

## **Shiites in Europe: a minority group of European Islam**

### **International colloquium**

**September 2008**

Every year, in various towns of Europe – Athens, Copenhagen, Paris, Hamburg or Helsinki, the Shi'a Muslims of Europe celebrate Ashura, to commemorate the day of the martyrdom of the Imam Hussein defeated at the battle of Kerbala. These Shi'a Muslims come from Iran, Pakistan, Iraq or Turkey... and form, within the Muslim populations living in Europe, an active minority. This Muslim minority is most often discreet and not well known. It is a composite group: they are divided ethnically, linguistically and sometimes even religiously. For instance, Turkish Alevis living in Europe belong to a different national and religious reconstruction than the Iranian Mudjahiddins opposing the Teheran regime - of whom Maryam Radjavi is the leader. The billionaire, businessman and philanthropist Karim Aga Khan, who has a residence in France, is the supreme Imam of 15 million of Ismaelites in the world. He is another notable figure of Shiism.

In order to give a definition of Shiism, one must trace back to the beginnings of the history of Islam. Shiism emerges immediately after the death of the Prophet Muhammad in 632, at the time of his temporal succession at the head of the Umma. The stake was to determine clearly which clan was going to affirm its political hegemony within the new Islamic world.

For those who would be later called the "Sunni Muslims", the temporal chief of the Muslim community was to be selected within the community of believers, and specifically to descend from the Quraysh tribe. On the contrary, Shi'a Muslims, holders of a political legitimacy, considered that the Caliph must be of direct descent of the Prophet, specifically the Alid branch: Ali, son-in-law and cousin of the Prophet, will become Caliph in the turmoil of 656, supported by a heterogeneous coalition. According to historians, his reign will be one of the most disturbed ones of the new-born Islam.

Ali was fought by close relations of the Prophet (namely his wife Aicha) and betrayed by his own partisans; he was assassinated in 661. After repeated conflicts, his son Hassan was forced to abdicate in favour of his long-term rival, Muawiyah, chief of the Umayyad dynasty, who then became Caliph.

Ali's other son, Hussein, refusing the authority and the legitimacy of the Umayyad caliphs, will also be defeated and killed during the battle of Karbala against the troops of the Caliph Yazid. This date is thus considered the symbolical starting point of the definitive division between Sunni and Shi'a Muslims.

The opposition between these two groups, at first political, will gradually become of more religious tone. According to the Shiites, after the achieved cycle of prophecy came the cycle of the Saints Imam, holders of a divine knowledge complementary of that revealed by Muhammad. As opposed to the Sunnis holders of legalism, the Shiites will consider that the Quranic text can be read both in an exoteric (literal) and an esoteric (interior) manner. This will contribute to the development of one of the major trends of gnosis in Islam.

In addition to this religious separation, a political competition started in the Middle Ages and continued in the modern era, divided between the Ottomans, who rejected Shiism and Alevism, and the Persian States.

Shiism, all trends considered, is a minor group of the Islamic world. Only 15 to 20% of Muslims consider themselves Shiites. Shi'a Muslims are a majority in certain countries such as Azerbaidjan (turcophone), Irak (arabophone where they constitute 60 % of the population) and of course Iran (persanophone) where Shiism is a State religion. They constitute important minorities in Lebanon, Pakistan and Turkey, not to forget Syria where the population is mostly Sunni but the political power is held by members of the heterodox Shi'a Alawite group.

Shi'a Islam is also a demographical minority in Europe: Muslim communities are mainly Sunni. Rooted in the Balkans (Bektashis from Kosovo and Rhodopes), or resulting from the political or economical migrations, this linguistically heterogeneous group has until now hardly ever been taken into account by broad researches in social sciences outside the Muslim cultural area. The Shi'a groups are not known, or not well known; the occidental image is that of holders of an uncompromising religious and political attitude. And this stereotypical perception is partly reinforced by events of the Muslim world: the Khomeyni revolution in Iran, the sectarian struggle between Shiites and Sunnites in Irak.

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# Politique, Religion, Institutions et Sociétés : Mutations Européennes



The colloquium organised by the research Center PRISME (CNRS / Robert Schuman University of Strasbourg) will bring together some twenty specialists of Shiisme, Muslims in Europe, and religious minorities. It will be one of the first attempts to realise an in-depth analysis of the Shiite presence on European ground: re-structuring, re-composition of believing and acting, relations to ethnicity, nation, and modes of declinations of belonging to the Umma.

The cooperation between different ethnic minorities and religious trends, interactions established between religious belonging and politics of the home country will be compared to the situation of other Muslim groups in Europe.

This meeting is the first step of a new field that the research group on re-compositions of Islam in Europe of PRISME intends to develop. Directed toward minoritarian elements of European Islam, this new field should allow evaluating how much Islam, in this part of the world, is heterogeneous and composed of many trends, sensitivities, with a pluralist reference to Islam, sometimes at the extreme of what society considers "canonic" Islam.

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