

## Iran's Shi`a Reach Out to Mainstream Salafists

By Alex Vatanka

THE IRANIAN STATE, politically and spiritually led by Shi`a Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, is publicly unwavering in its commitment to forge unity among Muslim countries. Tehran is again reaching out to Arab adherents of Salafism and Wahhabism, the historical antagonists of the Shi`a. Khamenei has declared the present Iranian year (ending March 2009) as the Year of National Unity and Islamic Solidarity. Iran's rival for leadership in the Islamic world, Saudi Arabia, is also emphasizing the necessity of religious dialogue. Two recent pan-Islamic conferences held in Tehran in May and in Mecca in June were aimed at lessening intra-Muslim differences, although in both instances scant explicit measures to achieve this objective were produced.

In practice, Shi`a-majority Iran and its Arab Sunni neighbors are at best reluctant, and at worst unable, to agree on a path to religious reconciliation between Islam's two largest branches. Much of the recent publicized enthusiasm for dialogue among Islam's various sects is above all driven by political motivations aimed at containing sectarian violence in the Middle East. Genuine Islamic accord, particularly among Shi`a and Sunnis, would require the full backing of senior religious authorities, but this has not been forthcoming.

### Salafists Travel to Iran

From May 4-6, 2008, the Iranian authorities hosted some 850 Muslim clerics (*ulama*) and intellectuals from 45 countries in Tehran for the 21<sup>st</sup> annual Islamic Unity Conference.<sup>1</sup> The initiative had first been touted by Iran's foreign minister, Manouchehr Mottaki, in December 2006 who then stated that "the Islamic Republic of Iran has always called for unity among Muslims." Mottaki's pledge was political and made on the back of accusations by Sunni states that the summer 2006 war between Hizb Allah and Lebanon was an Iranian and Shi`a

design to make inroads into the Arab Sunni world. The 2006 war effectively hastened the deterioration in relations between Shi`a and Sunnis, the old-age rift that had been violently rejuvenated following the fall of Saddam Hussein in Iraq. As with previous pan-Muslim gatherings in Tehran, the claim of the Iranian organizers was to provide a forum to generate debate among Muslims of different sects and continue to push for a charter on Islamic unity. According to Iran's state-funded Press TV, the charter has already been signed by 2,000 Muslim scholars, a key facet of which is the rejection of *takfirism*, a school of thought among hard line Sunnis that considers Shi'ism as heresy and sanctions violence against the latter.<sup>2</sup>

The conference in Tehran was chaired by Ayatollah Mohammad Ali Taskhiri, Iran's director-general of the World Forum for the Proximity of Islamic Schools of Thought. Taskhiri, handpicked for the position by Ayatollah Khamenei, courted Salafist participation for the event and spoke of similar efforts having reduced Sunni "misunderstandings" of Shi`a beliefs and practices and particularly in regard to Pakistani Sunnis.<sup>3</sup> At the event, no senior Salafist/Wahhabi clerics were present, although there were Arab Salafist participants from countries such as Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia.

Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, Iran's president from 1989-1997, and presently chairman of two of Iran's most powerful political institutions—the Assembly of Experts and the Expediency Council—devoted his address to the gathering on likely rewards Muslim countries could garner if they overcame internal strife and isolated extremists.<sup>4</sup> On May 9, Rafsanjani continued the same line, by stating in a sermon that "the extremist Shi`a and Sunnis are separating two important sections of the Muslim world," which is a "waste," but that if anything "disagreements in the Muslim world are increasing." He then notably

urged the Shi`a to rethink some of the sect's beliefs and practices, maintaining that unless re-examination first occurs among the Shi`a the gap with the Sunnis will only widen. "You can see how much Sunnis refer to the exaggerated statements in our books and traditions, and accordingly call us pagans," he said. "There are plenty of such statements," and unless "corrective measures are implemented the Sunnis will retain the opinion that Shi`a are apostates because they see their [Shi`a] imams as gods, which is not the case." Rafsanjani also urged Shi`a to refrain from "insulting [the] Prophet's disciples, the four caliphs and those who are regarded as saints by Sunnis."<sup>5</sup>

Advancing the need to curtail unorthodox Shi`a traditions and practices has been a constant feature of the theological debate in Iran, and predates the present Islamist government that came to power in 1979. In recent years, however, the urgency has mounted, at least in the eyes of those clergy who are loyal to the concept of the Shi`a *velayat-e faqih* (Guardianship of Jurisprudent) and the model of the Islamic Republic. This is due to the rise of the popularity of Islamic mysticism in Iran, and the emergence of Shi`a practices among some rural and poor urban communities in Iran that put emphasis on revering Imams `Ali, Husayn or Hasan, and Fatima al-Zahra, the Prophet's daughter. A number of Iranian Shi`a clergy have spoken against such trends, and warn that it effectively amounts to *kufir* (disbelief), as in Islam no human being should be worshipped.<sup>6</sup>

5 See summary of speech by Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Tehran, May 9, 2008. For a relatively recent Shi`a critique of the Wahhabi sect, see Hamid Algar, *Wahhabism: A Critical Essay* (New York: Islamic Publications International, 2002). Note that Algar makes an unambiguous distinction between "Salafism" and "Wahhabism," and it is the latter that is the target of his censure.

6 Shi`a Muslims hold the following five people above all others: Prophet Muhammad, Fatima al-Zahra (his daughter), his son-in-law and cousin, `Ali, and his grandsons Hasan and Husayn. See Vali Nasr, *The Shia Revival* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006). For an interesting sermon on Sunni perceptions of Shi`a on this matter, see Hojjat-ol Eslam Mehdi Daneshmand at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_HOvsFspC3M&amp;](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_HOvsFspC3M&amp;). Daneshmand decries some Shi`a practices that have emerged in Iran, such as Shi`a ceremonial chanting that equates Imam Husayn with Allah, suggesting that they amount to *kufir* or the rejection of the oneness of Allah, and which

1 "International Islamic Unity Conference Starts in Tehran," Islamic Republic News Agency, May 4, 2008.

2 "Iran to Host Islamic Unity Conference," Press TV, May 4, 2008.

3 "Salafi Scholars Can Also Express Their Opinions in Iran," Fars News Agency, May 1, 2008.

4 "Criticizing the Extremism of the Islamic World," *Etemad'e Melli*, May 5, 2008.

In relation to Sufism, or Islamic mystic sects, the state views their unorthodox and unregulated religious practices as a challenge to the theocratic regime's monopoly on religious authority and guidance, which it deems to basically underpin its political legitimacy.

Since 2006, for example, Iran has witnessed a number of government crackdowns on Sufi orders, the first of which occurred in the holy Shi'a city of Qom in February 2006 when around 200 people were hurt in clashes between police, Islamist Basiji militias and Sufi disciples. Another Sufi place of worship belonging to the Nimatullahi order was razed to the ground on November 11, 2007 in the western city of Boroujerd. Official media reported that the clashes came after adherents attacked a Shi'a mosque whose clerics had been publicly condemning Sufism over the minaret loudspeakers.<sup>7</sup>

#### Others Issue an Anti-Shi'a Letter

Regardless of the nature of its motivations, Iranian pleas for Islamic unity made little impression on some of Saudi Arabia's most senior Wahhabi clerics. Twenty-two of them issued an anti-Shi'a statement on June 1 in which they accused the Shi'a of abusing Sunnis under their control. "If they [Shi'a] have a country, they humiliate and exert control in their rule over Sunnis," and specifically mentioned conditions in Iran and Iraq. "They sow strife, corruption and destruction among Muslims and destabilize security in Muslim countries...such as Yemen."<sup>8</sup> The tone of the letter is not dissimilar to anti-Shi'a material found on extremist Salafist or jihadist websites that glorify violence against Shi'a, or the 2007 statement of Ayman al-Zawahiri who accused Iranian Shi'a leaders to be "intent on establishing certain [Islamic] concepts which nullify the intellects of their followers and prevent them from understanding the Qur'an and Sunna, except through [the Shi'a clergy's] interpretations and explanations."<sup>9</sup>

enables Sunnis to represent Shi'a as heretics and justify violence against them.

7 "Iran's Sufis in the Limelight," *Jane's Islamic Affairs Analyst*, March 2008.

8 Donna Abu Nasr, "Saudi Clerics Criticize Shiites for Destabilizing," Associated Press, June 1, 2008.

9 "Qaeda Video Taunts Bush, Iran, Shiites," CNN, May 5, 2007.

While the tough worded letter was a mere re-statement of a sentiment prevalent among Saudi Wahhabis, it was issued only three days before the opening of an inter-faith dialogue conference held by King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia in Islam's holy city of Mecca between June 4-7. Bringing together some 500 Islamic scholars and academics, the Mecca-based Muslim World League (MWL), which organized the event, had hoped the initiative would represent

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Saudi Arabia and King Abdullah in the West as forces of moderation in the Islamic world. Still, and despite official Saudis distancing themselves from the letter, it, combined with the fact that Saudi Arabia's indigenous Shi'a minority were officially barred from the Mecca conference, somewhat lessened the ability, if not the sincerity, of Saudi officials to reach out to the Shi'a.<sup>10</sup>

Iranian media reported the ban on Saudi Shi'a attendance and also gave coverage to reports of three Shi'a mosques and eight Shi'a clergy and community elders being arrested in the Eastern Province of the country while the intra-faith conference was in session in Mecca.<sup>11</sup> In spite of the malign Saudi ban, Iranian media by and large avoided any scolding of condemnation, perhaps a reflection of Iranian appreciation that

10 Saudi officials barred not just the Shi'a, but all non-Wahhabi sects. According to the pan-Arab newspaper *al-Quds al-Arabi*, "Fatimide, Isma'ili, Shi'is or any non-Salafi Sunni citizens [were] excluded. The Arab Shi'i participation was restricted to Shaykh Jawad al-Salihi who lives outside Iraq, is opposed to the Iraqi Government, and calls for its downfall." See *al-Quds al-Arabi*, June 5, 2008.

11 "Closure of Shi'a Mosques and Arrest of Shi'a Clergy in Saudi Arabia," *RajaNews.com*, June 7, 2008.

King Abdullah is engaged in a struggle of his own with radical Wahhabi clergy and their sympathizers in the kingdom. Nonetheless, the intended political message in Mecca was palpable. At the opening ceremony, King Abdullah walked into the conference hall with Rafsanjani, who later sat on the king's left on the center stage, interpreted by Saudi media to signal that the Wahhabi kingdom does not have a problem with moderate Shi'a.<sup>12</sup>

#### Conclusion

In the final analysis, in neither Tehran nor Mecca did the attendees produce tangible action plans to facilitate Shi'a-Sunni unity. This is a reflection of the level of suspicion and doctrinal divide, which is exacerbated due to the geopolitical rivalry of Iran and Sunni Arab states particularly since 2003.<sup>13</sup> At the same time as Saudi Shi'a were effectively facing disfranchisement in relation to the Mecca conference, there were reports of arrests of Sunni clergy in Iran's Kordestan and Balochistan provinces, and fear that the United Arab Emirates is financing the spread of Wahhabism in southern Iran. The Shi'a-Sunni gap is indeed real.<sup>14</sup> In the case of the Mecca conference, the objective was officially more about Muslims reaching out to Jews and Christians, somewhat fanciful given deep-seated intra-Muslim distrust and while holding the conference in Mecca, a city where non-Muslims are by law banned.

12 "Saudis Launch Islamic Unity Drive," BBC, June 4, 2008.

13 Recently, Saudi Wahhabi scholar Ibn Jabarayn called for the massacre of the Shi'a in a tape recording broadcast on the internet. The exact edict is, "The blood of the rafezi [derogatory word for Shi'a] is halal [religiously permissible]."

14 According to a report by the Iranian website *www.as-riran.com*, UAE-based Salafists are providing cash and religious Salafist literature to ethnic Arab seafarers from Iran on visit to the UAE. The aim is to spread Salafism in southern Iranian coastal areas, home to many ethnic Arab Sunnis. According to *www.jahannews.com*, a Sunni cleric in Balochistan was also recently arrested on allegations of cooperating with the Iranian ethnic Baloch and Sunni terrorist organization, Jund Allah. Meanwhile, *www.mizannews.com* reported that two Sunni clerics, Seifullah Hosseini, Friday prayer leader of Khatam al-Anbia mosque in Saqez, and Hossein Hosseini, Friday prayer leader of Hamzeh mosque in Javan-roud in Kordestan, were arrested.

Nevertheless, the recent Iranian and Saudi attempts should not be dismissed. Both events had the backing of the highest echelons of powers in the respective states. Ayatollahs Khamenei and Rafsanjani, often deemed as fierce rivals, judged the matter of intra-Islamic dialogue sufficiently worthy to both rally behind it. King Abdullah, too, has maintained the momentum for such a dialogue in his kingdom despite often stiff opposition, as seen in the anti-Shi`a letter signed by the 22 Wahhabi clerics who sought to undermine him.

It is clear that political and not religious drivers have been the primary catalysts in both instances, and both Iranian Shi`a and Saudi Wahhabi clerical establishments continue to contain dangerously sectarian voices that will prove stubborn in their views. Still, in an age when sectarian violence has almost become the norm in various Middle Eastern arenas, from Iraq to Lebanon and from Pakistan to Yemen, the two leading Shi`a and Sunni states in the world can ill afford to let others take the initiative.

*Alex Vatanka is the editor of Jane's Islamic Affairs Analyst and based in Washington, D.C. He is also an adjunct scholar at the Middle East Institute, and an adjunct lecturer at the U.S. Air Force Special Operations School. His current research focus is on Iran and its relations with its neighbors, and his most recent publication was Ali Khamenei: Iran's Most Powerful Man (Middle East Institute, February 2008). He is fluent in Farsi and holds a master's degree in International Relations from the University of Essex in the United Kingdom.*