Fragmented Realities: The 'Sectarianisation' of Space among Iraqi Shi'is in London

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Abstract

How do the spaces we inhabit shape our lived experiences? And how do those lived experiences in turn come to shape and influence our political subjectivity? Such questions are rendered all the more important in studies of migrant or diasporic populations who, by definition, conduct their daily lives in spaces and places that were initially alien to them. The way in which migrants interact with the spaces around them can tell us much about the community and political and religious engagements they invest in, as well as the very real way in which they experience their local milieu. Through a detailed study of Iraqi Shi'is living in London, specifically in the north-western Borough of Brent, this paper will seek to trace the ways in which religious institutions have carved up the physical and social landscape of North London in ways that have enduring effect on the communities with which they engage. The increasing diversification of different religious establishments, I argue, has led to a fragmentation of the city-as-lived, in which the vast majority of practising Iraqi Shi'is engage with only small isolated pockets of the urban environment on a daily basis. Moreover, the growing number of specifically Shi'a schools, charities, mosques, community centres and other such institutions has resulted in what I call a "sectarianisation" of space in Brent, in which differently practising Muslim sects inhabit different spaces within the city despite often living within metres of each other. Drawing on a mixture of interviews, participant observation, and mapping techniques, I bring together theory and practice in order to sketch out the ways migrant lives can come to be localised in certain spaces, and what that can ultimately mean in terms of their political subjectivity and engagement.

Key words: Shi'ism, Iraq, diaspora, identity, sectarianism, urban theory

Introduction

The city as a site of lived experience provides a unique manifestation of the social relations of which it is a part. In particular, the cultural and ethnic fabric of the urban environment is both a product of, and productive of specific ethno-cultural notions regarding identity, belonging, self, and other. In so-called "global" cities such as London, the social reality of living in close proximity to difference – whether manifested in terms of class, culture, race, ethnicity, religion, or otherwise – is a key part of the urban landscape, and has profound implications for the forms of political and social subjectivities cultivated within and as a result of such an environment. For

immigrants and minority groups, in particular, the ethno-social make-up of the city can contribute to a subjective sense of marginalisation and alienation as different areas come to be divided up and "ghettoised" through mechanisms of social and geographical exclusion (Sibley 2003). The way in which migrants and other minorities interact with the spaces around them can tell us much about the community and political and religious engagements they invest in, as well as the very real way in which they experience their local milieu. In this way, a focus on the urban environment can contribute to a detailed textural understanding of identity, difference, and subject formation in the daily lives of minority groups.

In this paper, I present a study of Iraqi Shi'is living in London, specifically in the north-western Borough of Brent, in order to trace how Shi'a religious institutions have carved up the physical and social landscape of north London in ways that have an enduring effect on the communities with which they engage. Drawing on more than two years of ethnographic fieldwork conducted amongst Iraqi Shi'i communities in London between 2014-2016 as part of my doctoral research,[1] I argue that the increasing diversification of different Shi'a religious establishments has led to a fragmentation of the city-as-lived, in which the vast majority of practising Iraqi Shi'is engage with only small isolated pockets of the urban environment on a daily basis. Moreover, the growing number of specifically Shi'a schools, charities, mosques, community centres and other such institutions has resulted in what I call a "sectarianisation" of space in Brent, in which differently practising Muslim sects inhabit different spaces within the city despite often living in close proximity to each other. This sectarianisation forms part of a wider political economy of Shi'a religiosity in Europe in which competing regional and international powers (in particular Iraq and Iran) use financial and material resources to serve their own interests, often at the expense of ordinary Shi'is themselves, and ties in with theoretical insights provided through disciplines such as urban theory where the landscape of the city is understood as the physical embodiment of capitalist modes of production and consumption (Harvey 1989a, 1989b, 2013; Schmid 2006; Sibley 2003).

The focus on religiously practising Iraqi Shi'is[2] is significant for three reasons. Firstly, Shi'a Muslims have mostly been overlooked in studies investigating the status of Muslim minorities in Britain, and their experiences have often been either glossed over or simply relegated to the

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[1] Throughout the course of my research, I conducted 27 formal and 51 informal interviews with practicing Shi'is in London and Iran aged between 16-75, and attended the annual programme of religious events for 'Ashura and Muharram in 2014 and 2015, including four public marches in central London. I also attended everyday personal and religious events, such as weddings, funerals, birthday parties, charity fundraisers, and talks at religious and cultural institutions (many of which had links to other Shi'a organisations around the world), and collated printed and written material from such events.

[2] It should be noted that this paper only deals with religiously practicing Iraqi Shi'a Muslims (i.e. those who pray on a regular basis, attend *majalis* at *husseiniyat* and other religious insitutions, and self-identify as Shi'a Muslim) and does not deal with Iraqis from alternative ethno-religious backgrounds, whether that be secular, atheist, Sunni Arab, Kurdish, Jewish, or Christian.

status of a caveat or footnote in more mainstream studies on Sunni Muslims (Bowen 2014; Cesari 2004; Gale and Hopkins 2009; Grewal 2014; Meer 2010; Modood 2003, 2005; Roy 2004, among others; see the introduction to this special issue for more details); and thus the time is ripe for a more detailed study that treats Shi'a Muslims as an object of analysis in and of themselves. Secondly, Iraqi Shi'is are demographically and practically dominant in the urban environment of London, a status that is reflected in the fact that the majority of Shi'a Muslim institutions in the city tend to be founded and run by Iraqis (though Iranians and Khojas – East African Shi'is of South Asian origin – also play a significant role). Finally, the focus on practicing Shi'is of Iraqi national background is significant as a result of the specific historical and socio-political circumstances of the Iraqi diaspora and the highly politicised nature of Shi'ism in contemporary Iraq, where a violent form of sectarianism has become an increasingly salient fact of social and political life.

The paper will begin with an exploration of urban theory in a way that makes explicit the relationship between the built and social environments, before moving on to a detailed ethnographic account of the ethno-sectarian landscape of north-west London as seen through the prism of the notorious "Shi'a triangle" in order to highlight the ways in which the inscription of ethno-religious identity onto the urban fabric can be understood as the physical manifestation of a divisive politics of sectarianism. Specifically, it is my contention that the increasing visibility engendered by a burgeoning sense of a specifically "Shi'a" Muslim identity amongst Iraqi Shi'is in London is reflected in the shifting dynamics of the urban environment where Shi'a religious establishments are breaking away from historical political and social links to Iraq and diversifying in a way that reproduces the fragmentation and sectarianisation of Shi'a Muslim identity in Britain. Moreover, this process of sectarianisation is not simply a benign product of the lived environment but has been cultivated as the result of a logic of religious commodification and objectification that is actively encouraged by geopolitical actors who manipulate the political economy of Shi'a religiosity in ways that further their own strategic interests.[3]

Living in Space: Between Social Constructivism and Critical Materialism

The enduring allure of the city – the orderly chaos of a multitude of human lives being played out simultaneously on the same urban stage – is one that has been invoked time and again in the study of politics and social relations. In the past few decades, while theorists such as Lefebvre (1991, 1996) and Foucault (1991) have contributed to our understanding of urban space as both a product of and a contributor to social relations, urban geographers such as Harvey (1989a, 1989b, 2013) and Schmid (2006) have gone further in specifying the relationship between cityscapes and the logic of capitalist economy. Such debates reflect a spectrum of contemporary

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[3] Arguably, the ethno-religious carving up of space in London can also be seen as a product of British state multiculturalism and ethnonormativity (Ramy 2015). However, such a policy-oriented analysis falls outside the scope of the current enquiry and as such is not developed further here.

discourses within urban theory that fall within the two poles of social and materialist approaches; the former viewing urban space as "a tool capable of orchestrating and transforming the social life it contains" (Sarkis 1993: 104) while the latter considers the built environment as a product and an instrument of capitalist production. The argument of this paper falls somewhere in the middle of these two approaches. Following Lefebvre (1996: 101), who maintained that social space is "a materialisation of 'social being'" – the social writ large – I take the social constructivist view of the city as a manifestation and reflection of social life as a starting point from which to map out and theorise the role of Shi'a religious spaces in London. However, in seeking to move beyond simply chronicling the spatialisation of Iraqi Shi'a ethno-religious identity in London I also explore how the creation, use, and maintenance of such religiously- and ethnically-inscribed spaces are themselves a product of capitalist forces of objectification, commodification, and political economy. Specifically, I wish to argue that the physical and psychic carving-up of the urban fabric of London into religiously and ethnically defined spaces of exclusion is both reflective and productive of a logic of sectarianism fuelled by a political economy of difference and exclusion.

Such an analysis draws on the Lefebvrian notion of three overlapping modes of space: the perceived, the conceived and the lived (Lefebvre 1996). The first of these, "perceived space", designates the physical reality of space, the way in which it is configured, produced and used through social practice. "Lived space", on the other hand, describes the way in which people negotiate and inhabit everyday life within the confines of the space in which they find themselves. Finally, "conceived space" refers to the imagined, abstract space in which the signs and codes of the city are inscribed and through which the inhabitants make sense of their surroundings. This paper seeks to draw together the diverse strands of these three understandings of social and urban space in order to show how the physical perceived space of north-west London has shaped the ways in which individuals come to live, move, and conceive of the space around them in ways that are productive of specific kinds of identity and subjectivity. In this way, rather than serving as a mere reflection of the social reality of "being Iraqi-Shi'a in London", the ethno-religious spaces of areas such as Cricklewood, Ealing, Kilburn, Queen's Park, and Wembley also represent the ways in which various social, material, and political forces work to produce particular ethnic economies that contribute to the sectarianisation of both mental and physical space in the city (Kaplan 1998; Smith 1992; Yiftachel and Yacobi 2003).

Having thus briefly outlined some of the theoretical contours shaping this project, I now wish to sketch a detailed portrait of the social and lived environment of practicing Iraqi Shi'is in London based on my own ethnographic research in the field.

Baghdad-on-Thames: Iraqi Shi'is in context

Shi'a Muslims make up around 15 percent of the estimated 2.7 million Muslims currently living in Britain (Spellman-Poots, 2012),[4] and come from a variety of socio-economic, ethno-national, political, and educational backgrounds; though the vast majority tend to be of Middle-Eastern origin, coming from countries as diverse as Iraq, Iran, Lebanon, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Afghanistan (there are also significant numbers from South Asia and East Africa). The predominantly Arab and Middle-Eastern origins of Shi'a Muslims in the UK thus contrasts with the dominant Sunni Muslim population mostly characterised by immigrants of South Asian origin (Meer, 2010; Modood, 2005, 2010). Although there are no accurate data regarding the ethno-national origins of Shi'a Muslims in Britain (the UK census does not record religious sect), in sheer physical terms, Iraqis and Iranians tend to dominate the institutional religious fabric of the city. In a self-claimed "exhaustive" directory of Shi'a religious establishments provided by the website arbaeen.co.uk, of the 19 London-based institutions listed, nearly half (nine) are run by Iraqis, while a quarter (four) are Iranian-run[5] (the rest are a mixture of South-Asian, Khoja, Lebanese, and minority Shi'a sects such as Ismailis).[6] It is due to their demographic dominance of London-based Shi'a Muslims that Iraqi Shi'is are fundamental to both the physical and mental contours of this minority religious group.

According to the 2011 Census of Britain, there are an estimated 73,000 Iraqi-born individuals living in the UK, with the vast majority concentrated in London (Office for National Statistics, 2013). However, since this figure is neither up to date nor takes into account second or third-generation Iraqis born in Britain (not to mention those born in exile who later settled in the UK), it is safe to assume that the total number of Iraqis in the UK is much higher.[7] The most significant waves of Iraqi emigration over the last few decades have coincided with a number of key political events in Iraq itself; and different political conditions in the homeland have led to differences in the economic, political, and sectarian demographics of Iraqis in exile. By far the largest wave of Iraqi migration to the UK took place under the regime of Saddam Hussain from 1979-2003, and for this reason was mostly (but not exclusively) characterised by middle- and lower-class Iraqi Shi'is (whether practicing or secular) (Al-Ali 2007; Al-Rasheed 1991; Saleh 2011; Spellman-Poots 2012). In this sense, the demographic dominance of Iraqis Shi's both amongst British Shi'a

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[4] Addley (2003), quoting the 2001 British census, suggests that there may be as many as 400,000 Shi'a Muslims in the UK, the majority coming from Iraq and Iran.

[5] It should be noted that as a result of the politics of the Iranian regime, and especially the fallout of the 1979 Islamic revolution, the majority of Iranians in Britain tend to be religiously secular and non-practicing, hence the dominance of Iraqis (Gholami 2016; Spellman-Poots 2012)

[6] www.arbaeenuk.com/directorylist, accessed 25 Sept 2016. According to my own fieldwork data, 11 of the 15 Shi'a religious institutions in north-west London were founded or run by Iraqis. This figure does not include secular or non-religious Iraqi-run establishments, such as the Iraqi Cultural Centre, Al-Muntada Institute, or the London headquarters of the Iraqi Communist Party.

[7] For example, Saleh (2011) gives the total number of Iraqis in the UK as of 2005 as being between 282,000 and 350,000, while Al-Ali (2007) gives a lower estimate of 100,000, and the Iraqi Embassy estimates between 350,000 and 400,000. In a comprehensive mapping exercise conducted in 2007, the IOM suggests there are a total of 240,000 Iraqis in the UK, including 125,000 in London alone (IOM, 2007)

Muslims and within the Iraqi diaspora itself makes this community an ideal case study for exploring the intra-communal dynamics within British Islam, and in particular of scrutinising the ways in which identity practices such as the production and use of urban space may either fuel or mitigate existing sectarian and political tensions between different Islamic sects in the UK.

For Iraqi Shi'is in the UK, the establishment and maintenance of religious institutions such as *hussainiyyaat* ("Shi'a mosques", sing. *husseiniyya*) became especially important in exile as a result of the social and political status of Shi'is in Iraq – the practice and observance of Shi'a rituals, for example, was banned under the Saddam regime. As a result of such converging social and political factors, such Shi'a religious institutions in exile assumed a significant political dimension in the emancipatory articulation of a hitherto suppressed Shi'a religious identity (Flynn, 2013), and, moreover, allowed Iraqis in exile to connect with others who found themselves in similar positions. Thus, 'from the outset, there [was] an emphasis on the political dimension on the [Iraqi Shi'a] community and its political expression as part of its particular identity' (Flynn 2013: 3). In other words, the mediation of the exile experience through the religious institutions of the *hussainiyaat* plausibly contributed to a diasporic identity that came to be intimately linked with Shi'a religiosity and political emancipation. This is a theme that will be explored further in the following section, but at this juncture it suffices to highlight the inherently politicised nature of Iraqi Shi'is in London and the potential role that this demographically dominant, politically-engaged, exiled community may have had in shaping both the physical terrain of urban London through the founding of Shi'a religious establishments, and the cultivating of a politicised, ethno-sectarian understanding of Shi'a religious identity grounded in the political legacy of the Iraqi Ba'thist state.

"Najaf in Brent"

> Britain's equivalent [of the Shi'a crescent"] is a triangle… Fanning out from a point among the Arab cafes of central London's Edgware Road, the Shi'ite centres of population and influence are to be found to the north and west in the boroughs of Brent, Westminster and Harrow. (Bowen 2014: 135)

Although Shi'a Muslims in London, as in the rest of Britain, remain in the minority in comparison to their Sunni counterparts, there is a particular sliver of northwest London where Shi'a religious institutions not only hold their own, but have even come to dominate the Islamic scene. This concentration of Shi'a religious institutions and activity in the boroughs of Brent, Westminster, and Harrow – especially the neighbourhoods of Wembley, Cricklewood, Kilburn, Queen's Park and Brondesbury (see Fig. 1). – has resulted in the tongue-in-cheek moniker of "Najaf in Brent" (Bowen 2014), a reference to the Shi'a religious seminaries of the southern Iraqi city of Najaf, the home of Shi'ism's highest-ranking religious source of emulation Grand Ayatollah Ali Al-Hussaini

Al-Sistani. Due to the hierarchical nature of Shi'a Islam, in which high-ranking religious scholars (known as *maraji'*, sing. *marja'*), create theological rulings which are then followed by ordinary practicing Shi'is, the existence of "Najaf in Brent" is intimately tied to the Shi'a religious establishment in Iraq (known as the *marja'iyya*) through the institutionalisation of religious doctrine and practice. Many Iraqi Shi'is were expelled under Saddam Hussein precisely because of their connection to the religious schools and seminaries of these cities (as well as their ties to Iran following the 1979 revolution), and have continued to maintain these links in exile. The majority of London-based institutions thus have direct links to the Shi'a religious seminaries (*hawzas*) in the shrine cities, and serve as the official representative of different clerical figures (*maraji'*, sing. *marja*), conducting outreach and other forms of religious and pastoral care on their behalf.
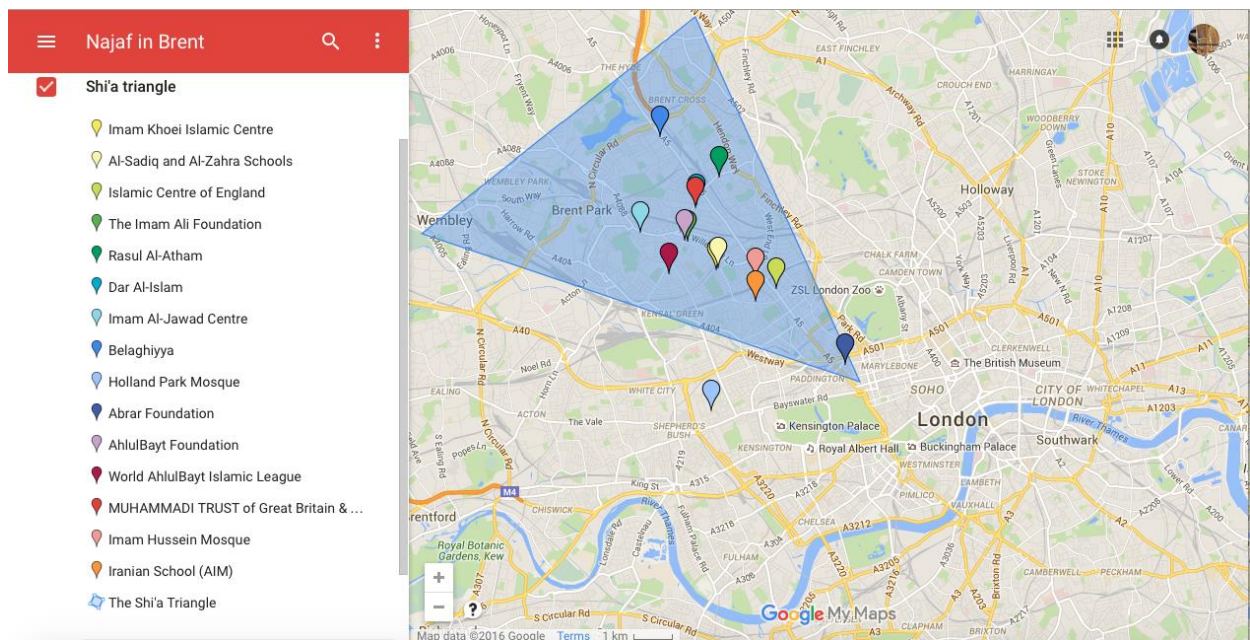

Fig. 1 – Map showing the main religious institutions in the "Shi'a triangle"
of North-West London (Source: Author's fieldwork)

Because Shi'a theology requires individuals to "follow" a particular *marja'* in matters of religious practice and jurisprudence, different institutions in London affiliated to different *maraji'* have thus come to reflect different schools of thought within Shi'a Islam, and especially when it comes to political orientations towards the Islamic Republic of Iran (see Table 1).

Name	Ethnonational background	Location	Political (Religious) Affiliation
Imam Khoei Islamic Centre	Iraqi	Queen's Park	Najaf (Khoei/Sistani)
Al-Sadiq & Al-Zahra schools	Iraqi	Queen's Park	Najaf (Khoei/Sistani)
Islamic Centre of England	Iranian	Maida Vale	Iran (Khomeini)

Imam Ali Foundation	Iraqi	Willesden	Najaf (Sistani)
Rasul Al-Atham	Iraqi	Cricklewood	Iran (Shirazi)
Dar Al-Islam	Iraqi	Cricklewood	Da'wa Party (Sadr)
Imam Al-Jawad Centre	Iraqi	Willesden	Najaf (Sistani)
Belaghiya	Iraqi	Brent Cross	Najaf
Holland Park Mosque	Iranian	Holland Park	Iran
AhlulBayt Foundation	Iraqi	Willesden	Najaf (Sistani)
World AhlulBayt Islamic League	Indo-Pakistani	Kensal Green	Najaf
Muhammadi Trust	Iranian/Iraqi	Willesden	Najaf
Imam Hussein Mosque	Lebanese	Kilburn	Najaf (Fadhlallah)

Table 1 – Major Shi'a Institutions in northwest London by background and affiliation

In practice, this means that the personal and political rivalries between different schools of Shi'a thought have been written into the urban fabric of London through the institutionalisation of the *marja'iyya* in the city. As one of my research participants, Ali M, explained, mapping out the various spheres of different Shi'a theological and political influence in London:

AM: [Al-Khoei Foundation, Ahlulbayt Foundation, Salaam Foundation, Imam Ali Foundation and al-Hakim Foundation]; this is one big happy family. This is Najaf in Brent. Then you have the [Islamic Centre of England]…. this is what I call "Iran", when we say Iran we mean the government. [Then] over here we have another sect, we'll call these *shiraziyya*, Shirazis. And they have Rasul Al-'Atham, which is the biggest *husseiniya* in London.

EDE: Where's that?

AM: Cricklewood. q   1

EDE: And what… who are they?

AM: They're the Shirazis [i.e. followers of Shirazi]… They basically call themselves the *Karbala'is*.

EDE: Oh ok

AM: They're the… if I put it to you, these are the extreme Right… in terms of their theology

EDE: So extremely orthodox?

AM: Yeah. They're the ones with the *tatbir*[8] and everything. Full on… And if we say these guys [points to Dar Al Islam], Da'wa and that, they're the lefties.

EDE: Ok. And who are Najaf? They're not political are they?

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[8] Controversial ritual cutting of the forehead practiced by certain strands of Shi'a Muslims and banned by the religious establishment in Najaf (though not in Iran).

AM: They're not political, but they're in the middle. We say that they're, what we call it, the right path... Whoever's backed by Najaf is in charge of everything.[9]

This polarisation of political and theological opinion within the Shi'a religious establishment means that in London, the choice of which Shi'a religious institution to frequent is often indicative of the politics of the individuals concerned, and is physically mapped onto the fabric of the city. For example, the Iraqi-run Dar Al-Islam is both a religious institution and the headquarters of the Islamic Da'wa Party in London; for this reason, Shi'is who frequent this establishment tend to have political leanings sympathetic to the current Iraqi government. Conversely, the Al-Khoei Foundation, the oldest and most widely known Shi'a institution in the UK,[10] was originally established in 1989 as the London office of Grand Ayatollah Sayyid Abu Al-Qasim al-Khoei (the predecessor of Sistani), and as a result has very close ties to the Iraqi religious establishment in Najaf but distances itself from Iraqi domestic politics. At the other end of the political spectrum, the Iranian-run Islamic Centre of England (ICE) has close ties to the Islamic Republic and although tends to maintain good relations with Najaf harbours a number of fundamental theological disagreements especially with regards to the Iranian state doctrine of *wilayat al-faqih*. Known as the Guardianship of the Jurist, this doctrine allows a designated scholar to assume political guardianship of the Shi'a umma in the absence of the twelfth Imam, and was first popularised by Ayatolah Khomeini, who used it as a basis for Iranian Islamic revolution of 1979 – indeed, to this day, support for *wilayat al-faqih* is often seen as synonymous for support for the Iranian regime, and therefore inflected with political undertones.

Beyond politics, towards an "(Iraqi-)Shi'a" identity in London
The various political and religious divisions within the Shi'a establishment are thus reflected in the multiple and competing institutions vying for the patronage of Shi'is in London. Nevertheless, one of my predominant observations gleaned from frequenting such institutions is that for practicing Iraqi Shi'is in London, the choice of which *hussainiyya* to attend on a particular day is often shaped as much by social and familial ties than by religious doctrine or ideology. During the Islamic month of Muharram, for example, a significant religious occasions for practicing Shi'is, I noticed that individuals would often attend different institutions on different days, or even attend several in the same night, often dictated by the preferences of family and friends.[11] One of my research participants, Um Zainab, a middle-aged Iraqi woman with a close-knit female friendship group, even spent several hours a day during Muharram calling up each of her friends to find out where they were going that evening and to arrange transport and lift

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[9] Interview 6.

[10] The Al-Khoei Foundation is often upheld by the British government as the representative of the Shi'a Muslim voice in the UK – a status that is not always corroborated by individuals in the community.

[11] For the younger generation, the choice of which *hussainiyya* to attend is often dictated by the particular orator speaking on a given night, with some English-language speakers attracting large and devout followings.

sharing. For Abu Dalia, on the other hand, a young Iraqi-born man who moved to the UK as a child, the most important factor in deciding which *husseiniyya* to attend is the quality and type of the food handed out at the end of each religious service (Author's fieldnotes).

Despite internal communal divisions, then, the concentration of Iraqi Shi'a religious centres and institutions in one corner of northwest London has arguably shaped the lived experience of practicing Iraqi Shi'is in the diaspora such that individuals often speak about feeling part of an "(Iraqi-)Shi'a community" that is defined through its relation to the material and social fabric of the city of London. More than this, the very geography of London itself has come to define the boundaries of particular religious and social groupings, concentrated around the different Shi'a religious and political establishments. For example, a recurring trope encountered during the research process was of the difference between Iraqi Shi'is living and frequenting different areas of London, especially the neighbourhoods of Kingston, Ealing, and Wembley. As one of my research participants explained:

> The [Iraqi] Shi'a community breaks down into different ethnicities and different schools of thought; it's group thinking. For example, you have what's known as the Wembley Iraqis, the Ealing Iraqis, and the Kingston Iraqis. The Wembley Iraqis tend to be traditional, religious and working class; the Ealing Iraqis tend to be liberal and higher class, but still religious; and the Kingston Iraqis tend to be liberal and secular, they often see themselves as British. Me, for example, I'm from Wembley, because I grew up there, but I'm "Ealing": I'm not traditional-style religious, I focus more on principles.[12]

In this way, the proliferation of Shi'a religious, political, and civil society institutions in Wembley (Lefebvre's "perceived space") is seen as shaping the levels of religious conservatism and political orientation of Iraqi Shi'is living in this area ("lived space"). This, in turn, serves to contribute to the consolidation of a specifically *Shi'a* politico-religious identity, one in which Iraqi national belonging becomes tempered with and superseded by ethno-sectarian articulations and inscribed onto the physical fabric of the city ("conceived space"). In the words of one of my interviewees, "Wembley" Iraqi Shi'is in London thus increasingly tend to "see their Iraqiness *as* Shi'aness; they show how Iraqi they are by being more and more Shi'a."[13] Conversely, "Kingston" Iraqis tend to eschew religious identification for more secular forms of belonging, which often manifests itself as a distancing from Shi'a-inflected Iraqi organisations and institutions and a greater level of integration in British society as a whole:[14] "they often see themselves as

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[12] Interview 21.
[13] Interview 23.
[14] Informal conversations with O Kadhum and Mohammed M.

British."[15] In this way, for the religiously devout "Wembley" Iraqis whose social reality is shaped by the institutions of "Najaf in Brent", the identity categories of "Iraqi" and "Shi'a" increasingly blur into each other such that articulation of one is seen as identification with the other.

As well as shaping the lived reality of Iraqi Shi'is in London through the institutionalisation of Shi'a religiosity into the fabric of the city itself, Shi'a religious and civil society establishments in the UK also offered a place for the fostering of communal ties and social belonging. For example, many of the young British-born Iraqis Shi'is I interviewed described how as children growing up in London in the 1990s their parents would regularly take them to the *hussainiyya* as a way to meet other Iraqis exiled in the UK and to exchange gossip and news. One interviewee, a secular Iraqi from a Shi'a background who fled the country as a young man in 1980 out of fear of being targeted by Saddam Hussein's regime, spoke about how he would often visit *hussainiyyaat* in London during the 1991 Gulf War as a way to keep up to date with developments in Iraq:

> I don't consider myself a religious man but I started to go to the mosque, or to the *hussainiyya* in '91 just to get the fresh news from Baghdad. Because there by faxes the news was coming by minutes [sic].[16]

In this sense, the *hussainiyyaat* and other Shi'a institutions acted as social and community "glue" that kept exiled Iraqi Shi'is together and allowed them to stay in touch both with each other and with developments "back home" in Iraq. In the London context, the *hussainiyyaat* engendered a sense of community by acting as a physical meeting place for diasporic Iraqi Shi'is; one that was simultaneously inscribed with religious meaning through the observance of rites and practices and that was oriented towards religious and political engagement with domestic developments in Iraq. Many of these institutions also maintain direct links to the political and religious establishment in Iraq (as outlined above) and act as channels for diasporic Iraqis to send and receive money, resources, and information across state borders. Thus, only in exile did the notion of "Shi'ism" as an institutionally-defined religious and political community come to play a dominant role in the self-perception of Iraqi Shi'is who had, while in Iraq, identified themselves through varying political, social, and demographic affiliations. For example, many Shi'is prior to

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[15] Interview 21. It is also worth noting here that the demographic of Iraqi Shi'is who settled in Kingston is slightly different from that of Iraqis in North and West London. There is a larger proportion of Iraqis who came prior to the political exile of the 1980s, and the majority tend to be more affluent than those in other parts of London. Although Iraqis in London come from diverse social and economic backgrounds, those who were forced to flee or were deported often struggled to find good employment in the UK, and I spoke to numerous engineers, doctors, lawyers, and other qualified professionals living in North and West London who are working as taxi drivers and in pizza shops since their English wasn't good enough. Because many Iraqis in Kingston came either to pursue higher education here or simply boasted better connections, this has resulted in a socio-economic and class division that didn't necessarily exist back in Iraq.
[16] Interview 4.

leaving Iraq saw themselves as primarily Najafis or Kerbala'is[17] (inhabitants of the southern Iraqi cities of Najaf and Karbala), Communists or Da'wa Party members, secularists or nationalists – rather than as Shi'is in and of themselves. In this way, it wasn't so much the commonality of Shi'a religious conviction (many of those in exile had vastly divergent views of religion) than the experience of meeting and socialising within a religiously-defined space that led to the construction of a sense of communal religious and political identity articulated in relation to the "homeland" of Iraq. Moreover, this notion of an "Iraqi" community in London came to be intimately tied to a sense of Shi'a religiosity as a result of the way in which Iraqi-run *husseiniyaat* doubled as spaces of communal belonging and religious practices.

Fragmented realities: Ethno-sectarianism in the city

As well as being in the demographic majority comparative to other Shi'is, Iraqi Shi'is in London have well-established and active religious and civil society institutions through which individuals are able to mobilise, both in terms of orientation towards Iraq itself and in terms of their political and religious views towards entities such as the Iranian regime, and, more recently, against the Islamic State (also known as ISIS). It is this network of Shi'a politico-religious institutions, many of which are explicitly geared towards social and political engagement in Iraq, that has contributed to the sectarianisation of the symbolic and material diasporic space in which different parts of London have come to be associated with different theological and political interpretations of what it means to be "Shi'a" and "Iraqi" in Britain. Arguably, the institutionalisation of Shi'ism in the urban fabric of London, and the material and discursive links between Shi'a spaces in the city and those in Iraq and Iran, have contributed to the crystallisation of an ethno-sectarian sense of communal and religious identity in which Shi'a religiosity has come to be intimately linked with Iraqi national belonging. Moreover, the physical inscription of Shi'a religiosity onto London's urban landscape has also resulted in bracketing off areas of the city as Shi'a-dominant "ghettos" where Muslims of different sects rarely interact, even if they live in close proximity to each other. One example of this is the proximity of Regent's Park Mosque and the Islamic Centre of England – each of these religious establishments is formerly a mosque, and thus in theory open to Muslims (and non-Muslims) of all denominations; and yet in practice the former is frequented almost exclusively by Sunnis and the latter by Shi'is. As one of my interviewees explained, describing his experience of living close to Edgware Road:

> **AM:** I hate this area that I live in because we have this stupid Regent's Park Mosque here…
>
> **EDE:** What's wrong with Regent's Park Mosque?
>
> **AM:** They're very undercover, but they support terrorism.

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[17] Indeed, these regional rivalries have even seeped into the diasporic experience through the way in which different Shi'a religious establishments are seen as being "Najafi" or "Karbala'i" – one *hussainiya* in particular, Rasul al-'Atham, is even known informally as "*al-Karbala'iyya*" ("the Karbala'i one").

> **EDE:** What do you mean?
>
> **AM:** Like, for example, they invited [X]. He is like the biggest person who, who hates Shi'is and called for everyone to cut Shi'is heads off. They invited him to give lectures there.
>
> **EDE:** Really?
>
> **AM:** Yeah. You see all these beardy-weirdys [sic]… Do you know what I mean? It's become… you know, sometimes I get, I feel uncomfortable walking.
>
> **EDE:** Really?
>
> **AM:** Yeah. And we've even done, in our lobby group, we've done experiments. One of our friends, he went to pray in a Sunni mosque and they told him to leave.
>
> **EDE:** So you never pray in Sunni mosques? Even though Regent's Park Mosque is right here you never go?
>
> **AM:** No… It's very sad. The other day somebody went to Regent's Park Mosque, he put down a *torba*,[18] he wanted to pray, and they kicked it out of in front of him.[19]

Although it is difficult to verify the truth of this information, what is clear is that this young man feels intimidated by what he considers to be "beardy-weirdys" (a reference to the Salafi style of wearing a long beard and shaving the moustache) and never frequents Regent's Park Mosque, even though it is the closest to him, preferring instead to travel further north to frequent the Imam Jawad Foundation and Al-Khoei Centre. Earlier in the same interview, the man had claimed that Sunni ideology was "flawed" and argued that "these are the same people whose forefathers killed Imam Hussein" in reference to ISIS. In this sense, we can see how the politics of sectarianism finds physical manifestation in the urban environment of London through the creation of Shi'a-dominated areas and the shift away from inclusive Islamic mosques and centres in the city and towards those defined by affiliation to a particular sect or ideology.

Such forms of politico-religious sectarianism, I wish to stress, do not emanate from some form of anterior ethno-sectarian "essence", but rather represent "a modern constitutive Foucauldian socioeconomic and political power that produces and reproduces sectarian subjects and modes of political subjectification and [is] mobilisation through a dispersed ensemble of institutional, clientelist, and discursive practices" (Salloukh et al. 2015: 3). In the case of Iraqi Shi'is in London, the reification of Shi'a "groupness" (Brubaker, 2002) through the proliferation of Shi'a religious and civil society organisations has contributed to the crystallisation of what it means to be "Shi'a" in the context of Islamic London in a way that often explicitly constructs different Islamic sects in a logic of mutual exclusion. In particular, the consolidation of the "Shia triangle" in northwest London has led to a concentration of Shi'a Muslims in certain neighbourhoods and to the polarisation of London between "Sunni" East London and "Shi'a" (North) West London. In

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[18] Clay tablet used by Shi'a Muslims during prayer.
[19] Interview 6.

practice, this has come to mean that even though Sunnis and Shi'is in London may both inhabit the same physical space (Lefebvre's "perceived space") – such as living in and around Edgware Road – individuals belonging to differently practicing Islamic sects no longer move among those spaces in the same way, preferring instead to frequent religious institutions geared specifically to their sectarian needs; thus leading to a fragmentation of the city-as-lived and the city-as-conceived. It is for this reason that individuals such as AM come to feel "uncomfortable" when walking down the street in certain parts of the city; the discord between their psychic understanding of their place in the urban fabric and the physical reality of the built environment can lead to a sense of unease and a desire to surround themselves with the "familiarity" of those who think and act like themselves. This all-too-human need for the familiar becomes politicised when the dividing lines between sameness and difference, "us" and "them", become defined by ethno-religious categories such as Islamic sect. Such self-imposed segregation is further compounded, moreover, by the growth of what Kaplan (1998) calls "ethnic economies", urban areas where business ownership tends to be concentrated in the hands of one particular ethno-religious group as a result of inter-personal networks and familial ties.

This trend is worrying in and of itself, but especially because such sectarianisation of space in London is not simply the product of an organic process of urban living but also the result of a deliberate political economy of sectarianism that is propagated and maintained by the interests of particular political actors. As the physical manifestation of the social world, the urban environment of the city is not simply an inert space in which human beings live and move, but a reflection of the social, political, and economic forces that shape human lives (Lefebvre 1996, 2008; Foucault 1991; Harvey 1989a, 1989b, 2013; Schmid 2006; Sibley 2003). For this reason, the physical demarcation of London's urban fabric into ethno-sectarian enclaves such as the "Shi'a triangle" and "Salafi Edgware Road" are indicative of wider sociopolitical forces that are working to shape the contours of such sectarian identities in the first place. For example, the current Iraqi government, led by the Shi'a Islamic Da'wa Party, is invested in securing symbolic and material support from Iraqis in the diaspora, and funds a number of London-based institutions aimed at reaching out to sympathetic Iraqi Shi'is in the UK by bolstering their sense of ethno-national identity and communal belonging. Similarly, the governments of countries such as Iran and Saudi Arabia also fund numerous religious and civil society institutions, schools, mosques, charities, and centres in the British capital with the aim of furthering their own geopolitical strategic interests.

The results of such a political economy of sectarian politics as played out in the streets and boroughs of London have become increasingly visible not only in the parcelling up of different areas of the city according to Islamic sect, but also a number of recent sectarian incidents. In May 2013, for example, a march against the Syrian regime involving Anjem Choudary (the former leader of proscribed radical organisation Islam4UK) descended into violence on London's Edgware Road. There are conflicting accounts of what happened, but on the website of (Iranian-

backed) AhlulBayt Islamic Mission, it is claimed that "protesters marched with hardline Salafi placards" and "attacked Shi'a passersby".[20] More recently, during the 2015 'Ashura march through central London, practicing Shi'a Muslims held up banners and placards condemning certain interpretations of Sunni Islam, and claiming that "Shi'a Muslims are the biggest victims of terrorism".[21] Such examples point to the fact that the sectarian dynamics of geopolitical conflicts in the Middle East are increasingly coming to fruition in the segregated urban spaces of London, where Sunnis and Shi'is are able to live in close proximity with each other without ever inhabiting the same spaces simultaneously or engaging in any form of meaningful dialogue or cohabitation.[22]

Conclusion

This paper has outlined the ways in which the urban fabric of London has been inscribed with politically-invested forms of etho-sectarianism through the dividing up of the city-as-lived into pseudo enclaves on the basis of religious sect by examining the particular institutions and practices of Iraqi Shi'i communities in northwest London. Although space limitations mean that the full implications of such sectarianised urban spaces cannot be elaborated here, I hope I have begun to lay the groundwork for a study of Shi'a communities in London that takes seriously the physical and material environment in which they live, as well as the ways in which these spaces may be shaped by external political and social forces.

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[20] http://www.aimislam.com/salafis-march-against-shia-islam-in-london-attack-shia-passersby-on-edgware-road/, accessed 30 September 2016.

[21] Author's fieldnotes. For example, one slogan read: "ISIS are the Yazid of today", a reference to the Sunni caliph Yazid, who is believed by Shi'is to have been involved in the killing of Imam Hussain at the Battle of Karbala.

[22] Indeed, even interfaith organisations in London have traditionally focused on building bridges between the major world religions, and not between different sects within a single religion; though this is beginning to change.

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