

## **Shi'i Resistance – Contextual Activism**

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*The notion of Shi'ism as a sect characterized by activism and resistance is incomplete. Throughout the course of Shi'i history, there have been a variety of circumstances, which require a muted understanding of activism and resistance. Born out of persecution and pragmatism, the Shi'a have incorporated a variety of doctrines that allow for the expression of resistance in a variety of overt and covert contexts. This "contextual activism" has not only resulted in the survival of the Shi'i sect, but has also provided for the lasting integrity of the Shi'i community.*

### **Shi'i Resistance**

In examining the elements of activism and quietism within Shi'i theology, it becomes readily apparent that this dualistic divide is inadequate when viewed as an unmitigated expression of opposition. However, when viewed as two ends of an interconnected spectrum, one gains an appreciation for the role of resistance in Shi'ism. To contend that Shi'ism is defined purely by resistance and martyrdom is an incomplete assertion at best. Likewise, the idea of Shi'ism as endorsing a passive approach of pure survivalism is equally as incomplete. What makes the Shi'i theological discourse unique is the ability of scholars, theologians, and jurists to adapt the conversation of resistance selectively to a variety of political contexts.

The subsequent theology that arises from any given historical context is then transmitted into an overarching narrative; one which forms a synthesis between looking toward the horizon and retroactive appropriation. This has provided Shi'ism with a unique dynamic, whereby it asserts concepts of activist resistance and at the same time incorporates elements of passivism when resistance is not prudent. The nature of adaptive Shi'i theology has been a key aspect of its promulgation, which cannot be limited to traditional activist considerations.

The use of resistance as a defining characteristic of Shi'ism, as posited here, is only as worthwhile inasmuch as it relates to the idea of the *ghayba* (occultation) of the *mahdi* and *taqiyya* (dissimulation). This muted piety has allowed the individual to maintain his or her faith whilst enduring a hostile political environment. These concepts have also allowed Shi'ism (even as a sectarian community) to survive as a whole. Similarly, the appropriation of messianic and eschatological qualities of the *mahdi* enables the indefinite postponement of a just society. These concepts were not distilled in a singular moment in time, and were the result of contextual political pragmatism. However, once these theological ideas became crystallized, they formed the basis of a novel synthesis between activism and passivism. It is upon the gauntlet of this prudential fusion of resistance and survival that the future of Shi'ism will be tested.

Shi'ī doctrine can be considered as both fluid and statically referential. In one instance, it purposefully fuses dissimilar concepts (i.e. resistance and quietism) for the purposes of contextual adaptation. Whereas in another instance, Shi'ism can be seen as possessing a marginally fixed doctrine of adherence manifested in the *imam*. This dichotomy has allowed Twelver Shi'ism specifically to promulgate itself as a community in a variety of political circumstances whilst remaining integral and active as a whole. However, without taking a brief survey of the historical contexts and political calamities which have shaped the idea of Shi'ī resistance, an understanding of the broader implications of said theology cannot be ascertained. As such, four formative events have been selected as the basis of Shi'ī resistance – the early succession crisis, the martyrdom of Husayn at Karbala, the Abbasid revolution, and the occultation of the twelfth *imam*. The goal in briefly highlighting these events will be dual-purposed to both emphasize the effect that historical/political context has had on Shi'ī resistance and to establish a general trend of persecution of the minority Shi'ī sect.

It is remiss to think of the early Alid claims to succession as being born out of any sentiments that were distinctly Shi'ī at the time. However, the effects of this era in shaping the larger body of Shi'ī theology as it became sectarian cannot be overstated. The endorsements of various lines of succession helped define the subsequent nature of Islam, which is to generalize in asserting that it created a dualistic community in terms of an overall landscape of orthodoxy/heterodoxy. This result is highlighted by Wilferd Madelung in his discussion of the counter-caliphate of 'Ali. The idea of a "counter-caliphate" seemingly solidifies the very roots of

Shi'ism as being defined by opposition. By deeming something as “counter” it thereby connotes a level of resistance to an established normative standard.<sup>1</sup>

Madelung details that “*Din ‘Ali* could at this stage have only a limited meaning, most likely the claim that ‘Ali was the best of men after Muhammad, his legatee (*wasi*), and as such most entitled to lead the Community”.<sup>2</sup> Madelung illustrates that the crisis for succession only acquired a theological implication in later periods. The implications of the claims of ‘Ali and the act of resistance manifested in the early succession crisis came to shape the broader identity of the resulting Shi’i sect as one of opposition. The rift surrounding the succession crisis created formative kernels for later Shi’i doctrines centering on the viability of succession, an importance placed upon a charismatic leader, and the idea of activist pursuit. At this early stage, it is unclear as to whether there is any precedent for the prudential temperance demonstrated in the later crystalized Shi’i doctrines.

The martyrdom of Husayn at Karbala is an oft-cited formative event in Shi’i history.<sup>3456</sup> The reverent significance of this passionate event is certainly deserved and the resulting effects it has had on the Shi’i political/theological landscape are undoubtable. While the Battle of Karbala became a symbol of the Shi’i emphasis on the *ahl al-bayt* in terms of succession and emulative piety, it also solidified the Alid claim to succession as an oppressed position of resistance. Vali Nasr posits that the defeat at Karbala “ended prospects for a direct challenge to the Umayyad caliphate, it also made it easier for Shiism to gain ground as a form of moral resistance to the Umayyads and their demands. Military defeat paved the way for a deeper appeal to Muslim consciousness”.<sup>7</sup> The martyrdom of Husayn at Karbala cemented the idea of Shi’ism as resisting tyranny. It is also worth mentioning the actions of Zaynab, who “bore witness to Karbala and lived to tell the tale”.<sup>8</sup> The elements of defiant transmission inherent in Shi’i resistance are also emphasized by the actions of Zaynab in the sense of a duty to promulgate the faith.

In contrast to these early developments, which appear to be a linear progression of a singular activism in resistance, the Abbasid revolution provided a glimpse at the evolving nuance

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<sup>1</sup> Wilferd Madelung, *The Succession to Muhammad: A study of the early Caliphate*, 144-309.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 179.

<sup>3</sup> Rola El-Husseini, "Resistance, Jihad, and Martyrdom in Contemporary Lebanese Shi'a Discourse," 404-405.

<sup>4</sup> Farhad Daftary, *The Isma'ilis – Their History and Doctrines*, 52.

<sup>5</sup> Vali Nasr, *The Shia Revival*, 40-41.

<sup>6</sup> Abdulaziz Sachedina, “Activist Shi'ism in Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon,” 430.

<sup>7</sup> Nasr, *The Shia Revival*, 42.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

of Shi'ī resistance. After the succession of the Abbasid caliphate, which the Shi'ī had supported, the claim to the succession of the *imam* as a political figure was betrayed. The Shi'ī were thereby viewed with suspicion by the Abbasid caliphs and were required to subsume their political claims under a variety of theological guises as to dim the perceived threat posed by their opposition. The succession of the Abbasid caliphate formed a turning point in Shi'a theological development, wherein it was no longer sustainable to promote outright activism against an unjust ruler. Moreover, the discussion of the political connotations (*al-Qa'im*) of the *imam* was subsumed under the theological considerations of the *mahdi*.<sup>9</sup> This theological discourse was present under the Umayyad caliphate as well, but only after the calamity of the Abbasid succession did the Shi'ī fully embrace the idea of prudential temperance as manifested in the *mahdi*.<sup>10</sup>

The history of the Shi'ī as an oppressed minority is exemplified in the aforementioned events. As with any oppressed minority, the resulting discourse comes to frame the evolution of said group's future considerations. Whilst the passion of resistance is an ever-present factor, the pragmatism of survival comes to take precedence. With Shi'ism, this translated into a unique fusion of theology and politics, with one discourse complementing the other.

In engaging in a discussion of Shi'ī activism, one must first define what that activism entails. In this context, activism can mean rebellion. But it can also conversely mean resistance in a tacit sense. Disobedience is also a form of resistance for the Shi'ī, whereby an unjust ruler is neither aided nor actively opposed. This approach is not explicitly passive, as one is still a participant in an overall political discourse. The nature of balance in resistance is apparent, as an enabling factor for Shi'ī to participate without overstepping the delicate boundaries which are inherent in an oppressed minority. The pragmatic and mediating effect of this approach is apparent in the ability of the Shi'ī doctrines to subsume hostile political contexts whilst simultaneously asserting an activist Shi'ī position. Specifically, the concepts of *mahdi*, *taqiyya*, and *imam* are essential in describing the true nature of Shi'ī resistance from a theological perspective.

For the Shi'a, the emphasis is placed upon the idea of an ordained charismatic leader.<sup>11</sup> This leader is to be emulated and promulgated by faithful Shi'ī, in contrast to Sunni doctrines

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<sup>9</sup> Sachedina, *Islamic Messianism : The Idea of Mahdi in Twelver Shi'ism*, 15.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

which suppose a referential treatment of the *Sunna* as a set of guiding principles. The focus on a charismatic leader thereby coalesced into the doctrine of the *imam*. The historical relevance of succession is also manifested in this doctrine, wherein the political and spiritual disputes of a community become realized in the divergence of imamate lines. Whilst this has resulted in a fractious community amongst the Shi'ī in terms of sectarian divides, it has also provided a kernel of self-identity as espoused through the creed of the Shi'ī. This kernel of the *imams* simultaneously allows for unity in a divided community whilst accommodating said divisions.

Whilst the line of succession from the prophet is important, via the *imams*, it is therefore important to consider what this succession represents. Essentially, the line of succession supposed by the Shi'ī incorporates a passing down of divine knowledge through the throne ('*arsh*) of the *ahl al-bayt*.<sup>12</sup> This concept reflects a crystallization of the Shi'a claims to succession by firmly rooting the legitimacy of their successors within the legitimacy of the prophet, which is unquestionable. The *imams* then acquire the connotation of infallibility. As the Sunnis refer to the tradition of the prophet, Shi'a regard the family of the prophet as sources of emulation and temporal authority. This has fused the idea of piety and polity into a singular theological concept of emulation.

The idea of *al-Qa'im*, or the infallible political authority exercised by the final *imam* has been a subject of lively theological adaptation within classical Shi'ī discourses.<sup>13</sup> In representing a minority position, the Shi'ī have had to articulate a balance between remaining vital and integral whilst at the same time guaranteeing the existence of future Shi'ī discourses. This has prompted the use of *mahdi* as a method of both deferring the earthly power of the *imams* whilst maintaining their spiritual significance in the hearts of future Shi'ī. The notion of a competitive political authority has brought the Shi'ī into direct confrontation (be it willingly or unwillingly) with the dominant political frameworks throughout history. Subsequently, the idea of proposing the *imam* as a direct competitor to existing political elites (largely Sunni) became problematic and unsustainable. Yet it has been necessary to maintain this connotation of the *imam* as representative of a just earthly polity in order to maintain the integrity of the evolving Shi'ī creed.

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<sup>12</sup> Asaf A. Fyzee, trans., *A Shi'ite Creed - A translation of Risalatul-I'tiqadat of Muhammad b. 'Ali Ibn Babawayhi al-Qummi known as Shaykh Saduq*, 46-48.

<sup>13</sup> Sachedina, *Islamic Messianism : The Idea of Mahdi in Twelver Shi'ism*, 16.

In considering the evolution of *imam* as a doctrine, the concepts of temporal political conflict come to dictate later theological implications. In asserting an alternative (or counter, according to Madelung) leader in a relevant political context, the Shi'ī are essentially challenging the authority of whichever polity in which they exist. The doctrine of *imam* also incorporates the idea of the *imam* as not only a spiritual leader, but as a leader who exercises temporal and earthly authority. Subsequently, the position of *imam* is politicized in a way that is often in conflict with the political apparatus of the era. The specific assertion of an alternate political leadership became an issue during the Abbasid caliphate, which prompted certain elements of theological temperance.<sup>14</sup>

These elements of temperance can be seen in the concepts of *taqiyya* (dissimulation) and the *ghayba* (occultation) of the *mahdi*. Whilst the eschatological imperatives assigned to the *mahdi* are indeed relevant to the discussion of Shi'ī theology inasmuch as it defines the sect as one of resistance, the theme of deference is more important in this instance than a particular end-state. *Taqiyya* can be seen as an act of prudence undertaken by the individual, whilst *ghayba* is a broader narrative established to provide relevance to the theological development of the Shi'ī insofar as it relates to political circumstance. Both concepts incorporate elements of tacit deference, wherein faith is not actively espoused in an effort to remain inconspicuous. This occurs on both an individual level and a political level with *taqiyya* and *ghayba* respectively, although it seems likely that the assertion of an alternative political leader would thereby prompt dissimulation via the detriments of holding a minority position.

*Taqiyya* requires the individual to momentarily deny identifying oneself as a Shi'ī as to not draw the ire of majority powers who have seen fit to persecute the Shi'ī for reasons of political competition or pious conviction.<sup>15</sup> This is not the same as passivism, as the integrity of one's faith is still held and promulgated in private. This is a short term micro-occultation which also renders relevant the broader considerations of *ghayba* for the individual. *Taqiyya* allows the individual to circumvent earthly tyranny and transcends the concept of survival on the level of the individual. The occultation of the *mahdi* is thereby experienced by the individual Shi'ī in the act of *taqiyya*.

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<sup>14</sup> Nasr, *The Shia Revival*, 53.

<sup>15</sup> Daftary, *The Isma'īlis – Their History and Doctrines*, 68.

While activism is often equated with immediate overt activity, this is perhaps misleading. What *taqiyya* provides for the Shi'ī is not a bashful cowardice in choosing to not emphasize one's faith, but a sense of long-term investment. If one takes part in the act of *taqiyya*, he or she is directly participating in the promulgation of their community. In this light, it is apparent that this form of quietism (in a literal sense) is actually one of the most potent manifestations of activism. The activism of *taqiyya* does not require, or even emphasize, the waving of the Shi'ī banner. To the contrary, it emphasizes an internal recognition of prudence for the greater survival of the Shi'ī faith. This could be posited as an act of internal resistance, whereby the political oppressors are not able to suppose control over the internal convictions of the individual. *Taqiyya* allows for this tacit resistance by allowing the individual to participate in a broader and long-term emphasis on personal piety; something which is often in conflict with normative political and religious contexts.

If *taqiyya* is the method of tacit activism, the *ghayba* of the *mahdi* represents the broader process to which the individual contributes by actively maintaining the integrity of one's faith. The deference of earthly authority through the occultation of the final *imam* has functioned as a mechanism of survival as much as it has functioned as a perceivable end-state. In subsuming the activist assertion of the political authority of the *imams* under an imaginative concept, the *taqiyya* of the individual pays proverbial tribute to the *ghayba* of the faith. The *imam*, as per the creed of the Shi'ī is a manifestation of that faith. The authority of the *imams* is manifested (not exercised), under occultation, within the individual. Subsequently, the *ghayba* has allowed the Shi'ī to assert a broader political authority without necessarily advocating for the outright removal of the existing state.

The *ghayba* will end pending the return of the *mahdi* or final *imam*. The *mahdi* will then establish a just society prior to the day of judgment. Even on the surface, the *mahdi* is asserting political and spiritual authority in the fusion of justice which appears to be a central facet of Shi'ī resistance. The establishment of justice implies an injustice to be corrected, therefore requiring the narrative device of *mahdi* as an activist theological imperative to rectify in the long-term.<sup>16</sup> The actual eschatological connotations of the *mahdi* are perhaps not as significant as the idea of a goal for the Shi'ī. The concept of hope or hopefulness is manifested in *mahdi* as a promise of

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<sup>16</sup> Sachedina, *Islamic Messianism: The Idea of Mahdi in Twelver Shi'ism*, ix.

future justice, or rectification of past injustices. This is central to the idea of the *mahdi* as a redeemer, not of the transgressions of the individual, but of the struggle of the faith as a whole.

If *taqiyya* is the method of individual input, *ghayba* is the promise of a just future, *mahdi* is the realization of that struggle, then *kalam* (speculative reasoning) assumes the role of the proverbial mortar which links the three concepts together. *Kalam*, at least from a historical perspective, has been an act of resistance unto itself. By engaging in *kalam*, one is essentially rejecting the normative qualities of Sunni traditional obedience as the sole determinant in theological thought. In simply taking part in the theological framework of *kalam*, one is essentially embarking on an endeavor of tacit resistance to supposed norms. It is therefore difficult to separate Shi'ism from the act of resistance, simply by virtue of adopting heterodox thought processes to use as a basis for later theological imperatives.

*Kalam* can also be considered as both an act of the individual and as specific participation in a particular theological discourse. *Kalam*, as has been noted in theological analysis, maintains the distinction of representing a particular theological concept in terms of overall schools of thought (Ash'arite, Imamite, and Mu'tazilite respectively). However, it can also be posited as having an individual element in the idea of speculation and reasoning. Whilst it may be remiss to assert that each Shi'i is actively injecting his or her own reason to theological understanding, it must be remembered that the theologians and scholars who were participants in the aforementioned schools were indeed individuals. These individuals sought to fuse a prudential understanding of theology in such a manner that it reflected the necessities of political context. *Kalam* is not only a process of a discourse, but also of individual cognitive reason. This can be seen as evidence of the contextual activism (both on a broad and individual level) even in the formative theological discourse which gave birth to modern Shi'ism.

*Kalam* is the mental milieu from which the doctrines of Shi'ism emerge. It is the participation in *kalam* that allows for theology to remain steady, yet adaptive, within Shi'ism. The use of “steady” and “adaptive” may appear to be contradictory, but that is the essence of Shi'ism. The essence (at least in terms of resistance) is the maintenance of faith through contextual and prudential application of thought, theology, and political activism. *Kalam* acts as the proverbial lever, or mechanism, which produces *taqiyya* and *ghayba*. *Taqiyya* is the actual day-to-day application of that contextual realism. This allows for the maintenance of an emulative contribution to the archetypal *ghayba* of the *mahdi*.



Shi'ism, if viewed as heterodox, is often defined by what it is not. This has caused some to make the assumption that simply by virtue of Shi'ism being a minority position, that it is therefore explicitly involved in unregulated resistance and passion. While there is a kernel of truth to this assumption, the error is found in the connotation of Shi'ism as explicitly passionate and imprudent. Sunnism and Shi'ism both place similar prescriptions on the act of resistance, with dissimilar connotations. Whilst Khaled Abou El-Fadl's work primarily focuses on the legal discourse surrounding the treatment of rebels, he nonetheless makes nuanced headway in a consideration of residual theology.

Two motivating factors are posited as the motivating factors for the resulting Shi'i doctrine surrounding *bughah* (rebellion). The first is the consideration "of those who rebelled against 'Ali".<sup>17</sup> The second is that of those who rebel against the "true and infallible *imam*".<sup>18</sup> The idea of a *ta'wil* is posited as essential to the Shi'i understanding of rebellion, inasmuch as it distinguishes the act from banditry.<sup>19</sup> El-Fadl primarily cites Abu Jafar al-Tusi and Jafar al-Sadiq in his analysis of Shi'a doctrinal positions, and they therefore represent the political contexts of the time.

Specifically, the discussion of *taqiyya* is poignant in that it prescribes the actual application of *taqiyya* whilst under an "illegitimate government".<sup>20</sup> *Taqiyya* in this instance is only demanded when an unjust ruler imposes the enforcement of an illegal order under the threat of physical harm. If said illegal order provides for the death of an innocent, *taqiyya* is not permitted. This, for El-Fadl, leaves much to be desired in terms of a specific definition.

As is detailed later, the Shi'i doctrine regarding rebellion and resistance clearly has acquired an element of a "balancing act".<sup>21</sup> This is expressed in the idea that "one needs to weigh the costs and benefits of taking an active role, and if the harm outweighs the good, one needs to refrain from needlessly endangering himself or others".<sup>22</sup> The prudence expressed in *taqiyya* does not preclude one from taking part in an act of resistance. *Taqiyya* acts as a form of mediation and as a cognitive process for the individual to decide which course of action is necessary.

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<sup>17</sup> Khaled Abou El-Fadl, *Rebellion and Violence in Islamic Law*, 62.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 217.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 219.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 225.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 226.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

El-Fadl rightly notes that whilst Shi'ī and Sunni doctrines are similar in many areas, they are different in a few key areas. The obvious emphasis is placed on resistance to the infallible *imam* which is not permissible.<sup>23</sup> Likewise, armed rebellion against an unjust ruler is still not permissible. However, those who rise up against an unjust ruler are not considered rebels<sup>24</sup>. With this in mind, the idea of non-violent disobedience is posited as an act of resistance. Resistance is thereby defined by how one disassociates (rather than combating in a traditional sense) oneself from the edicts and practices of an unjust ruler. The idea of prudential survival is enacted via the arbitrating act of *taqiyya*. This simple fusion allows the individual Shi'ī to retain a sense of pious decency in prudential non-acquiescence while balancing that consideration with the pragmatism of the era.

El-Fadl asserts a somewhat flawed analysis in that Imami doctrines were tangentially symbolic in their consideration of rebellion inasmuch as it occurred under the rule of a future infallible *imam*.<sup>25</sup> Rebellion can therefore only exist whilst there is an infallible *imam*, which is inapplicable if there is no infallible ruler. This is a very politically relevant symbolic gesture of resistance to the established order, rather than an abstraction as asserted by El-Fadl. Likewise, El-Fadl posits foreknowledge on the part of 'Ali in knowing that "his party would ultimately be oppressed and persecuted and he wanted to set a precedent that would protect the Shi'a".<sup>26</sup> The idea of willful intent is perhaps presumptuous; however, the resulting dissolution of *taqiyya* upon the return of an infallible ruler exemplifies the end-goal orientation of Shi'ism in general.

Khaled Abou El-Fadl also exemplifies the idea of a subjective understanding in the implementation of theological concepts, which is essential in understanding the "contextual activism" posited in this paper. This may not be intentional on the part of the author, but it is evident in the outlined discourse of *Rebellion & Violence in Islamic Law*. Whilst all theologies by definition suppose a particular understanding as objective (which thereby results in a practical legal framework), Shi'ī resistance injects a contextual and subjective understanding of a particular scenario onto the canvas of an objectively situated theology. This contextual theological flexibility translates into a relatively flexible legal discourse.

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 301.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 299.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 297

Most, if not all, of the concepts of Shi'ī resistance (i.e. *taqiyya*, *ghayba*, and *mahdi*) are situated from the perspective of the contemporary political contexts in which they are applied. Likewise, the individual is a point of reference in terms of subjective application of said theological imperatives. The application of resistance in a contextual and subjective framework is exhibited in the idea of *jihad*, which can be seen as conceptually similar (although distinct in meaning) to ideas of Shi'ī resistance. Like *taqiyya*, *jihad* is a theological concept which can be applied in a variety of contexts by a myriad of differentially motivated individuals and political agendas.<sup>27</sup> However, it also has a referential temperance (i.e. the distinction between lesser and greater *jihad* and the idea of *jihad* as defensive) which is similar to the prudence expressed in Shi'a resistance.

*Jihad* is less an act of resistance and more of a connotation of righteousness when undertaking an action. While there are certainly edicts for waging war in terms of an act of resistance to aggression (i.e. a defensive act) from a very formative *Qur'anic* period, one's personal understanding of defensive and offensive is subjective.<sup>28</sup> What may be construed as defensive for one body may be considered as offensive for another. As such, the dichotomy of subjectivity thereby enforces the idea of situational context.<sup>29</sup> *Taqiyya* is more relevant to a discussion of internal *jihad* (*jihad al-nafs*), meaning an internal struggle against one's own vices or negative qualities.<sup>30</sup> While the two concepts have different applications and perhaps meanings, they are connected by an overall emphasis on internal processing and the resulting prudential application of said process.

In terms of *jihad* as an overt act of resistance in Shi'ism, it still bears the mark of the prudential temperance; something which is characteristic of the often oppressed sect. Assaf Moghadam's "The Shi'ī Perception of Jihad," attempts to highlight the underpinnings of *jihad* in terms of Shi'ism. While some of Moghadam's analysis may be misguided in marginalizing more formative emphases (in favor of modern analysis of modern thinkers such as Ali Shariati, Ayatollah Sayyid Mahmud Taleqani, and Ayatollah Murtaza Mutahari), the idea of *jihad* as multivalent is a salient approach to the concept of resistance in Shi'ism.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>27</sup> El-Husseini, "Resistance, Jihad, and Martyrdom in Contemporary Lebanese Shi'a Discourse," 404.

<sup>28</sup> Michael D. Bonner, *Jihad in Islamic History: Doctrines and Practice*, 29.

<sup>29</sup> El-Husseini, "Resistance, Jihad, and Martyrdom in Contemporary Lebanese Shi'a Discourse," 404.

<sup>30</sup> Bonner, *Jihad in Islamic History: Doctrines and Practice*, 99-100.

<sup>31</sup> Assaf Moghadam, "The Shi'ī Perception of Jihad," 1-5.

It is important to consider *jihad* as occurring on a contextual spectrum, no less the subject of prudential pragmatism than any other theological concept. It is remiss to suppose a monolithic understanding of *jihad* when it is very much a subjective application of piety in resistance. *Jihad* is a concept of righteous perception, in addition to being profoundly limited when it refers explicitly to warfare. Various prescriptions and limitations are placed upon *jihad* ranging from who can declare an act of war as *jihad* to the limits in conduct in warfare. Similarly it is a concept to which an end is ascribed, therefore placing it squarely in the sights of context.

Moghadam fuses his analysis of prominent modern Shi'ī thinkers to tease out the competing factors in characterizing Shi'ī *jihad*. The main theme is found in identifying the role of suffering and oppression within Shi'ism. The second important theme is the idea of an oppressor in Shi'ī history. Moghadam perhaps makes a misstep in later equating *jihad* with focusing on concepts which occupy a more subjective grey area between offense and defense (i.e. waging *jihad* to defend the dignity of Muslims and “personal anger”).<sup>32</sup> These appear to be salient issues as well; however, they inevitably cloud an understanding of resistant *jihad* as an act of contextual defense. It is important to remember that these concepts, though perhaps tangential, do represent the application of the same type of contextual subjectivism present in Shi'ī theology.

In addition to the overall thesis centering on the concept of multivalence, Mohamad cites the historical relevance of Shi'ī suffering as a differential motivator between Sunni and Shi'ī conceptions of *jihad* (which are asserted as similar in most regards save for the purview of the twelfth *imam*).<sup>33</sup> This historical relevance is applicable to a variety of contexts, given the ever-present idea of Shi'ism as a minority sect. Asserting that *jihad* is applicable to all contexts, however, is inaccurate. External *jihad* in Shi'ism also incorporates elements of prudence which demand cognitive application of one's own reasoning to weigh the costs of *jihad* inasmuch as they impinge on the welfare of Shi'ism as a whole.

Distinct from *jihad* in terms of application and theological discourse, but linked via the significance of resistance, is the concept of the martyr or *shahid* in Shi'ism. Martyrdom has proved to be a powerful theological concept in terms of political mobilization within Shi'ism.<sup>34</sup> However, this martyrdom is distinct from the traditional definition in that it is not simply a

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Sachedina, “Activist Shi'ism in Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon,” 431.

personal sacrifice in the service of a cause. A martyr is a “witness to the faith,” as posited by Nasr in the act of testimonial martyrdom.<sup>35</sup> The idea of a witness or the act of witnessing is demonstrative of the Shi'i emphasis on contextual activism.

While the title of *shahid* may be more honorific than symbolic, the act of martyrdom can be seen as a kind of proof in that it exposes or highlights a particular injustice. The martyr is subsequently elevated to a sacred level in being a representative witness for the suffering of the Shi'i community. The act of martyrdom is therefore more an act of exposition and humiliation (of a tyrannical oppressor) than an act of outright worldly opposition.<sup>36</sup> Martyrdom occupies a similar middle ground to *taqiyya*, albeit acquiring a much more apparent activist role, in that it is an act of individual reticence which is not in open conflict with an oppressor. What distinguishes *martyrdom* from *taqiyya* is not the sentiment of the action, but the visibility and significance of the action in terms of a broader narrative of resistance.

*Taqiyya* is a method of participation in a sense of contribution to an overall process, whereas martyrdom is a method of participation in the sense of mobilization and paradigmatic emulation. Martyrdom, like *taqiyya*, is not always prudent or required as an act of resistance. Martyrdom can also be seen as representative of a tenuous theological relationship between those who give their lives willingly or to those who merely die in battle.<sup>37</sup> However, a symbolic (rather than residual) act of martyrdom is one of the most high-profile acts to be appropriated by Shi'i. Subsequently, famous martyrs like Husayn were framed as being killed by the oppressing party regardless of their own situation in an areligious political context.<sup>38</sup> However, it is important to recognize the context to the extent it can be ascertained of the historical events of martyrdom within Shi'ism.

Martyrdom is merely an application of resistance in a context in which it is prudent to exhibit overt resistance. The early martyrdoms of Shi'ism serve to create the basis for a narrative, leaving the theological discourse to shape the resulting doctrine. The doctrine is thereby to be applied by the individual as a tool of resistance. However, this type of overt resistance is not always wise given the precarious position of Shi'ism as a minority party. The

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<sup>35</sup> Nasr, *The Shia Revival*, 57.

<sup>36</sup> Moghadam, "The Shi'i Perception of Jihad," 1-6.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

theological discourse is shaped therein to reflect this position, which then retroactively crystallizes into a contextual application of the pre-existing doctrines.

Most of the previous discussion is related specifically to Twelver Shi'ī theological discourses. Being a sectarian community, it is wise to consider comparative experiences within Shi'ism as a potential proof of the overarching narrative of contextual resistance. The Ismaili historical experience has been distinct from the Imamite experience for several reasons. The first and most significant discrepancy is the assertion of the Fatimid caliphate and subsequent fractious Ismaili states. The second theme is the application of *taqiyya* inasmuch as it relates to the historical contexts undertaken by the Ismailis. It is worthwhile mentioning that there are many types of Ismailis and for the sake of brevity; the Ismaili states themselves will form the comparative basis for a brief overview of the Ismaili historical experience.

The novelty in the Ismaili experience is to be found in the foundation and maintenance of a successful caliphate by a Shi'ī elite. The Fatimid caliph, with the exception of the caliphate of 'Alī, serves as the only major Shi'ī body of governance in the classical period. Farhad Daftary details that,

In Fatimid times, the Isma'ilis were permitted to practise their faith openly and without fearing persecution within Fatimid dominions, while outside the boundaries of their state they were obliged to observe *taqiyya* as before. In fact, with the establishment of the Fatimid *dawla*, the need had arisen for promulgating a state religion and a legal code, even though Isma'ilism was never to be imposed on all the subjects of the Fatimid state.<sup>39</sup>

Even whilst having formed a state, the Ismailis were still persecuted outside of their purview. This is a tangible example of the prudence applied in *taqiyya*, in that it was used when the circumstances dictated. Likewise, the concept was appropriated by the Ismailis to incorporate their unique take on the esoteric aspects of *batin* in protecting said knowledge.<sup>40</sup>

After the fall of the Fatimid caliphate, the Ismaili state was transferred to a series of disparate and encircled territories from Persia to Syria.<sup>41</sup> Daftary characterizes this period as the “Alamut period,” given the control exercised by Hasan-i-Sabbah from Alamut.<sup>42</sup> However, after the fall of Alamut, the Ismailis (specifically Nizari Ismailis) were forced to dissimulate yet again

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<sup>39</sup> Daftary, *The Isma'ilis – Their History and Doctrines*, 137.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

through the process of *taqiyya*. Daftary asserts that they were therefore scattered and never able to form a state afterwards, leading to the diffuse populations of Ismailis that exist today.<sup>43</sup> While the Ismailis differ from the Imami Shi'ī in several key theological areas (such as the treatment of esoteric knowledge, the concept of proselytizing in the *da'i*, and the succession of the imams) what is important in the aforementioned history is the role of political assertion leading to calamity.

The Ismailis can therefore be seen as the proverbial “exception that proves the rule” with regards to a discussion of Shi'ī resistance. In asserting an earthly political dominion, the Ismailis therefore brought themselves into direct conflict with competing political entities (the Abbasids, Ayyubids, and Mongols respectively). Due to this overt assertion of political authority, the Ismailis were affected more so by conquering forces and therefore required to diffuse into a community which is perhaps more divided than that of Twelver Shi'īs. The Ismailis drew the ire of their competitors and were thus heavily persecuted for their overt assertion of authority. When this persecution became tangible, in the form of invading armies, the Ismailis then rescinded their overt profession of faith in favor of *taqiyya*.

The activism as dictated by Shi'ī theology is one of internal activism, rather than pure overt activism. This does not preclude the overt activism found in *jihad* and martyrdom, but it is not the sole (or even preferable in many regards) method of an expression of resistance. The essence of Shi'ī resistance is to be found in the conviction of the individual in arbitrating between political hostility and spiritual bounty. This has demanded the temperance which renders remiss the consideration of Shi'ism as defined purely by opposition. Succinctly, Shi'ism is thereby defined by this unique fusion of activism and passivism which results in a novel form of resistance. The best modern analog for this approach would perhaps be “civil disobedience” but the characterization of Shi'ī resistance is more essential and vital than mere political disobedience.

In an allegorical sense, the dynamic of Shi'ī resistance can be explained in terms of a shoreline. Shi'ism is the sea, capable of being both tranquil and tempestuous. All the while, the sea is constantly lapping at the shore regardless of its current temperament. Sunnism is the shoreline itself, concrete and at odds with the tide of the sea. The tide of Shi'ism flows in and out with the pull of context, simultaneously receding from and advancing into the land where

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 4.

circumstance dictates. Occasionally the sea inundates the land, yet the tide must return to the shoreline eventually in order to maintain its integrity. The ultimate fear is isolation, lest a pool of water become trapped inland to be dried up by the sun. However, that sense of tacit isolation (or divide) is what sustains the sea of Shi'ism as a whole. The perpetual state of the sea and land cannot be metamorphosed into the same substance under the purview of man, but requires the intervention of God to be made one.

Resistance manifests itself in a variety of forms, ranging from internal dissimulation to overt opposition. In Shi'ism, though, it cannot be applied monolithically as a fixed doctrine devoid of circumstance. It is multifaceted in the sense that it is the result of competing social, historical, and political contexts. The salient theme identified in Shi'i resistance is the idea of context and the prudential application of said resistance. Similarly, the internal cognitive processes act upon theological concepts such as *taqiyya* in order to express resistance in such a prudential manner. In one instance circumstance may demand overt opposition or martyrdom, yet in another it may require one to dissimulate one's faith as to survive. This flexibility is the contextual essence which has allowed Shi'ism to promulgate, survive, and remain vital as a community.

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