for Shias in the Central Curricula Board," to asking that advanced Islamic Studies university courses should include texts on Shi'i *fiqh* and *hadith*.<sup>100</sup> At the APSC meeting in Lahore in March 1948 attempts to convince the government to yield to Shi'i educational demands were discussed.<sup>101</sup> A glimmer of hope in that regard was evident in a 1950 announcement by the new Pakistani government. The announcement advised all educational intuitions to allow students the freedom to adhere to their sects and pursue education specific to their sects.<sup>102</sup>

However, overall, the 1950s were a period of disappointment for Shi'i educational activists. Shi'is continued to criticize books assigned in public school curriculums. For example, an article published in *Razakar* in 1952 asserted that the Frontier Province's new curriculum contained books that were unacceptable in the eyes of some sects and requested these books' removal.<sup>103</sup> Efforts toward convincing the government of a separate Shi'i *diniyat* curriculum in all schools and colleges continued.<sup>104</sup> An article published in the early 1950s in *Razakar* noted that the ITHS had been advocating for a separate Shi'i religion curriculum since 1948. The article lamented that this goal remained elusive despite efforts by prominent Shi'i scholars, and even cooperation from some Sunnis.<sup>105</sup> In 1952 the All Pakistan Shi'a Board was formed, in part because the APSC and ITHS were unable to make any progress on securing a separate *diniyat*

<sup>97</sup> Fuchs, *In a Pure Muslim Land*, 42.

<sup>98</sup> Even the history curriculum of secondary schools was faulted for deliberately leaving out mention of Shi'i rulers, leaders, authors, and legal scholars. The exclusion of 'Ali from the syllabus was viewed as especially egregious. See: Sayyid Akbar Ja'far 'Ali Sahib Naqvi, "Majuwaza Nisab-i Tarikh aur Shi'a," *Razakar* 11, no. 36 (September 1, 1948): 2.

<sup>99</sup> Rieck, *The Shias of Pakistan*, 75.

<sup>100</sup> Rieck, *The Shias of Pakistan*, 75.

<sup>101</sup> n.a., "Pakistan Shi'a Conference kay Ijlas ke Manzoor Shuda Tajawiz," *Razakar* 11, no. 18 (April 16, 1948): 7.

<sup>102</sup> n.a., "Mazhabi Talim: Markazi Hakumat ka Taza Farman," *Razakar* 13, no. 17 (May 1, 1950): 3.

<sup>103</sup> n.a., "Eek Aham Dini wa Qaumi Mutaliba: Subah Sarhad kay Jadid Nisab-i Talim par Sarsari Nazar," *Razakar* 15, no. 39 (October 16, 1952): 9.

<sup>104</sup> Hakim Muhammad Hussain Ja'fari, "Kya Mushtarika Nisab-i Diniyat Qaum-i Shi'a ki Awaz hai?" *Razakar* 17, no. 3 (January 16, 1954): 6.

<sup>105</sup> Ja'fari, "Kya Mushtarika Nisab-i Diniyat Qaum-i Shi'a ki Awaz hai?:" 6.

syllabus.<sup>106</sup> In the 1950s an official effort was made – for the sake of “national unity” – to design textbooks that would be amenable to both Shi’is and Sunnis. A commission of six Shi’i and six Sunni ‘*ulama*’ headed by the Minister of Education was formed. Only nine of the fifty textbooks prepared by the commission were approved by the Education Department. Moreover, Shi’i attendance of the joint Shi’i-Sunni commission’s meetings fell very sharply.<sup>107</sup> The president of the APSC, writing in *Razakar*, provided details of this joint commission, noting that ultimately the endeavor failed and, in light of the lack of agreement on the syllabus, in 1954 “the Punjab government . . . accepted that *diniyat* would be a voluntary subject.”<sup>108</sup>

In 1968 there was some official acknowledgment regarding the acceptance of Shi’i demands for a separate *diniyat* syllabus, but syllabi and textbooks remained unchanged.<sup>109</sup> In 1972 an official Nisab-i Diniyat Committee (Religion Curriculum Committee) was formed of five Shi’i and five Sunni ‘*ulama*’ to decide on a *diniyat* syllabus. An article in *Razakar* authored by a Shi’i member of this commission, Mawlana Muhammad Bashir, explains that the committee’s recommendations included a separate *diniyat* curriculum for Shi’is and Sunnis.<sup>110</sup> The article adds that Pakistani Shi’is have been petitioning for 25 years that anti-Shi’i material should be removed from the curriculum, and under the leadership of Mawlana Kausar Niazi, the committee has unanimously agreed to advise the removal of all such material from the curriculum books.<sup>111</sup> The committee’s recommendations were not well received: several Sunni ‘*ulama*’ appealed to the prime minister to reject Shi’i demands for a separate syllabus.<sup>112</sup>

Despite roadblocks, efforts at reaching a joint agreement on the syllabus continued. Membership of this committee was later increased to 14 individuals who eventually reached a decision on a joint textbook.<sup>113</sup> In 1974 “the working group of Shia and Sunni ‘*ulama*’ charged with formulating the *diniyat* syllabus started its work . . . and the new syllabus for classes 3–8 was ready some months later.”<sup>114</sup> The textbooks for classes 3–8 were released in May 1975; Shi’is took to the streets in large numbers protesting that the textbooks were riddled with inaccuracies.<sup>115</sup> At the Shi’a Mutalibat Committee’s (Shi’a Demands Committee) council gathering in June 1975,

<sup>106</sup> Rieck, *The Shias of Pakistan*, 76–77.

<sup>107</sup> Rieck, *The Shias of Pakistan*, 77.

<sup>108</sup> n.a., “Sadr-i All Pakistan Shi’a Conference ka Nisab-i Diniyat se Mutalik Biyan,” *Razakar* 17, no. 36 (October 1, 1954): 2.

<sup>109</sup> Rieck, *The Shias of Pakistan*, 144.

<sup>110</sup> Mawlana Muhammad Bashir, “Nisab-i Diniyat Committee ke Tajawiz,” *Razakar* 36, no. 47 (December 16, 1972): 1.

<sup>111</sup> Bashir, “Nisab-i Diniyat Committee ke Tajawiz,” 4.

<sup>112</sup> Muhammad Qasim Zaman, “Religious Minorities and the Anxieties of an Islamic Identity in Pakistan,” in *Formations of Belief: Historical Approaches to Religion and the Secular*, eds., Philip Nord, Katja Guenther, and Max Weiss (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019), 225.

<sup>113</sup> The textbook was envisioned as containing chapters on the following: (1) Qur’anic verses that Shi’is and Sunnis could recite during prayer; (2) an uncontroversial biography of the Prophet; (3) main Sunni beliefs, biographies of the four rightly guided caliphs and key companions of the Prophet; (4) “Shia *kalima* and *usul ad-din* including *imania*; Shia religious practices and the lives of the *ahl al-bait*” (Rieck, *The Shias of Pakistan*, p. 164).

<sup>114</sup> Rieck, *The Shias of Pakistan*, 171.

<sup>115</sup> Rieck, *The Shias of Pakistan*, 189.

the council declared that it refused to accept the books in their current form and advised the government to implement the changes suggested by the Shi'a Mutalibat Committee and other Shi'i groups.<sup>116</sup>

In later decades, Shi'is continued to raise objections against the *diniyat* syllabus. For example, in 1995 the demands of the leader of the Shi'i organization Sipah-i Muhammad included "preparation of a new syllabus for schools and colleges for Islamiyat and history, which will shed proper light on the Al-i Muhammad and distinguished *sahaba* like . . . the martyrs of Karbala."<sup>117</sup> Debates over the syllabus continued in later years and at times became intertwined with regional dynamics of power.<sup>118</sup> In the early 2000s, Shi'is in Gilgit-Baltistan, in north-western Pakistan, protested the silencing of Shi'i views in the curriculum and newly introduced textbooks in the Northern Areas.<sup>119</sup> Shi'i complaints against the textbooks included the following points: Only Sunni-accepted *hadith* were included; individuals "were described and valued according to the Sunnite tradition"; and Shi'i religious figures were ignored and/or not given their due.<sup>120</sup> Agha Ziauddin Rizvi, the imam of Gilgit's Imamia mosque shared these grievances with the authorities and demanded a revision of the textbooks.<sup>121</sup> Unprecedented sectarian clashes undermined law and order in Gilgit; during 2004–2005 sectarianism led to the loss of almost a hundred lives. Schools were shut for half the year and Gilgit was in a constant state of curfew.<sup>122</sup> In 2005 Agha Ziauddin, the head of the movement seeking syllabus reform, was shot dead.<sup>123</sup> Following his death, violence and debate over the textbooks continued without a truly amenable solution being reached.<sup>124</sup>

It is against this backdrop of long-standing Shi'i apprehensions regarding public school curricula and textbooks that the contemporary discussion on this topic emerges. Shi'i 'ulama's recent concerns are fueled by the Khan government's introduction of the SNC. Per the Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Training, the SNC aims to increase upward mobility and reduce disparities in access to a quality education.<sup>125</sup> Commenting on the new curriculum, Ayatollah Najafi shared the initial enthusiasm he felt upon hearing Khan's plans:

<sup>116</sup> n.a., "Council ka Ijlas," *Razakar* 39, no. 23 (June 16, 1975): 1.

<sup>117</sup> Rieck, *The Shias of Pakistan*, 267.

<sup>118</sup> Regional dynamics of power come into play not just in discussions on the curriculum but with regard to Shi'i-Sunni tensions more broadly. For example, in the second-half of the 2010s, anti-Shi'i violence most directly targeted the Shi'is of the Turi tribe in the country's tribal regions. While such regional dynamics are vital to consider, in charting the broad history of anti-Shi'i violence in Pakistan, there is a tangible national trend of heightened anti-Shi'i violence since the 1980s that, despite some lulls, is evident to date.

<sup>119</sup> Rieck, *The Shias of Pakistan*, 309; and Nosheen Ali, "Sectarian Imaginaries: The Micropolitics of Sectarianism and State-making in Northern Pakistan," *Current Sociology* 58, no. 5 (September 2010), 748.

<sup>120</sup> Georg Stöber, "Religious Identities Provoked: The Gilgit 'Textbook Controversy' and Its Conflictual Context," *Internationale Schulbuchforschung* 29, no. 4 (2007), 390.

<sup>121</sup> Stöber, "Religious Identities Provoked," 391.

<sup>122</sup> Ali, "Sectarian Imaginaries," 748. Eventually a degree of compromise was reached, but it was short-lived.

<sup>123</sup> Stöber, "Religious Identities Provoked," 393.

<sup>124</sup> Stöber, "Religious Identities Provoked," 394–95.

<sup>125</sup> For more on the Single National Curriculum, see: <http://www.mofept.gov.pk/ProjectDetail/MzkyNDc2MjMtY2VjY00ZDA4LTk5OTU0NzUyNDI3ZWZmZnN2Rm?qeiqdgtqdqsiayn?tmpegdgtqnrzpln?rihfkbcvxdgtdqn?dgdngdeihvomwj>.

Imran Khan said that he wanted a unified system of education and that he wanted to reduce the size of children's school bags. [Khan said that] multiple disciplines/subjects should feature in a single schoolbook. Instead of hauling large school bags that cause the backs of young kids to double over, a child can have the ease of taking a single book to school. This idea made me very happy. Then Imran Khan raised the slogan that the entire country should have the same syllabus. This too, appealed greatly to me.<sup>126</sup>

Importantly, Ayatollah Najafi's enthusiasm for a single curriculum in all public schools is not new. In our 2012 conversation, I had asked Ayatollah Najafi about the country's educational system. He had retorted: "What educational system? Each school has its own system!"<sup>127</sup> He lamented that the British interference, which started even prior to formal colonialism, has "completely destroyed the educational system."<sup>128</sup> He added that sectarianism was evident in the multiplicity of curricula being implemented in the country's schools. To address this sectarianism and prevent divisiveness, he had been urging the Zia and Musharraf governments (among others) to only teach those aspects of religion that are shared among sects.<sup>129</sup> Describing some of his efforts, he stated that, during the Musharraf era, he – alongside representatives from all the other Pakistani schools of thoughts – met with the top army brass, Air Force leaders, and Ijaz ul-Haq (the minister of Religious Affairs at the time). Ayatollah Najafi advised them to implement one standard curriculum until the matriculation (colloquially termed "matric") level (i.e., grade 10). This curriculum would include "Qur'an, teachings about prayers, fasting and other rituals, as well as what is normally taught at the matric level."<sup>130</sup> After matriculation, students could specialize in whatever they please.<sup>131</sup> Musharraf responded to Ayatollah Najafi stating: "I am ready to do this, but the *molvis* (religious leaders) will never agree." Lamenting his recommendation's rejection, Ayatollah Najafi added: "Everyone started laughing and the matter ended."<sup>132</sup>

At another point in our 2012 conversation, Ayatollah Najafi again emphasized the importance of a single educational system and curriculum: "There should only be one educational system, which should be made by the government."<sup>133</sup> Emphasizing the importance of a single national curriculum, without using that specific term, Ayatollah Najafi remarked: "The best virtue found in Iran and nowhere else is that they have one educational system, one book and it is predetermined exactly what pages will be taught from that book on any given day . . . . Now suppose a child goes to school in Tehran. His grandmother lives in Mashaad . . . . Even if he leaves for a week [to visit his relatives elsewhere] his education will not be affected. He will take his books with him, attend a school there [i.e., in the city he is visiting]. The same lesson

<sup>126</sup> Ayatollah Najafi, Interview, July 2021.

<sup>127</sup> Ayatollah Najafi, Interview, May 2012.

<sup>128</sup> Ayatollah Najafi, Interview, May 2012.

<sup>129</sup> Ayatollah Najafi, Interview, May 2012.

<sup>130</sup> Ayatollah Najafi, Interview, May 2012.

<sup>131</sup> Ayatollah Najafi, Interview, May 2012.

<sup>132</sup> Ayatollah Najafi, Interview, May 2012.

<sup>133</sup> Ayatollah Najafi, Interview, May 2012.

that is being taught in Tehran will be taught in the other city.”<sup>134</sup> In short, Ayatollah Najafi was lauding the “single national curriculum” of Iran as a model that ought to be emulated in Pakistan. And, as noted a little earlier, when he initially heard of the SNC being implemented in Pakistan, the Ayatollah was thrilled.

Ayatollah Najafi’s enthusiasm was quickly tempered once he saw the strong Sunni bent of the curriculum. He stated, “in crafting that syllabus, there are efforts to push aside Shi’ism and the *ahl-i bayt*.”<sup>135</sup> Detailing the height of exclusion, Ayatollah Najafi bemoaned that the battle of Karbala, “the monumental event in world history,” was not mentioned even once while Yazid was mentioned.<sup>136</sup> “Clearly this is a problem for us.”<sup>137</sup> Ayatollah Najafi also complained that Abu Bakr and ‘Umar, caliphs who the Sunnis revere, were mentioned frequently. He was also frustrated by the syllabus’s focus on the Prophet’s companions (*ashab, sahaba*) and the newfound reverence accorded to them.<sup>138</sup> Ayatollah Najafi was particularly upset about changes in the *durood*, a commonly uttered benediction that is usually phrased as follows: “peace and blessings upon him [Muhammad] and his family.” The phrase, Ayatollah Najafi stated, has recently been reconfigured to: “peace and blessings upon him [Muhammad] and his family and all his companions.”<sup>139</sup> Mounting a case against the changed *durood*, Ayatollah Najafi explained that the Qur’an clearly mentions that some *sahaba* committed mistakes and acted badly. Marshalling this Qur’anic evidence for his cause, Ayatollah Najafi questioned rhetorically, “How can you send peace and blessings on *all* his companions when not all of them were good? Can it ever be that all fingers are the same length?”<sup>140</sup> Explaining the Shi’i stance, he detailed, “We too send peace and blessings upon Muhammad’s companions, but only upon select ones; the ones beloved to the Prophet who acted on God’s commandments.”<sup>141</sup> Ayatollah Najafi ended his exposition on the syllabus by beseeching, “Don’t spread Sunnism!”<sup>142</sup>

<sup>134</sup> Ayatollah Najafi, Interview, May 2012.

<sup>135</sup> Ayatollah Najafi, Interview, July 2021.

<sup>136</sup> Ayatollah Najafi, Interview, July 2021.

<sup>137</sup> Ayatollah Najafi, Interview, July 2021.

<sup>138</sup> Ayatollah Najafi, Interview, July 2021.

<sup>139</sup> Ayatollah Najafi, Interview, July 2021.

<sup>140</sup> Ayatollah Najafi, Interview, July 2021.

<sup>141</sup> Ayatollah Najafi, Interview, July 2021.

<sup>142</sup> Ayatollah Najafi, Interview, July 2021. It was at this point that he lauded Zia for refusing to bow to pressure to divide the army along sectarian lines.

Ayatollah Najafi was right in noting that the profuse reverence for all *sahaba* is a recent development. Historically the Sunni tradition has not had a firm and clear position on the “precise status and definition of the *sahaba*” (Fuchs, *In a Pure Muslim Land*, 174). Moreover, not all *sahaba* were viewed as equals. There were important voices that argued that companions could commit errors, and only select companions should be considered unquestionably just (Fuchs, *In a Pure Muslim Land*, 175. For a detailed discussion of how the *sahaba* came to be elevated by the SSP, see: Fuchs, *In a Pure Muslim Land*, 173–79).

In recent decades in Pakistan, the SSP has pushed for unprecedented reverence of the companions (Fuchs, *In a Pure Muslim Land*, 174). SSP ‘*ulama*’ “utilized the imprecise concept of the *sahaba* and presented their highly syncretistic views as being perfectly in line with the Sunni mainstream” (Fuchs, *In a Pure Muslim Land*, 175). During the early 1990s, the leader of the SSP, Mawlana Muhammad ‘Azam Tariq, served as a member of the National Assembly. In 1992, Tariq pushed for the passing of a bill titled *Namoos-i Sahaba* (The Honor of the Prophet’s Companions). The bill aimed to introduce capital punishment for anyone found guilty of insulting Muhammad’s companions. This was clear targeting of the Shi’i practice of *tabarra’*, that is, insulting select companions of Muhammad for obstructing ‘Ali’s right to the caliphate.



Like his father, Dr. Najafi has also long been invested in the subject of the public educational curriculum. But, unlike his father, he was far less critical of the public education system. In my 2012 conversation with Dr. Najafi, I steered the conversation toward Shi'i critiques of the public educational system. Mentioning articles published in *Al-Muntazar* that cited Agha Ziauddin Rizvi, the imam of Gilgit's Imamia mosque, critiquing the Sunni bent of the Pakistani educational system, I asked Dr. Najafi if he agreed with that sentiment. He responded by saying that this issue was specific to Gilgit, and "it is not like that in other places."<sup>143</sup> He mentioned that at the matriculation level, there is a separate Shi'i and Sunni portion of the exam. He added that with regard to the issue of Gilgit, Agha Ziauddin Rizvi had formed a board of Shi'i and Sunni *'ulama*. Dr. Najafi was part of this board. The board "had advised that [in the syllabus] there shouldn't be an undue focus on personalities that weren't embraced by all sects . . . . Alternatively we had advised that you could provide the view of both sects, that is, the Shi'i view is this, and the Sunni view is that."<sup>144</sup> Given Ziauddin's untimely death, no amenable solution was reached.<sup>145</sup> Echoing his earlier statement about the curriculum issue being specific to Gilgit, Dr. Najafi wrapped up our conversation on the educational system by stating, "For the most part, an effort has been made to avoid divisive issues in our educational system."<sup>146</sup>

Although Dr. Najafi had no strong critique of the public education system and curriculum in our conversations in the 2010s, like his father he initially embraced the SNC. In our 2021 meeting he detailed working intimately alongside Sunnis in drafting the *diniyat* syllabus for first to fifth grades.<sup>147</sup> By summer 2021, Dr. Najafi's initial eagerness had dimmed greatly. He described the desire to implement a single curriculum for both sects as "really good," yet viewed the actualization of this desire as practically impossible.<sup>148</sup> He likened it to how everyone acknowledges that world peace is a wonderful idea and should be implemented, yet practically this never comes to pass.<sup>149</sup> In short, Dr. Najafi's experience of working on the syllabus had left him completely disenchanted regarding its practical possibility.

Narrating how he reached this level of disillusion, Dr. Najafi shared that he and his colleagues worked together to prepare a syllabus that did not privilege any one sect or present anything contentious. For example, details regarding the placement of hands during prayer – a topic on which Shi'is and Sunnis differ – were avoided. Describing how this carefully crafted syllabus met an untimely end, Dr. Najafi detailed that "the interference of agencies outside Pakistan" led to the fanning of sectarian flames.<sup>150</sup> As a result of this external interference the Punjab government passed a controversial ordinance that "whenever the *durood* is written it will state, 'peace and

<sup>143</sup> Dr. Najafi, Interview, May 2012.

<sup>144</sup> Dr. Najafi, Interview, May 2012.

<sup>145</sup> Stöber, "Religious Identities Provoked," 394–95.

<sup>146</sup> Dr. Najafi, Interview, May 2012.

<sup>147</sup> Dr. Najafi, Interview, July 2021. The drafting of the single national curriculum proceeded by reworking lower grades followed by later grades. At the time of our 2021 interview, discussions across the nation were focused on the grade 1–5 syllabus since that had been largely completed. The revised syllabus for later grades was still in the works.

<sup>148</sup> Dr. Najafi, Interview, July 2021.

<sup>149</sup> Dr. Najafi, Interview, July 2021.

<sup>150</sup> Dr. Najafi, Interview, July 2021.

blessings upon him [Muhammad] and his family and all his companions.”<sup>151</sup> Dr. Najafi explained that the new *durood* was a deviation from the Qur’an, *hadith*, and early legal texts and was a ploy not by Pakistani Sunnis but by “external forces” that aimed to ruin Sunni-Shi’i relations.<sup>152</sup> Clearly, the trope of the foreign hand looms large for Dr. Najafi, as is common for many Shi’i *‘ulama* following the Iranian Revolution.

While neither father nor son mentioned the history of Shi’i grievances regarding textbooks and curricula, their comments evidence that many of the anxieties and dissatisfactions articulated decades ago are echoed nearly verbatim today. Shi’is are still concerned about revered figures and key moments in Shi’i religious history being supplanted by their Sunni counterparts. If anything, the contemporary era features a new key issue of contention – the reconfiguring of the *durood* – in addition to the long-standing ones mentioned earlier.

Ayatollah Najafi and Dr. Najafi have been outspoken regarding their deep dissatisfaction with the SNC’s syllabus and textbooks.<sup>153</sup> Their concerns were echoed and publicly articulated by other prominent Shi’i *‘ulama* including ‘Allama Dr. Hussain Akbar, a member of the Council of Islamic Ideology (CII); ‘Allama Dr. Shabbir Hassan Maisami, secretary general of the Shi’a ‘Ulama Council Pakistan; ‘Allama Sayyid Nazir ‘Abbas Taqvi, additional secretary general Shi’a ‘Ulama Council Pakistan; among several others.<sup>154</sup> Speaking at a meeting of concerned Shi’i *‘ulama*, ‘Allama Muhammad Afzal Haidari, secretary general Wifaq al-Madaris al-Shi’a Pakistan, declared that Shi’is supported the idea of a unified curriculum but the reality of what was in the SNC and its textbooks was deeply concerning. Haidari added that Shi’i clerics expressed their concerns in writing to the Ministry of Education but received no response.<sup>155</sup> Other *‘ulama* present at the meeting expressed similar grievances and critiqued the sectarian bent of the SNC. They called on prayer leaders (*imams*) across the country to bring up this issue in their next Friday sermons. These Shi’i *‘ulama* also alerted authorities that they planned to mobilize and demonstrate if the syllabus and textbooks were not revised.<sup>156</sup> Similarly, the TNJF also expressed deep dissatisfaction with the sectarian bent of the SNC.<sup>157</sup>

<sup>151</sup> Dr. Najafi, Interview, July 2021. For more on recent government decisions regarding the *durood*, see: “Punjab Chief Secretary Told to Ensure Recitation of Darood Sharif at School Assemblies,” *Dawn*, December 1, 2021, accessed December 27, 2022, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1661180>. Also see: “Punjab Govt Makes Recitation of Durood Sharif Mandatory in Schools,” *Bol News*, November 30, 2021, accessed December 27, 2022, <https://www.bolnews.com/latest/2021/11/punjab-govt-makes-recitation-of-durood-sharif-mandatory-in-schools/>.

<sup>152</sup> Dr. Najafi, Interview, July 2021.

<sup>153</sup> “Shia Ulama Stood Up against Uniform Education Curriculum! Allama Tahir Ashrafi Reply یکساں ی نصاب تعلیم,” *Youtube*, video uploaded by MessageTV, January 29, 2022, accessed December 28, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dtupgayl2o4>.

<sup>154</sup> “Shia Ulema Reject Single National Curriculum, Declare It Partisan,” *Youtube*, video uploaded by Naya Daur TV, January 29, 2022, accessed December 28, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rf5KxnhroYA>.

<sup>155</sup> “Shia Ulema Reject Single National Curriculum, Declare It Partisan,” *Youtube*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rf5KxnhroYA>.

<sup>156</sup> “Shia Ulema Reject Single National Curriculum, Declare It Partisan,” *Youtube*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rf5KxnhroYA>.

<sup>157</sup> “New Curriculum a Deviation from Qur’an, Sunnah: TNJF,” *The News International*, June 19, 2021, accessed December 28, 2022, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/851833-new-curriculum-a-deviation-from-qur-an-sunnah-tnjf>. For a non-mainstream news source whose editorial criticizes the Sunni bent of

The Sunni *'alim* 'Allama Tahir Ashrafi, chairperson of the Pakistan 'Ulama Council and special assistant to the prime minister on Religious Harmony, responded to Shi'i *ulama's* concerns by defending the SNC and its textbooks. Flipping the Shi'i script, he accused Shi'i religious leaders of generating sectarian tensions.<sup>158</sup> The coming years will reveal whether this issue will be resolved or will result in heightened animosity and violence.

### Rapprochement with Sunnis Today

Rapprochement (*taqrib*) with Sunnis has been a long-held aim of Pakistani Shi'i *'ulama*.<sup>159</sup> Fuchs has dexterously argued that in the initial decades of Pakistan's founding, intra-Shi'i debates over theology and practice were driven by the desire for rapprochement with Sunnis.<sup>160</sup> *Taqrib* was also a key aim for Khomeini who repeatedly asserted that conspiring superpowers, as opposed to Shi'is and Sunnis themselves, were responsible for the lack of Muslim unity. To bolster Muslim unity, Khomeini banned hostile sectarian writings and public *tabarra'* (verbally proclaiming that one is dissociating from those that oppose the Prophet's family). He also advised Shi'is to pray alongside Sunnis.<sup>161</sup> Khomeini's messages permeated Pakistan through numerous sources including the journal *Razakar* which published an article on Khomeini's advice regarding the importance of rapprochement.<sup>162</sup>

In Pakistan in the 1980s, when sectarian tensions were high, Shi'i *'ulama* and their publications (including the journal *Razakar*) parroted Iranian rhetoric and blamed external forces for sectarian violence.<sup>163</sup> Sayyid 'Arif Hussain al-Hussaini urged

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the curriculum, see: "Dominance of a Specific Sect in All New Uniform Curriculum," *Today's Point*, August 11, 2020, accessed December 28, 2022, <https://todayspointonline.com/dominance-of-a-specific-sect-in-all-new-uniform-curriculum/>.

<sup>158</sup> "Shia Ulama Stood Up against Uniform Education cCurriculum! Allama Tahir Ashrafi Reply یکسماں ی نصیب تعالیٰ," Youtube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dtupgayl2o4>. For more on Ashrafi, see: Kalbe Ali, "Tahir Ashrafi Made Special Representative for Religious Harmony," *Dawn*, September 30, 2020, accessed December 28, 2022, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1582347>.

<sup>159</sup> Similarly, Pakistani Sunnis have also aimed at rapprochement. In fact, even in the years leading up to the birth of Pakistan, Sunnis attempted to promote sectarian harmony and quell Shi'i concerns about the potential Sunni bent of the envisioned country (Fuchs, *In a Pure Muslim Land*, 102–103).

<sup>160</sup> Per Fuchs, rapprochement was a motivating factor for local Punjabi reformists who advocated reimagining the events of Karbala as a political struggle and abandoning the practice of controversial Shi'i rituals, as well as for traditionalist *'ulama* who advocated a Shi'i-Sufi synthesis and viewed access to the Hidden Imam as having no religious criteria (Fuchs, *In a Pure Muslim Land*, chapter 2).

<sup>161</sup> Fuchs, *In a Pure Muslim Land*, 140.

<sup>162</sup> n.a., "Ayatollah Al-'Uzma Rahbar-i Kabir Imam Khomeini nay Farmaya: Ittehad Bain al-Muslimin ke Ahmiyat," *Razakar* 49, no. 45/46 (December 1–8, 1985), unnumbered colored page after page 4. It is not page 5; we encounter page 5 after the colored pages end and the journal transitions back to its customary black and white pages.

<sup>163</sup> See, for example, the following articles: (i) n.a., "Quetta kay Waqi'a mein Mullawis Hath Hamare Mulk say Das Hazar Meel Dur hai," *Razakar* 49, no. 28 (July 24, 1985): 1. (ii) n.a., "Eek Super Taqat ko Khush Karne ke Liyay Shi'on par Tashaddud Sharam ke Baat hai," *Razakar* 49, no. 29 (August 1, 1985): 1. (iii) n.a., "Shia Sunni Ikhtilafat Samaraji Koshishon ka Natija hain," *Razakar* 49, no. 31 (August 16, 1985): 4. (iv) n.a., "Mere Baitay ke Shahadat Shi'a Sunni Ittehad ke 'Alamat hai," *Razakar* 49, no. 32/33 (August 24, 1985, September 1, 1985): 2. This article expresses the views of a father of a Shi'i man who was killed in an incident of sectarian violence in Quetta. The father states that while external forces are attempting to paint the act as revealing tensions between Shi'is and Sunnis, the fact is that in Quetta both sects are

Pakistani Shi'is to remain loyal to the country, even as they faced persecution.<sup>164</sup> Simultaneously, al-Hussaini decried the accusations of those who labeled Shi'is as disloyal, stating, "Those who doubt the Shi'is love for their country [Pakistan] and their love for freedom themselves lack love for their country."<sup>165</sup> Publications in *Razakar* emphasized that Shi'is held no animosity against Sunnis and that Shi'i-Sunni tensions were a result of external forces.<sup>166</sup> Leading the Shi'i call for rapprochement, Sayyid 'Arif Hussain al-Hussaini spoke extensively about *taqrib* and maintained working relationships with Sunni 'ulama, despite their criticism of Shi'ism.<sup>167</sup> Echoing Khomeini, al-Hussaini blamed external forces for sectarian tensions and violence and counseled Shi'is and Sunnis to pray together. He also directed Shi'is not to insult Sunnis' practice of a special late-night prayer during Ramadan (*tarawih*).<sup>168</sup>

Dr. Najafi's deep investment in *taqrib* was evident from our very first conversation in 2012. In that conversation he repeatedly emphasized that all Muslims are one and that there is "not a hair's breadth of difference between them." on the fundamentals of religion.<sup>169</sup> He repeated this sentiment stating, "There is no difference between any Muslims on the principles of religion (*usul al-din*). Shi'i, Sunni, Barewla, Wahhabi – there is no difference between them."<sup>170</sup> Furthermore, in our conversation, he referred to the first four caliphs as *khulfa-i rashidun* (the rightly guided caliphs) – an honorific most used by Sunnis. In contrast, Shi'is largely view the first three caliphs as usurping the right of 'Ali to leadership of the Muslim community.

In July 2015 I reminded Dr. Najafi of his use of this phrase, commenting that it was unusual to hear a Shi'i scholar honor all four caliphs. He stated, "There is no issue or prohibition in using such a phrase."<sup>171</sup> He again minimized Shi'i-Sunni differences saying that there is only one difference between the two sects: that of the status of 'Ali/the order of succession after Muhammad.<sup>172</sup> He added, "'Ali lived during the rule

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united. (v) n.a., "14 August," *Razakar* 49, no. 31 (August 16, 1985): 3. The article mentions that Shi'i demands have not been met due to the pressure of external forces. It adds that Pakistani Sunnis are not the ones creating obstacles for Shi'is.

<sup>164</sup> Quaid-i Millat-i Ja'faria, "Mushtail ho kar koi Aisa Kadam na Uthain jis se Qawmi Maqasid ko Thais Pohanchay," *Razakar* 49, no. 26 (July 8, 1985), 1 and 7.

<sup>165</sup> Quaid-i Millat-i Ja'faria, "Tahrik ko Bad-nam Karne kay Liyay Ghisse-Pittay Harbe Istemal Kiyay ja Rahay hain," *Razakar* 49, no. 27 (July 16, 1985): 2.

<sup>166</sup> One article stated: "The truth is that . . . we have no dispute with our Sunni brothers" (n.a., "Shia Mutalibat se Muztarib na hon," *Razakar* 49, no. 30 (August 8, 1985): 3. Another article that promotes *taqrib* is: n.a., "Shi'a aur Sunni kay Darmiyan Ikhtilafat ko Hawa Dainay Walay Islam kay Dushman hain," *Razakar* 49, no. 47 (December 16, 1985): 2. This article reminds its readers that the Prophet's birthday is upon them, and urges Muslims to make a vow to embrace Muslim brotherhood on this blessed day. It alerts readers that the enemies of Islam are trying to harm Islam by driving a wedge between Sunnis and Shi'is.

Yet another 1985 *Razakar* article promoting *taqrib* laments that external forces are driving a wedge between sects. See: n.a., "Sarmaj nay Musalmanon kay Zahnon mein yeh baat Bitha de hai ke Shi'a Sunni ka Dushman hai aur Sunni Shi'a ka," *Razakar* 49, no. 30 (August 8, 1985): 1 and 7.

<sup>167</sup> Fuchs, *In a Pure Muslim Land*, 140.

<sup>168</sup> Fuchs, *In a Pure Muslim Land*, 141.

<sup>169</sup> Dr. Najafi, Interview, May 2012.

<sup>170</sup> Dr. Najafi, Interview, May 2012.

<sup>171</sup> 'Allama Dr. Sayyid Muhammad Najafi, Interview by author, Islamabad, Pakistan, July 2015.

<sup>172</sup> Dr. Najafi, Interview, July 2015.

of Abu Bakr, Omar, ‘Uthman . . . when he did not say any such thing [i.e., anything negative about the caliphs preceding him], then we too should refrain from this.”<sup>173</sup> He added further, “That time that we had those differences [i.e., the time of the first four caliphs] has passed. So now should we take that difference and have it inspire constant discord, infighting and acrimony. No! His [i.e., ‘Ali’s] example shows us that he too did not fight . . . Yes, he did ask for his right. But he did not fight or kill anyone for it, or partake in bombing. So we too should not do that. So I do not think that there is any issue in using such expressions [i.e., the expression *khulfa-i rashidun*].”

As our conversation continued, Dr. Najafi shared that he serves as the deputy director of Taqrib-i Mazahib-i Islami, an organization that promotes sectarian rapprochement in Pakistan. The organization invites prominent ‘*ulama* of different persuasions and members of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to dialogue, avoid misunderstandings, learn the intricacies of each sect’s beliefs, and find solutions to the problem of sectarian disputes and violence.<sup>174</sup> Dr. Najafi commented that the reception from leading Sunni ‘*ulama* has been incredibly warm. They wholeheartedly support his cause and participate actively in the organization’s many events.<sup>175</sup> I pressed Dr. Najafi on whether state or government officials had been asked to participate or assist with the organization. He responded emphatically, “No. No. Not at all. Not at all. We haven’t received any help from the government, and we don’t want that either.”<sup>176</sup> In our 2021 conversation, Dr. Najafi explained that his organization is inspired by the work of its older, more robust and more experienced Iranian counterpart, but its relations with the Iranian organization are limited to occasionally asking them for guidance on matters such as the logistics of trips to foreign destinations.<sup>177</sup> Currently Taqrib-i Mazahib-i Islami Pakistan lacks the means for a separate office space. When organizing events, Dr. Najafi reaches out to large seminaries such as Jami‘at al-Muntazar to inquire if they will house guests and provide the space for hosting an event either pro bono or for a small fee.<sup>178</sup>

Echoing the Iranian line, in our 2021 conversation Dr. Najafi spoke at great length about how Islamophobic superpowers were responsible for sectarian violence in the country. Explaining their nefarious agenda, he stated, “My personal opinion is that today the world does not want that Islam should have the same grandeur and accomplishments (intellectual and otherwise) that it used to enjoy.”<sup>179</sup> He further lamented that at times “our government and state are under the influence of outside powers.”<sup>180</sup> Dr. Najafi’s appraisal stands in contrast to at least some of the evidence in the textual archive. For example, Fuchs notes that there is limited evidence to support external, and in particular, Saudi Arabian influence on Sunni militants. Pakistani Sunnis advanced unique, Pakistan-specific sectarian arguments; they did not parrot Saudi clerics.<sup>181</sup> In this instance, some of the textual archive and oral sources appear divergent.

<sup>173</sup> Dr. Najafi, Interview, July 2015.

<sup>174</sup> Dr. Najafi, Interview, July 2015.

<sup>175</sup> Dr. Najafi, Interview, July 2015.

<sup>176</sup> Dr. Najafi, Interview, July 2015.

<sup>177</sup> Dr. Najafi, Interview, July 2021.

<sup>178</sup> Dr. Najafi, Interview, July 2021.

<sup>179</sup> Dr. Najafi, Interview, July 2021.

<sup>180</sup> Dr. Najafi, Interview, July 2021.

<sup>181</sup> Simon Wolfgang Fuchs, “Faded Networks: The Overestimated Saudi Legacy of Anti-Shi‘i Sectarianism in Pakistan,” *Global Discourse* 9, no. 4 (2019): 705.

Discussing *taqrib*, Dr. Najafi sang the praises of the Islamic Republic of Iran stating that “the real system of sectarian harmony was started after the Islamic revolution.”<sup>182</sup> He repeatedly attributed the birth of *taqrib* efforts in Pakistan to Iran. He stated that the Iranian cleric, Qibla Qazi visited Pakistan in the 1980s to establish and systematize *taqrib* centers. ‘*Ulama* heading sectarian harmony efforts in Iran also visited Pakistan, and Pakistanis were invited to Iran to augment Muslim unity.<sup>183</sup> Over the decades, numerous organizations promoting sectarian unity arose across the world, including in America.<sup>184</sup> Dr. Najafi noted that such organizations have taken his father and other prominent Shi’i and Sunni ‘*ulama* to Norway, the United States, and other destinations.

Explaining the positive impact of *taqrib* efforts, Dr. Najafi narrated an incident involving Mawlana Salimullah Khan (d. 2017), who headed the Wifaq al-Madaris ‘Arabia for almost three decades. During Zia’s era, Mawlana Salimullah refused to participate in a Qur’an translation project undertaken jointly by Shi’is and Sunnis, stating that he did not consider Shi’is to be Muslims. *Taqrib* efforts led to Salimullah having a change of heart that Dr. Najafi personally witnessed when the two of them, along with other ‘*ulama*, visited Iran. There Mawlana Salimullah acknowledged that Iran stood out among all its peers for its thorough implementation of Islam and Islamic law. Commenting on the change in Salimullah’s views, Dr. Najafi stated, “That is the wonderful benefit, most important benefit, of *taqrib*.”<sup>185</sup> Detailing one example of how sectarian harmony is promoted today, he mentioned the actualization of one of Khomeini’s recommendations: key Pakistani Shi’i and Sunni ‘*ulama* pray in congregation and behind one another.

While lauding *taqrib* efforts for bringing “our physical selves very close together,” Dr. Najafi noted that more work is needed so “our hearts draw nearer as well.”<sup>186</sup> At a later point in our conversation he said, “Right now our unity appears to be limited to our external physical selves and their displays. Sometimes I feel as if these feelings of unity have not penetrated hearts [and are only skin deep].”<sup>187</sup> Thus, his work with *Taqrib-i Mazahib-i Islami Pakistan* continues.

Does Dr. Najafi share his passionately articulated stance on Shi’i-Sunni unity with a lay Shi’i audience? The study of oral history teaches us to be attuned to context and to recognize how narrations might change based on who is being addressed. A different shade of Dr. Najafi’s personality and perspective was visible when he addressed what appears to be an overwhelmingly, if not exclusively, Shi’i gathering in September 2021.<sup>188</sup> To resounding appreciation Dr. Najafi narrated multiple incidents recorded in key texts from the Sunni canon that support Shi’i beliefs. One of these incidents, Dr. Najafi mentioned, was from *Sunan Abi Dawud*.<sup>189</sup> The crux of Dr. Najafi’s narration

<sup>182</sup> Dr. Najafi, Interview, July 2021.

<sup>183</sup> Dr. Najafi, Interview, July 2021.

<sup>184</sup> Dr. Najafi, Interview, July 2021.

<sup>185</sup> Dr. Najafi, Interview, July 2021.

<sup>186</sup> Dr. Najafi, Interview, July 2021.

<sup>187</sup> Dr. Najafi, Interview, July 2021.

<sup>188</sup> “Allama Dr. Syed Muhammad Najafi | 16 Safar 1443/2021,” *Youtube*, video uploaded by Markaz Azadi, October 2, 2021, accessed December 28, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=keZJ0yqZK8>.

<sup>189</sup> “Allama Dr. Syed Muhammad Najafi | 16 Safar 1443/2021,” *Youtube*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=keZJ0yqZK8>.

of that incident was as follows: Muhammad's wife 'A'isha (a figure revered in the Sunni tradition but largely reviled among Shi'is) saw her father Abu Bakr staring transfixed at 'Ali's face. She nudged Abu Bakr and inquired, "Don't you have others to see? You're only staring at 'Ali." Abu Bakr rebuked her saying, "Don't introduce deficiencies in my worship!" Dr. Najafi added that Abu Bakr narrated that he had heard from the Prophet that gazing on 'Ali's face was an act of worship. Following his narration of the incident, Dr. Najafi appeared to address an imaginary Sunni objecting to Shi'i theology and practice. Dr. Najafi taunted, "My friend, how will you stop us from our focus on 'Ali. First try and stop Abu Bakr!" Similarly, earlier in his address Dr. Najafi questioned, "How can you have the audacity to stop us from saying 'Ali is God's friend' (*'Ali wali Allah*) in the call to prayer?"<sup>190</sup>

As opposed to avoiding contentious sectarian issues, at this particular gathering, Dr. Najafi staunchly defended Shi'i beliefs by emphasizing their presence in the Sunni canon. Simultaneously, Dr. Najafi highlighted the ignorance of Sunnis regarding their own religious literature.<sup>191</sup> He states, "For those who announce that Shi'is are non-Muslims, tell them 'O crazies, at least read your own books!'" In short, unsurprisingly, Dr. Najafi's colors appear to change to *some degree* depending on the audience.

## Conclusion

This article has inaugurated the use of oral history in the study of Pakistani Shi'i *'ulama*. In so doing, I hope to have brought to light the importance of this previously overlooked primary source. The article has charted how the oral sources at times challenge, and at other points supplement and reinforce, the textual archive. Whether they stand in opposition or conformity or somewhere in between, the new oral history archive that lies at the heart of this article adds unique layers and dimensions to what we know about Pakistan's Shi'i *'ulama*. This new oral history archive has at times opened a vista to explore what oral historians term "underground memories," that is, memories of minority groups that contest official or dominant memories.<sup>192</sup> This article's focus on Shi'i *'ulama*'s oral history has also allowed for the "salvaging of memories, experiences, and existences that have been hidden and silenced."<sup>193</sup> Think, for example, of Ayatollah Najafi's previously unknown political aspirations as well as his generous appraisal of Zia.<sup>194</sup>

In making a case for the significance of oral history in the study of Pakistani Shi'ism, this article, *in some ways*, has called that textual archive's significance into question. For the *'ulama* at the heart of this article, their own recollections of history

<sup>190</sup> "Allama Dr. Syed Muhammad Najafi | 16 Safar 1443/2021," Youtube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=keZlJ0yqZK8>.

<sup>191</sup> "Allama Dr. Syed Muhammad Najafi | 16 Safar 1443/2021," Youtube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=keZlJ0yqZK8>.

<sup>192</sup> Araújo and dos Santos, "History, Memory and Forgetting," 86.

<sup>193</sup> Araújo and dos Santos, "History, Memory and Forgetting," 86.

<sup>194</sup> The conversations at the heart of this article are revelatory for what they discuss as well as what they elide. The Najafis did not mention Shi'i political parties, attempts at criminalizing Shi'i ritual practices, socioeconomic divides among Shi'is, the Taliban, the Hazara, and other issues, events, and groups that are an important facet of Shi'i experience in Pakistan. There is much to be mulled over regarding these exclusions.



trump the textual archive. These ‘*ulama*’s recollections matter in visceral and tangible ways; they impact how they live their lives today as well as the trajectories they desire for themselves and their community. Consequently, I suggest that when drawing on past events and historical data to explain contemporary Shi’i *ulama*’s desires, attitudes, and actions, scholars should consider not just the textual archive, but should pay equal attention to oral history, even when, or especially when, these oral sources differ from the textual archive.

The unique nature of oral sources must be factored into analyses. Theorists of oral history rightly inform us that the account that is remembered and narrated is not etched in stone.<sup>195</sup> It might be recalled differently on a different day or in conversation with a different interlocutor. Similarly, ethnographers and scholars studying communication and interviews have repeatedly emphasized the centrality of the interviewer’s, ethnographer’s, or questioner’s identity and its impact on the data that is gleaned.<sup>196</sup> For example, Margaret Mills, the famed folklorist, details that her positionality as a female American interacting with Afghan storytellers “became an opening for certain kinds of risks and liberties.”<sup>197</sup> Based on these well-accepted insights, I remind the reader that my first interactions with the Najafis were in 2010; however, our first, lengthy recorded conversations were in 2012. In retrospect, these 2012 conversations were not deeply revelatory. A range of reasons come to mind: initial conversations often simply allowed us to scratch the surface; my own understanding of Pakistani Shi’ism and Shi’i *ulama*’s views was still in the process of refinement; and my questions were mostly open-ended without much follow-up requesting more details or clarification. Moreover, my positionality likely played a part. At the time of those conversations, I was a Pakistani graduate student studying in the United States, and my Pakistani affiliation was prominent. When Ayatollah Najafi asked me for my phone number and address in 2012, I mentioned my Pakistani address (where I lived for over a year during 2012–2013). It could be that my identity as a Pakistani researcher with US ties and my at-that-point nascent academic career impacted what the Najafis did or did not reveal.

By 2015 I had established a deeper relationship with Dr. Najafi, which enabled an easier rapport. By this time I was also able to ask more refined questions and follow up on comments he made in our 2012 conversation. Moreover, I could share and mention my publications on Pakistani Shi’i *ulama* in our meeting, which possibly impacted what he chose to share – although even at that meeting he repeatedly politely refused to engage in any discussion about his intellectual disagreements with other Shi’i *ulama* in the country.

Finally, by 2021, I had known both these clerics for a decade. At the start of my meeting with Ayatollah Najafi, I shared with him my recently published book (which included two chapters on Pakistani Shi’i *ulama*). When I called Dr. Najafi to schedule a

<sup>195</sup> Portelli, “The Peculiarities of Oral History,” 103–105.

<sup>196</sup> Timothy Rapley, “The Art(fulness) of Open-Ended Interviewing: Some Considerations on Analysing Interviews,” *Qualitative Research* 1, no. 3 (2001): 317.

<sup>197</sup> Margaret Ann Mills, *Rhetorics and Politics in Afghan Traditional Storytelling* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991), 14.

meeting with him that summer, he told me that Ayatollah Najafi had passed on the book to him. In short, both *'ulama* knew that I was now an established academic and my mention of publishing their views was no longer a hypothetical. These *'ulama*'s knowledge that their statements would be published abroad and in English could have factored into what they shared. In the case of Ayatollah Najafi sharing his political aspirations during the 1980s, it is possible that the amount of time that had passed since the 1980s, and the fact that we had known each other for a decade all played a part in him feeling comfortable revealing his attempts to form a *'ulama*-led government during the Zia era.

In sum, the specific recollections and responses that feature in this article (as a result of these *'ulama*'s interactions with me), might not have emerged had a different individual asked the same questions of these clerics.<sup>198</sup> Similarly, had I asked different questions, or asked the same questions on a different day or in a different order, it is possible that different answers would have been elicited.

Finally, I want to underscore the fragility of unrecorded oral sources and their loss as the minds and bodies that serve as the repository of this delicate archive pass on. Recognizing the advanced age of the only remaining generation of Shi'i *'ulama* who have personal recollections of Pakistan's early decades, it is my keen hope that this article will draw other scholars' interest to the recovery and preservation of this oral treasure before it is lost forever.

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**Ethics Statement.** The interviews that feature in this article were recorded with the *'ulama*'s permission. They also gave me permission to publish their statements in my scholarship. I also have IRB approval for this research.

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<sup>198</sup> Consequently, scholars should not aim to identify an *'alim*'s "true" recollection or perspective. Instead, they should focus on "interpreting the subtle and intricate inter-section of factors that converge" to form a particular oral recollection and/or opinion (Charles L. Briggs, *Learning How to Ask: A Sociolinguistic Appraisal of the Role of the Interview in Social Science Research* [Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1986], 22).

**Dr. Mashal Saif** is an Associate Professor of Religion (Islam) at Clemson University. Dr. Saif's research interests include Islam in contemporary South Asia; the transtemporal dynamics between medieval and modern Islamic discourses; contemporary Muslim political theology; the intersection of religious studies and postcolonial theory; and the anthropology of the state.

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