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Facets of Shi'ite Islam in
Contemporary Southeast Asia (II):
Malaysia and Singapore

Christoph Marcinkowski

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ABSTRACT

The present paper is the sequel to the author's IDSS Working Paper "Facets of Shi'ite Islam in Contemporary Southeast Asia (I): Thailand and Indonesia". In an earlier *IDSS Working Paper*, the author has also tried to address some issues pertaining to Twelver Shi'ite Islamic thought, as well as conceptual and practical aspects.
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Dr Christoph Marcinkowski (b. 1964 in Berlin) is an award-winning German scholar in Islamic, Southeast Asian, and Iranian studies and has spent several years in Iran (1984-86) and Malaysia (1995-2004). He had been Senior Research Fellow (1999-2002) and Associate Professor of History (2002-04) at the International Institute of Islamic Thought of Civilization (ISTAC), Kuala Lumpur, and Associate Research Scholar and member of the editorial staff of *Encyclopaedia Iranica* at the Center for Iranian Studies, Columbia University, New York City (2004-05). Currently, he is Visiting Research Scholar at the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies (IDSS) at Nanyang Technological University (NTU) as well as Visiting Affiliate at the Asia Research Institute (ARI), National University of Singapore (NUS). He has published widely on issues pertaining to Islamic history and culture in Iran, Iraq, and Southeast Asia.

Dr Marcinkowski is the author of *Religion and Politics in Iraq. Shi'ite Clerics between Quietism and Resistance* (Singapore, 2004). His eighth and latest book, *Shi'ite Islam in Southeast Asia. Basic Concepts, Cultural and Historical Aspects, Contemporary Implications*, is forthcoming at Singapore University Press. Presently, he is working on a new book on contacts between Hadramaut in southern Arabia and Southeast Asia.

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Introduction

In spite of the various historical episodes of the presence of Shi'ism in the region referred to in the first part of this bipartite article,[1] the revival of Shi'ism in Southeast Asia - Twelver Shi'ism in particular – appears to be a relatively recent phenomenon. This development should be considered in the light of the impact of the Iranian revolution of 1979 and its aftermath on the Muslim world in general. As Ambassador Barry Desker, the Director of Singapore's Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies (IDSS), has pointedly stated:

> "A signal event was the Iranian revolution of 1979. In Iran, the dictatorial regime of the Shah was equated with its backer, the United States, which was viewed as the "Great Satan" for its exploitation of the country's natural resources and corruption of the local culture. The erosion of Islamic values, combined with the moral and financial lassitude of the ruling elite, fomented a groundswell of anger against the Shah. The unexpected success of Khomeini's revolution stirred a sense of Islamic empowerment across Muslim communities all over the world, including in Southeast Asia. […] There was, however, a significant constraint in the ability of Iran to export its brand of Shi'a Islam to Southeast Asia since most Muslims in the region belong to the

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[1] See also C. Marcinkowski, *Shi'ite Islam in Southeast Asia. Basic Concepts, Cultural and Historical Aspects, Contemporary Implications*, chapter 2 (forthcoming)

Sunni variant of the faith. Nevertheless, the successful establishment of a purist Islamic theocracy in Iran inspired a new sense of confidence in the power of Islamic identity and the strength of Islam to mobilize the masses. In addition, Khomeini's triumph fostered a wave of Islamic activity in the Sunni world as well, especially since it galvanized Saudi Arabia to aggressively promote Wahabi [*Wahhābī*] beliefs in competition with Iran. Under the dual influence of Khomeini's example and Saudi Arabia's rich sponsorship, Muslims in Southeast Asia developed a growing sense of identification with the larger community of believers and increasing acknowledgement of the new ideological developments in the Middle East."[2]

As in the case of the first part of this study, it is not intended to present an exhaustive account of contemporary Shi'ism in Southeast Asia. This is mainly due to the scarcity of reliable printed sources. It is intended to go somewhat deeper into the subject in a paper that is going to be published separately. The following observations are thus largely based on online resources or on interviews with Southeast Asian Shi'ites conducted by myself. In most cases, my informants wished to remain incognito, due to the - for Shi'ites - often less encouraging climate. Moreover, as we shall see, this climate is largely dependent on the prevailing political (and, at times, ethnical) structures of the country they are living in. We shall first have a look at Malaysia, where Shi'ite Muslims appear to face a rather uncertain future.

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[2] B. Desker, "The Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) Phenomenon in Singapore," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 25, no. 3 (2003), pp. 491-92.

Survival on a Daily Basis: The Malaysian Experience

In contrast to other parts of Southeast Asia, the presence of Shi'ism on the Malay peninsula seems to be of rather recent date. In history, the Malacca Sultanate as well as its various successor states on the peninsula had always been strongholds of the Sunni S̲h̲āfi'ite legal "school" combined with a staunchly As̲h̲'arite theological outlook, although Sufism, too, was always well represented.[3]

However, already more than thirty years ago, the German scholar Werner Ende has pointed out in an important article[4] that the issue of continuing latent Shi'ite tendencies in Southeast Asian Islam had already at the beginning of the 20th century again become the subject of a heated debate among the Muslims in British-administered Malaya and Singapore, as well as the Dutch East Indies. Al-Sayyid Muhammad b. al-'Aqīl al-Hadramī, a member of the local Arab community, evoked an outcry among his peers and fellow Sunnis when he considered the cursing of the first Umayyad caliph, Mu'āwiyah, meritorious in several of his works published in Singapore.[5] Although this episode, which at times even involved leading Egyptian reformist scholars such as Ras̲h̲īd Ridā, was significant with regard to the situation within the local Southeast Asian Arab communities, it nevertheless also revealed the persistence of Shi'ite tendencies in spite of the growing influence of Middle Eastern modernist thought on Southeast Asian Islam from the early 19th century onwards. Already the introduction of steamships to the Indian Ocean region by the British and Dutch colonial powers in the first half of the 19th century had facilitated the contacts

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[3] See Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *Some Aspects of Sufism, as Understood and Practised Among the Malays*, ed. Shirle Gordon (Singapore, 1963).

[4] W. Ende, "Schiitische Tendenzen bei sunnitischen Sayyids aus Hadramaut: Muhammad b. 'Aqil al-'Alawi (1863- 1931)," *Der Islam* 50 (1973), pp. 82-97.

[5] Al-Sayyid Muhammad b. al-'Aqīl al-Hadramī, *Al-'atab al-jamīl* (Jakarta [?], 1971) [in Arabic], idem, *Al-nasā'ih al-kāfiyah liman yatawallā Mu'āwiyah* (Qum, 1412 AH) [in Arabic], *Taqiyyat al-imān bi-radd tazkiyyat Ibn Abi Sufyān* (Qum, n. d.) [in Arabic].

of Southeast Asian Sunni Muslims with the Arab lands of the Middle East, in particular with the sacred places on the Arabian Peninsula and the Sunni study centers in Egypt. Returning pilgrims and religious students began to spread puritanical ideas, particularly Wahhabism, throughout the Archipelago.

In addition to this and before leading proceeding to the contemporary situation, it should be noted that Shi'ism - or at least cultural expressions of it - did have an outlet on Penang Island, which was in British hands from the last 18th century onwards. Mozaffari-Falarti has shown in a recent paper,[6] a part of a larger research project, that along with the British came sepoy troops from India, many of them Shi'ites from various denominations –Twelvers as well as Ismāʿīlis. Those Shi'ite sepoy soldiers brought with them the *boria*, a choral street performance carried out annually by several troupes. By the late 19th century, *boria* had also been adopted by the local Sunni Malay population[7] and was practiced in other Malay states, such as Perak and Kedah, as well. *Boria*, celebrated during the first ten days of Muharram in commemoration of the tragic events of Karbalā', had its apex in the 19th century and is still practiced in contemporary Malaysia,[8] where it has become a part of the Malay heritage.[9] As pointed out by Mozaffari-Falarti, whose article is based on extensive field-research, today's *boria*

> "troupes are composed predominantly of Sunni Malays and may
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> represent a street, *kampong* ([Malay:] a village) or districts. *Boria* are

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[6]   Maziar Mozaffari-Falarti, "Critical Study of Theories Surrounding the Historic Arrival of a Popular Shiite Festival in Contemporary Malaysia," in: C. Bailey, D. Cabrera, and L. Buys (ed.), *Proceedings. Social Change in the 21st Century, Centre for Social Change Research, School of Humanities and Human Services, Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Australia* (Brisbane, 2004), pp. 1-18, available online at http://eprints.qut.edu.au/view/person/Mozaffari-Falarti,_Maziar.html (accessed on May 3, 2006).
[7]   Ibid., p. 2.
[8]   Kay Kim Khoo and Ranjit Singh Malhi, "Boria Chants Marked Tragedy of Muharram," *Sunday Star* [Kuala Lumpur] (October 24, 1993), p. 28.
[9]   See Rahmah Bujang, *Boria. A Form of Malay Theatre* (Singapore, 1987).

performed merely for fun and entertainment and often include an annual singing competition. The size, membership, themes and movements of each *boria* troupe may vary from year to year. Likewise, the themes and contents of the *boria* performed by the different troupes also changes each year and can have a comical, political or satirical notion."[10]

Mozaffari-Falarti states with regard to 19th-century *boria*, that it is

"believed to have consisted [of] an annual event held during the first ten days of Muharram in which various troupes dressed up as different characters and often accompanied by music. Most scholars report, however, that nineteenth-century *boria* were performed chiefly by Indian migrants comprising an amalgamation of sepoys (especially the Indian Native Infantry), labourers, convicts or traders rather than the native Malays and that the performances were not competitive but fairly religious corresponding to the Shiite Muharram festival. Thus, these scholars continue that it was these Indians who first introduced the Shiite Muharram festival with its spins of religious zeal and pathos into nineteenth-century Malaysia and that the local Sunni Malays by either observance or intermarriage with Indian migrants gradually adopted the religious Muharram festival as their own, transforming it into a non-religious practice. Likewise, the origin of the word *boria* is argued by various scholars to be either from Persian or Indian

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[10] Mozaffari-Falarti, "Critical Study of Theories Surrounding the Historic Arrival of a Popular Shiite Festival in Contemporary Malaysia", p. 2.

languages, […] introduced into the Malay language directly from India".[11]

In spite of all this, in the view of Mozaffari-Falarti, there exists so far "no conclusive evidence […] that there was any significant Shiite minority in any part of the Malay Peninsula that would give rise of the religious [*boria*] Muharram festival".[12]

With this in mind, let us now turn to contemporary Malaysia, a multi-cultural and multi-religious country with a large ethnic Chinese and Indian non-Muslim minority. According to the *The World Factbook*, Malaysia's ethnic distribution in 2004 was as follows: Malay 50.4%, Chinese 23.7%, Indigenous 11%, Indian 7.1%, others 7.8%.[13] Part I of the Malaysian Constitution, dealing with the member states as well as religion and law of the Malaysian Federation, states that "Islam is the religion of the Federation; but other religions may be practiced in peace and harmony in any part of the Federation".[14] In line with this provision, the Islamic Affairs Division of the Prime Minister's Department is to provide an effective coordination in the

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[11] Ibid., pp. 2-3.

[12] Ibid., p. 3.

[13] Central Intelligence Agency, *The World Factbook*, available online at http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/my.html (accessed on May 10, 2006). On some of the intriguing issues pertaining to ethnicity and Islam in Malaysia see Mohamed Abu Bakr, "Islam, Civil Society, and Ethnic Relations in Malaysia," in: Nakamura Mitsuo, Sharon Siddique, and Omar Farouk Bajunid, eds. *Islam and Civil Society in Southeast Asia* (Singapore, 2001), pp. 57-75. See also P. Riddell, "Islamization, Civil Society, and Religious Minorities in Malaysia," in: K. S. Nathan and Mohammad Hashim Kamali, *Islam in Southeast Asia. Political, Social and Strategic Challenges for the 21st Century* (Singapore, 2005).

[14] Helplinelaw, "Constitution of Malaysia," Part I, 3 (1), available online at http://www.helplinelaw.com/law/constitution/malaysia/malaysia01.php (accessed May 11, 2006). For good source material see also Farid Sufian Shuaib, Tajul Aris, and Ahmad Bustami. *Administration of Islamic Law in Malaysia. Text and Material* (Kuala Lumpur, 2001). For introductions into the setting of Malaysian Islam see also Virginia Hooker and Norani Othman, eds. *Malaysia. Islam, Society, and Politics* (Singapore, 2003), and Hussin Mutalib. *Islam in Malaysia. From Revivalism to Islamic State?* (Singapore, 1993).

administration of Islamic religious affairs of the country. This function is now implemented by the *Pusat Islam Malaysia* (Malay for "Islamic Centre of Malaysia"), which is an administrative centre for Islam-related activities.

It is crucial to understand that the fact of only little more than half of the country's population being ethnically Malay and Muslim has at least since Malaysia's independence in 1957 always alerted the political leadership of the Malays. This circumstance had always been the all-determining factor of Malaysian internal politics—to some extent understandably, from the Malay perspective. *Agama, bangsa, dan negara* (Malay, "religion, race, and country") could thus be considered a key concept for uniting them *vis-à-vis* a vast ethnic Chinese and Indian minority and aimed at avoiding political and denominational 'disharmony' among the Malays.[15]

However, very interestingly, and also relevant with regard to the future fate of the Malaysian Shi'ite community, are certain recent political developments in the country. Thezse developments seem to indicate, on the first glance, a beginning of a new era in the dealings of the government with its people. In Malaysia, the transfer of power from Dr Mahathir Mohamed to Mr Abdullah Ahmad Badawi—who succeeded the former as Malaysian Prime Minister in 2003, and who won a stunning victory in the 2004 general elections—has resulted in several changes with regard to internal politics. Mr Badawi's new policy was widely perceived as indirect criticism of his predecessor in office when he announced the cancellation of several cost-intensive

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[15] The issue of Malay ethnicity and its implications for contemporary politics has been dealt with from different angles: see, for instance, L. Y. Andaya, "The Search for the 'Origins' of *Melayu*," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 32 (October 2001), pp. 315-30, T. P. Barnard, *Contesting Malayness. Malay Identity Across Boundaries* (Singapore, 2004), A. Reid, "Understanding *Melayu* (Malay) as a Source of Diverse Modern Identities," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 32, no. (October 2001), pp. 295-313, A. B. Shamsul, "A History of an Identity, an Identity of a History: The Idea and Practise of 'Malayness' in Malaysia Reconsidered," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 32, (October 2001), pp. 355-66. The issue had also been thematized by Malaysia's former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad; see Mahathir Mohamad, *The Challenge* (Petaling Jaya, 1993, 4th printing), and idem, *The Malay Dilemma* (Singapore and Kuala Lumpur, 1995, reprint). For an introduction to the historical development of Malays nationalism see W. R. Roff, *The Origins of Malay Nationalism* (New Haven, 1967).

'mega-projects' such as, the replacement of the causeway that links the Malaysia's second-biggest city of Johor Bahru and Singapore. In particular his promise to proceed against "cronyism" and alleged 'corruption' in the Malaysian police force and the judiciary also indicated a change of direction. Moreover, in the sphere of religious policy, the Badawi government is promoting the progressive concept of "Islam Hadhari", which is usually translated as "Civilizational Islam", a concept that includes among its fundamental "ten principles" also "the freedom and independence of the people", "the protection of the rights of minority groups and women", "cultural and moral integrity", and - above all - a "just and trustworthy government".[16] However, Mr Badawi's new policy of 'openness' might have been wrongly perceived by some (to the mind of the present writer[17]) as a 'weakness'. This is because Malaysia is an oil-producing and exporting country. It has subsequently witnessed several demonstrations and other reactions from the public against substantially rising petrol prices.

During the 1980s and 1990s, many Malaysians and Indonesians, mostly former Sunnis, were to be found at the Shi'ite theological study centers of Qum in Iran, as also witnessed by myself during my own stay in that country between 1984 and 1986. However, most Shi'ite Muslims in Malaysia the writer had talked to—all of whom chose to stay anonymous—do consider themselves loyal citizens and many even do not question key institutions, such as the monarchy or the still prevailing national 'Bumiputra' (Malay for "princes of the soil", i.e. "indigenous population") 'affirmative action' legislation which favours Malays and other indigenous ethnic

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[16] Government of Malaysia, "The Concept of Islam Hadhari", available online at http://www.pmo.gov.my/website/webdb.nsf/vIslamHadhari/7ADA18205EDC7C6C482570830032B65 E (accessed on June 29, 2006).
    [17] See on this issue also Yang Razali Kassim, "Pulling the Hair from the Flour. Will Abdullah's Art of Defusing the Mahathir Crisis Work?," *IDSS Commentary* no. 58/2006, available online at http://www.idss.edu.sg (accessed on June 28, 2006).

groups in several fields of public life *vis-à-vis* the non-Malay citizens. Many of the Malaysian Shi'ites –if not all of them –seem to harbour no ill-will towards their Sunni Muslim compatriots as such, although in their daily dealings with them they might feel compelled to exercise *taqiyyah*. They do consider themselves as 'good Muslims'. However, at times, they do also criticize the allegedly 'lax', 'liberal' and having a 'double-standard' attitude of the Malaysian government and society with regard to things Islamic which is on one the hand upholding Sunni "orthodoxy" while promoting on the other what is perceived as "corrupting Western lifestyle and mind-setting", a phenomenon common to many other contemporary Muslim societies and so masterly described and termed by secular writer Daryush Shayegan as *cultural schizophrenia*.[18] Moreover, they felt personally hurt when confronted with the fact that they are often lumped together by the Government and its Islamic organs with other, rather dubious "religious movements", such as the followers of the so-called "Sky Kingdom" (Malay: *Kerajaan Langit*), a cult which was founded by Ariffin Mohamed (also known as "Ayah Pin", an apostate from Islam) and dissolved by the Malaysian authorities in July 2005.[19] In the past, several Shi'ite practices, discussed in the first chapter, have led to misunderstandings between Malaysia's Sunni authorities and the local Shi'ite community. The misuse of *mut'ah*, "temporary marriage", for instance, - mostly by individuals who were not even Shi'ites themselves - has led to severe accusations against the local Shi'ite community as a whole. Although, most of the 'perpetrators' were Sunnis, the whole issue was blamed on the local Shi'ite community at large and was thus not helpful in improving their

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[18] Daryush Shayegan, tr. J. Howe, *Cultural Schizophrenia. Islamic Societies Confronting the West* (London, 1992).
[19] See on this sect Malaysiakini, "Ayah Pin's Sky Kingdom", available online at http://www.malaysiakini.com/pages/ayah_pin/ (accessed on June 29, 2006).

lot. The issue shall be discussed later again in some detail within the context of Singapore.

Contrary to their Sunni brethren, contemporary Southeast Asian Shi'ites prefer to congregate in *husayniyyah*s rather than in mosques, which seems to be a general feature of Shi'ism in the region. As the name already suggests, *husayniyyah*s do not merely fulfill the function of a mosque but are also cultural centres and, above all, assembly halls for the celebrations of particularly Shi'ite events, such as 'Âshūrā'. Moreover, in Malaysia, the erection of a Shi'ite mosque would be impossible due to the still prevailing restrictive climate in that country. As I could observe for myself during my stay in Malaysia where I lived and worked between 1995 and 2004, several of such *husayniyyah*s existed in the area of Kuala Lumpur and the surrounding State of Selangor. All of them operated only in secret and were only temporarily active, due to persecution, and most where situated either in apartment blocks or in rented houses.

Malaysia rightly stands out as an example for tolerance, in particular when it comes to her non-Muslim citizens. However, although of no concern to the present writer, in particular many somewhat more traditional Sunni as well as Shi'ite Muslim readers will be surprised to hear that Malaysia - aside perhaps from secular Turkey and Indonesia – appears to be the only Muslim country which permits openly the activities of the Bahā'īs on its soil[20] - a religious movement which declaredly left Islam in the course of the 19th century - while at the same time outlawing Shi'ite Islam. Within this framework then, the dealings of the Malaysian government with its tiny Shi'ite community could become something of a 'test-case' for how serious the Badawi administration is with its promotion of the idea of a 'just and trustworthy government', as stipulated by its "Islam Hadhari" concept. To date, any 'deviation'

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[20] Baha'i Community of Malaysia, "The Baha'i Community of Malaysia", available online at http://www.bahai.org.my/index1.htm (accessed on June 29, 2006).

from what is perceived as an 'orthodox Sunni Islam' – of the S̲h̲āfiʿite brand, one should add – is still considered to be 'heretical' as it could disturb the 'unity of the Malays'. It should not be forgotten that the legal stipulations of the notorious Internal Security Act (ISA), one of the many remnants of the country's colonial past which provides for "detention without trial" for up to 60 days (and under special circumstances for even up to two years) are still in force, ready to be invoked against 'unruly elements' in case of 'need'.

Already the second half of the 1990s had seen a government-backed campaign against what was introduced to the public as 'deviationist teachings', among them Twelver Shi'ism. The campaign was also reflected in the Malay-language press, as well as in certain periodicals.[21] This campaign led also to several ISA detentions that caused also serious concerns among international observers. Inter Press Service English News Wire, for instance,[22] reported on November 19, 1997, on the detention earlier that month of 10 Shi'ites for allegedly spreading 'deviant' Islamic teachings. As the news site also stated, their detention without trial was also denounced by 19 organizations, ranging from human rights activists to political opposition parties. It is also interesting how those arrests had been reflected on in local Malaysian online discussion forums. One subscriber, for instance, apparently a Shi'ite himself, wrote on November 29, 1997:

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[21] See, for instance, Faridah M. Sani. "Pensyarah sebar faham syiah" [Lecturer spreads Shi'ite teachings], *Berita Minggu*, 25 February 1990 [in Malay], eadem, "Ajaran syiah boleh jejas perepaduan" [Shi'ite teachings could damage unity], *Berita Harian*, 3 March 1990 [in Malay], eadem, "Mungkinkah syiah terkeluar daripada Islam?" [Are the Shi'ites out of Islam?], *Al-Islam* 20, no. 232, April 1993, pp. 8-9 [in Malay], Ustaz Ashaari Muhammad, *Bahaya syiah* [The Shi'ite danger] (Kuala Lumpur, 1987) [in Malay], Mustaffa Suhaimi, "Syiah: Mencabar akidah umat Islam" [Shi'ah: Challenging the *ʿaqidah* of the Muslim *ummah*], *Al-Islam* 20, no. 232 (April 1993) [in Malay].

[22] Anil Noel Netto, "Malaysia-Religion: Crackdown of Shiah Muslims Puzzples Many," available online at http://www.highbeam.com/doc/1P1:520505/MALAYSIA-RELIGION~C~+CRACKDOWN+ON+SHIAH+MUSLIMS+PUZZLES+MANY.html?refid=ip_hf. (accessed on June 21, 2006).

"I was unable to attend the demonstration held this morning to protest against the Internal Security Act (ISA) arrests of 10 Shi'ah [i.e. Shi'ites]. I wish it to be known I stand together with the protestors against the arrests of the 10 persons under the ISA. The chief of the Islamic Centre (Pusat Islam), Datuk Abdul Hamid Zainal Abidin, was reported in the *Berita Harian* [a Malay-language Kuala Lumpur daily newspaper] to have stated in Nilam Puri, they were neither militants nor were they connected to any foreign country. They were also not members of an organised group. Said he, "they were arrested as individuals who did not conform" (to the 'Official Sunni Islam'). He added, "they were deemed dangerous because they could divide the Muslim community for upholding the beliefs". I am unable to accept a religion of this coercive sort. As a person born into a Shi'ah family and who refuses to conform to any belief by force of coercion or by threat, I wish it to be known, should I be arrested under the ISA because of my beliefs, this government would have arrested a non-Muslim for an 'Islamic offence'. Thank you and God Bless".[23]

It appears that this campaign was motivated by purely internal political rather than religious considerations, such as the above-referred to issue of "Malay unity". Already in 1996, only a year before the arrests, a particularly crude example of anti-Shi'ite polemics - a book entitled *Syiah Imamiyah, mazhab ke-5?*[24] (Imamite Shi'ism, a fifth legal school?) – was republished in third edition. One could well argue that the

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[23] "Shi'ah Arrests," available online at http://www.malaysia.net/lists/sangkancil/1997-11/msg01343.html (accessed on June 21, 2006).

[24] Sulaiman Nordin, Mohd Zawawi Abdullah, and Mohamad Sabri Haron, eds., *Syiah Imamiyah, mazhab ke-5?* [Imamite Shi'ism, a fifth legal school?] (Kajang, Selangor [Malaysia], 1996, 3rd editon) [in Malay].

work would certainly fulfill the conditions for "inciting sectarian sedition", punishable by law in Malaysia - would it not have been directed against Shi'ites. The book was edited by Dr Sulaiman Nordin, Dr Mohd Zawawi Abdullah, and Mohamad Sabri Haron and first published in 1993 by the Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM, Malaysian National University) in Bangi, Selangor. It constitutes the proceedings volume of a seminar that was organized by UKM's Centre of General Studies (Pusat Pengajian Umum) and conducted at Pusat Islam, the Islamic Centre, in Kuala Lumpur on December 26 and 27, 1992. It is made up of 21 chapters,[25] some written by members of the Malaysian Sunni establishment. Several of the contributors appear to display at least a cursory knowledge of some of the Twelver Shi'ite classical key sources, such as al-Kulaynī's collections of Traditions, *al-Kāfī*. However, in sum, wrong interpretations and translations of what was actually stated in the Shi'ite sources quoted by them made up the bulk of the volume. An example for this was the almost constant and willful rendering into Malay from Arabic Shi'ite sources (and equalizing) of the term *nawāsib* with 'the Sunnis', a common threat throughout the book. Without having to go into the details of Classical Arabic, one can state with confidence that, at least in Twelver Shi'ite *fiqh*, the term *nawāsib* is exclusively used for "those who are inimical towards *Ahl al-Bayt*". In order to understand the wider dimension and the severity of the issue at stake, one needs to know that according to Twelver Shi'ite *fiqh*, *nawāsib* are considered non-Muslims and as such "ritually impure"(Arab. *najis*).[26] To mistranslate the term *nawāsib* as 'the Sunnis', in turn, would amount to assuming that Shi'ites believe that Sunnis 'hate' the family of their own Prophet, to which a Sunni, in a sober minute of superficial thought, would certainly not agree. They would thus be non-Muslims and as such "impure". As any

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[25] For a synopsis (in Malay) see "Syiah Imamiyah Mazhab ke-5?," available online at: http://www.geocities.com/ahasan12/buku.html?200617 (accessed on June 21, 2006).
[26] *Ahl al-Kitāb*, however, such as Christians and Jews, are considered *tāhir*, "ritually pure".

Shi'ite work on *fiqh* would show, Sunnis are considered Muslims. A translation of *nawāsib* as 'the Sunnis' as done in the book in question is thus highly irresponsible.

Of perhaps more interest within the context of the present chapter is the first article by cleric Ustaz Mohd Asri Yusof of the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM). His piece, "Bahaya syiah kepada aqidah, syariah, akhlak, ummah, dan negara" (The Shi'ite danger for Islamic belief system, ethics, and community, and for the State"), reveals already in its title the attitude and intention of its author. In particular the part on the alleged Shi'ite "danger for the State" is malicious in intend and wording and certainly not complying with the dignity usually ascribed to a true man of religion - any religion for that matter. To the mind of the present writer then, the work can well be considered the "authorizing blueprint" for the subsequent actions taken against the country's Shi'ite minority.

Moreover, it is particularly regrettable that attempts towards reconciliation and dialogue, based on knowledge, such as the book *Facing One Qiblah: Legal and Doctrinal Aspects of Sunni and Shi'ah Muslims*[27] by the Lebanese-American Sunni convert Karim Douglas Crow and Canadian-Iranian Sayyid Ahmad Kazemi-Moussawi, are still not appreciated. Both scholars had been until recently Full Professors and colleagues of the present writer at Kuala Lumpur's International Institute of Islamic Thought of Civilization (ISTAC) during his own tenure there as Associate Professor. Their book which aimed at a Sunni-Shi'ite *rapprochement* and to which Chandra Muzaffar,[28] president of the bipartisan Malaysian reform movement ALIRAN, wrote the foreword, is still banned on the Malaysian book market. In particular Crow, who in a personal communication with the present writer considered

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[27] Karim D. Crow and Ahmad Kazemi Moussavi, *Facing One Qiblah. Legal and Doctrinal Aspects of Sunni and Shi'ah Muslims* (Singapore, 2005).

[28] For a comprehensive overview of the thought of Chandra Muzaffar, one of Asia's leading public intellectuals, see his *Rights, Religion and Reform, Enhancing Human Dignity Through Spiritual and Moral Transformation* (London and New York, 2002).

the defamation of "the Other" as "deviant" an "extreme manifestation of ignorance, as we are now witnessing a resurgence of uncompromising attitudes in the bloody sectarian violence in several parts of the Muslim world", has made valuable contributions in the past to interreligious understanding.[29]

The case of the fate of ISTAC would warrant a separate study. As it is quite exemplary in terms of Malaysia's still prevailing intellectual climate, it shall be mentioned here only in passing that ISTAC, perhaps Malaysia's most prestigious institution of Islamic higher education, was until some years ago an autonomous institute of the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) and—in contrast to the latter—known for its spirit of tolerance which enabled even non-Muslim scholars as well as Shi'ite Muslims to work there. In 2002, ISTAC's autonomy was revoked, in part apparently because of a personal vendetta of the then Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohamed against ISTAC's Founder Director Professor Dr Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas (a prominent Malaysian Sunni scholar and philosopher of international reputation), but in truth because of these wild accusations from the part of certain individuals in the IIUM milieu against ISTAC as being a 'dent of deviationists'. Unfortunately, this intellectually rather constricting development is currently continuing and it affects negatively the general climate of scholarship as well as Malaysia's general standing and reputation in the academic scene.

The arrest of the six Malaysian Twelver Shi'ites, under the ISA stipulations in October 2000, was also cause for concern far beyond the Shi'ite community. In February 2001, for instance, Zainah Anwar, Executive Director of Malaysia's *Sisters In Islam* movement, which constitutes a group of rather liberal Muslim professional

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[29] For instance, see Karim D. Crow, "Nurturing an Islamic Peace Discourse," *American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 17, no. 3 (Fall 2000), pp. 54-69, idem, "Islamic Peaceful-Action: Nonviolent Approach to Justice and Peace in Islamic Societies," *Capitol Journal on Culture and Society* [Cagayan de Oro City, Philippines] 12, no. 2 (2000-01), pp. 11-20.

women committed to promoting the rights of women within the framework of Islam, wrote a letter of protest on their behalf to then Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Home Affairs - Mr Abdullah Badawi.[30] Mrs Zainah, a Sunni, pointed out that, the detention on purely religious grounds – for being a Shi'ite and following the *ja'farī* *ma<u>dh</u>hab*, a recognized 'school' elsewhere in the Islamic world, as she emphasizes – would be an infringement of Article 11 of the Malaysian Federal Constitution which guarantees religious freedom.[31] Moreover, she considered it "a dangerous exercise of state power to judge the faith, beliefs and views of its citizens", in particular "in countries where religion is used to serve the cause of political ideology or to serve political ends of partisan party politics, as the case is in Malaysia". She also contended that in history "outstanding scholars of Islam were persecuted, some tortured, imprisoned and even executed for views now accepted by the vast majority of Muslims, including Malaysians". She summarized her concerns in the following statement that was characterised by a remarkable degree of frankness:

> "Freedom of religion, expression, and association are fundamental rights enshrined in the Federal Constitution and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Those who hold controversial views which are rejected by the established theological or political order or even the public at large must be protected as long as they do not engage in criminal activities and their actions do not violate the rights of others nor undermine the principles of the rule of law. Any charge

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[30] Sisters In Islam, "Memorandum on ISA Arrest of Shi'ah Followers," available online at http://sistersinislam.org.my/memorandums/20022001_a.htm (accessed June 20, 2006).
[31] For important source material on the issue of religious freedom in Malaysia see also Abdullah Saeed and Hassan Saeed, *Freedom of Religion, Apostasy and Islam* (Aldershot and Burlington, UK, 2004).

of a threat to national security or public order must be proven in an open and fair trial, according to the rule of law."[32]

The arrest of the six Shi'ites under the ISA stipulations has also been widely featured on prominent international Shi'ite websites, such as the Britain-based Shianews.com. In a report dated July19, 2002,[33] Shianews.com gives some details about the identities of the detainees that are quite interesting in terms of the social structuring of the local Shi'ite community: Mr Norman Basha (then age 42), is a construction site worker and had been arrested on October 13, 2000 and then brought in handcuffs to his own house where the police confiscated some of his religious books. After 60 days of detention he was sent to the Kamunting Detention Centre where he served another two-years detention order, apparently without having seen any judge. Another Shi'ite, Zainal bin Talib, a businessman in his 40s, was arrested on the same day and dealt with in the same manner as Mr. Norman. The third individual, Mahadi Asab, also in his 40s, is self-employed and was arrested between October 13 and 20, 2000. He, too, served a detention order at the said institution. The fourth one, Syed Hassan Al-Attas, was self-employed and 36 years old on the date of his arrest in early January 2001. He and served a 60-days term of detention. Two others were arrested but released later: Mustafa bin Safar, a businessman then age 28, who was arrested on October 13, 2000. He served a 60-days detention order and was released under a one-year restriction order in the Gombak district, in the State of Selangor, in the vicinity of the country's capital city Kuala Lumpur. Syed Mokhtar Al-Haddad, a businessman then age 42, was informed about his imminent arrest under ISA at the Kuala Lumpur International Airport (KLIA) and actually taken into

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[32] Sisters In Islam, "Memorandum on ISA Arrest of Shi'ah Followers".
[33] See Hussein Rashid, "Shias Under Attack in Malaysia," July 19, 2002, available online at http://www.shianews.com/hi/asia/news_id/0001668.php (accessed on June 21, 2006).

custody in his own house on November 5, 2000, but released later on without condition. It is interesting that two of them, Syed Hassan Al-Attas and Syed Mokhtar Al-Haddad, are ethnic Arab-Malaysians with prominent family names. Moreover, the same apparently well-informed Shianews.com puts the number of the Malaysian Shi'ites at about 2-3,000 people in 2001, unfortunately without citing any source for this.[34] It also referred to the 1997 crackdown and provided some more background information:

> "Those who were released early in 1997 were told to renounce their Shia faith and to revert to the Sunni Sect as a pre-condition of their release from ISA. The reason of arrest according to the police then was "activities prejudicial to national security and Muslim unity". The Shia mazhab [sic! What is referred to appears to be the *ja'farī madhhab* or "legal rite" on the one hand and Twelver Shi'ite theology on the other] has never been declared as illegal nor its teaching deviationist in Malaysia. If it was deemed that their teachings are deviant, then they should be tried in the Syariah [*sharī'ah*] court (Islamic court) and not the ISA."[35]

In terms of the responsibilities of the Shi'ite community, it goes without saying that trust and understanding is a two-way road and that they, too, have to do their part. It has been stated earlier in the first chapter that Malaysian Shi'ites use to take part in increasing number in the yearly Muharram celebrations and on other occasions of the Islamic festive calendar on the extraterritorial compound of the

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[34]   Hussein Rashid, "Shias Under Attack in Malaysia".
[35]   Ibid.

Iranian embassy in Kuala Lumpur. To the mind of the present writer, however, in order to be accepted by the rest of the Malaysian Muslims as a stone in the mosaic of Malaysian religious life, Malaysia's Shi'ites should not allow themselves being taken advantage of by any foreign country.

In November 2005, the U.S. State Department's International Religious Freedom Report for that year lamented that,

> "[t]he [Malaysian] Government opposed what it considered "deviant" interpretations of Islam, maintaining that the deviant groups' extreme views endanger national security. According to the Islamic Development Department's website, 56 deviant teachings have been identified and prohibited to Muslims. They include Shi'a [and] transcendental meditation [...], among others. The Government can detain members of groups that do not follow the official Sunni teachings without trial under the Internal Security Act (ISA). The Government continued to monitor the activities of the Shi'a minority."[36]

In the light of what has been stated above, the fate of the Shi'ites in Malaysia is thus rather nebulous and seems to depend on the general course the country is going to take. According to information provided to the writer by several of his interviewees, a high proportion of the Malaysian Shi'ites consists of university graduates. Many of them display a serious interest in intellectual discourse, an asset that could and should be utilized. In terms of concerns for internal security, it should

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[36] U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, "International Religious Freedom Report 2005: Malaysia," available online at http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2005/51518.htm (accessed on July 5, 2006).

be kept in mind that, in the past, it had been rather Sunni militant "extremists" that had posed a threat to peace and stability in the country as well as in the Southeast Asian region and that the Shi'ite record in this regard is rather negligible.[37] It is therefore hoped that the current Malaysian administration will be in a position to pursue an approach towards its Shi'ite Muslim citizens that is based on knowledge and justice. Taken into account the trust and prestige of personal integrity that Mr Badawi still seems to enjoy among wider strata of the Malaysian public as well as abroad, this writer is cautiously optimistic that the lot of Malaysia's Shi'ites might eventually improve slightly one day—provided both sides are willing to enter into a kind of dialogue.

Singapore: Perspectives in a Multi-Cultural Society

Lastly, Singapore. According to the *The World Factbook*, based on Singapore's 2000 census, the ethnic composition of the island republic in May 2006 was as follows: Chinese 76.8%, Malay 13.9%, Indian 7.9%, other 1.4%. whereas the religious split-up was: Buddhist 42.5%, Muslim 14.9%, Taoist 8.5%, Hindu 4%, Catholic 4.8%, other Christian 9.8%, other 0.7%, none 14.8%.[38]

The Singapore case is also somewhat unique from another point of view, as the country does not have an Iranian embassy or Cultural Centre in the republic which could be considered as "promoters" of Shi'ism. Until recently, Iran's interests in Singapore had been taken care of by the Iranian ambassador to Indonesia, who was also accredited to Singapore. The local Shi'ite community is therefore mainly based

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[37] See, however, "Singapore: Perspectives in a Multi-Cultural Society", below.
[38] Central Intelligence Agency, *The World Factbook*, available online at http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/sn.html (accessed on May 10, 2006). For a very fascinating study of inter-ethnic and inter-religious relations in Singapore see the award-winning work by Lai Ah Eng, *Meanings of Multiethnicity. A Case-Study of Ethnicity and Ethnic Relations in Singapore* (Kuala Lumpur, 1995).

on its own. As in the case of Malaysia, however, university graduates are often found among the local Shi'ite Muslims. However due to the nature of Singapore, as a secular multi-ethnic and multi-religious state, the problems faced by local Shi'ites differ from those of their coreligionists in Malaysia. In Singapore, the main issue seems to be to establish a climate of mutual trust between the Shi'ites and other, *non-Muslim* Singaporeans, and to a lesser extent with the local Sunni Muslim community as both, Sunni and Shi'ite Muslims, are a minority in the island republic.

This author's main "living source" on Shi'ism in contemporary Singapore <u>Shaykh</u> Mohammad Rosli bin Hassan who is 42-years old. He is ethnic Malay and he became a Shi'ite in the 1980s. As he recounted, he was the President of Muslim Youth Assembly of Singapore, or *Himpunan Belia Islam* (in Malay: HBI, often quoted as "Islamic Youth Movement"), in the last 15 years. This organization was registered in 1973,[39] and he is also, since about seven years ago, the Vice President of the Jaafari Muslim Association of Singapore.[40] The Muslim Youth Assembly – or HBI—is also a founding member of Yayasan MENDAKI,[41] a foundation and self-help group set up 24 years ago by Singapore's Malay-Muslim community leaders in cooperation with the government in order to help the disadvantaged through furthering their education. According to the website of HBI, its main activities involve "promoting Islamic-oriented education through leadership training courses, forums

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[39] According to the website of HBI, Himpunan Belia Islam (Muslim Youth Assembly), "Himpunan Belia Islam (Muslim Youth Assembly", available online at http://www.hbi.org.sg, accessed on June 29, 2006), which features, by the way, also a picture of Shaykh Rosli in his clerical attire as well as photos taken at religious functions, such as *'Āshūrā'*, the organization was founded in 1971, apparently as a Sunni association, see Desker, "The Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) Phenomenon in Singapore," p. 491.

[40] Its president being former businessman and multi-millionaire Ameerali Jumabhoy, another leading Shi'ite figure, who will be referred to shortly.

[41] The current chairman of MENDAKI is Dr Yaacob Ibrahim, Minister for Community Development and Sports and Minister in-charge of Muslim Affairs. On the role of MENDAKI in the field of *religious* education see Chee Min Fui, "The Historical Role of Madrasah Education in Singapore," in: Noor Aisha Abdul Rahman and Lai Ah Eng, *Secularism & Spirituality: Seeking Integrated Knowledge & Success in Madrasah Education in Singapore* (Singapore, 2006), pp. 16-18.

and talks; administering a book club which stresses the importance of good reading habits; assisting welfare organizations in fund raising activities; and conducting education programmes for women".[42] It should be added that Mr Rosli, to whom this author is indebted for his hospitality and openness in answering the interview questions, studied in the 1980s for about five years at the *Madrasah-yi Hujjatiyyah*, a theological seminary for international students, in Qum, Iran. Our interviews, however –either conducted in English or in fluent Persian—took place mostly at the community's *imāmbārah* - an Indian synonym for *husayniyyah* – at 43 Lim Ah Woo Road, off Guillemard Road, near the Korean School and not far from Paya Lebar MRT Station in the eastern part of the city. According to Mr Rosli, the well-kept two storey-building which has an elevator, belongs to Mr Ameerali Jumabhoy, who is now in his 80s. A second *husayniyyah*, called *Al-Zahrā*, "The Radiant", after the nickname of the Prophet's daughter Fātimah, is located close to the *imāmbārah* at 27 A, Guillemard Road. This *husayniyyah* belongs to the community.

The Jumabhoy family is still one of the richest in Singapore. Ameerali's father, Rajabali Jumabhoy, arrived in Singapore in 1918 from Gujarat in then British India. In Singapore, Rajabali, a Twelver Shi'ite Khoja, was involved in trading and, according to Backman,[43] imported dates from Iran and exported timber from Java. In the subsequent years, he became wealthy, which enabled him to venture also into other fields. In 1952, the he Jumabhoy passed control of his business over to his son, Ameerali Jumabhoy. Ameerali is still active in the family's business, but his sons Rafiq and Iqbal, both in their 40s, are now also handling the family's activities.

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[42] Himpunan Belia Islam (Muslim Youth Assembly), "Himpunan Belia Islam (Muslim Youth Assembly".

[43] This and the following glance on recent Jumabhoy family history is based on M. Backman, *Asian Eclipse: Exposing the Dark Side of Business in* Asia (Singapore, 1999), chapter 7, which contains also a sketch of the family's performance in Singapore business and which is also available online, featured as "Chapter 8: Polygamy and Family Squabbles," available at http://pabs.netfirms.com/chapter8.htm (accessed on June 28, 2006).

Interesting within the context of Singapore politics, is that Ameerali was one of the founding members of the oppositional Workers Party and a member of its Executive Council in 1957. According to Mr Rosli, Mr Ameerali Jumabhoy, former chairman of Scotts Holdings, is perhaps the most important single sponsor of the Singapore Twelver Shi'ite community. He is also the President of the Jaafari Muslim Association of Singapore. The website of the organization contains also important general information about the history of Twelver Shi'ite Islam in Singapore.[44] The Association is a registered society under Singapore law. It was formed in 1998 to serve the growing Twelver Shi'ite community in Singapore. According to its website, the activities of the Association are "in most cases conducted jointly" with those of the Muslim Youth Assembly of Singapore, headed by Mr Rosli. As in the case of the latter, the Jaafari Muslim Association, too, conducts lectures and prayer sessions on all important Shi'ite occasions. Other activities range from regular classes for children to discussion sessions, such as Qur'an interpretation, as well as social work such as participation in blood donation drives. Volunteers from the Association also provide assistance in burial arrangements and funeral prayers for deceased members of the city's Shi'ite community. According to the website of the Jaafari Muslim Association, Twelver Shi'ites

> "[…] have been in Singapore since before the First World War […].
> Muharram majaalis [Arab. *majālis*, religious sessions on the occasion
> of Muharram] […] were held and continued after the war at the homes

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of two prominent families – the Namazie family and a Khoja family, that of Rajabali Jumabhoy."[45]

The Namazies, mentioned above, are also prominent member of Singapore's Twelver Shi'ite community. An area in the northern part of the island, Namazie Estate, still bears their name. The Namazies are of Persian stock. Their ancestor, Mohamed Javad Namazie (Muhammad Jawād Namāzī), migrated from British India to Singapore in the early 20th century. As Mr Rosli pointed out, Mohamed Javad Namazie, as a leader of Singapore's at his time, was considerably involved in the formulation of the Administration of Muslim Law Act (AMLA) of 1966, which shall be referred to again soon. The Namazies are still wealthy and their law firm, Mallal & Namazie, is well-known in the city state. Mallal & Namazie, located at 50 Robinson Road in Singapore's central business district, specializes in general practice, litigation, conveyancing, corporate, shipping, commercial and company law, trusts and estates, family law, as well as Muslim law.

As the website of the Jaafari Muslim Association continues,

"[d]uring the Japanese occupation of Singapore from 1942 to 1945, prisoners of war from the British Indian army and other local shia [Shi'ites] were allowed to commemorate Muharram and organize processions related to it. In the late '70s Rajabali Jumabhoy and his wife Fatima Premjee bought a shophouse in Lim Ah Woo Road where Muharram majaalis were addressed by an Urdu vaiz ([Arab. *wāʿiz*] speaker) from Lucknow in India, Maulana Mazahir, who to this day

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[45] Ibid.

(2005) is still invited to do the same. The ladies' section was strongly

supported by the late Mrs. Amina Jumabhoy, and her friend and guide

the late Mrs. Shams Namazie, and their families."[46]

Apparently, these early beginnings were mostly centred on ethnic Indians or

Persians, as in the case of the *Namazies*. Things changed, however, from the mid

1980s onwards when

"[…] it was noticed that some Malay Muslims asked to attend these

majaalis. For their benefit a short précis of the speaker's sermon was

translated every night. These Malay brethren belonged to a group

called the Himpunan Belia Islam (HBI) or Muslim Youth Assembly

that numbered about four hundred persons. They had been staunch

followers of the [Sunni] Wahabi [Wahhābī] sect."[47]

This is indeed a remarkable statement. It provides the important information

that HBI was at the beginning a Sunni organization. This change of orientation of HBI

from Sunni to Shi'ite has also been noticed by outsiders, as we shall see later.

Concerning this 'conversion process', the website continues, perhaps a bit too much

imbued with religious zeal,

"Then, with better access to authentic Islamic books and personalities

and the uplifting Islamic revival after the Iranian revolution, they

began to recognise the truth in shia teachings. Valuable assistance

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[46] Ibid.
[47] Ibid.

through direct teaching or arranging educational programs came from many well wishers including brothers Javad Souhani, Dabbagh [apparently, Iranians], Syed Ahmed Baragbah and Syed Husin Shahab. Avid readers, they possessed the determination to seek the truth. They had been blessed with open minds and sincere hearts. Above all, they had the courage to take the tough actions to change once the true path was found. Initially, led by Brother Muhammad Ithinin Kasmin, seven of them (brothers Farok, Habib, Hizbullah, Ithnin, Jahari, Rahim and Shaaban) accepted the Shia faith, and in due course most of the rest also became […] [Twelver Shi'ite] Muslims – the first time that local Malays had embraced these beliefs. Describe it as a historic event or a modern miracle, there is no doubt that later generations will continue to thank and pray for these pioneers who put them on a path that brings happiness and inner peace in this world and rewards in the hereafter. Alhamdolillah [Arab. *al-hamdulillāh*, i.e. "paised by God], the community in Singapore has grown ever since. Some Khoja brothers [apparently, businessmen] from Karachi who had offices in Singapore, namely brothers Reza Chandoo, Askari Taqi, and Reza Premjee supported the da'wah [Arab. *da'wah*, i.e. "missionary"] activities. They invited a learned and broadminded intellectual from Karachi named Syed Fardzande Raza, who over several visits engaged in discussions with the Malay brethren and their womenfolk. Since the eighties, a dedicated mentor and a sincere friend of the community has been imparting knowledge and encouragement every year during the chehlum [Urdu for Arab., *arba'īn*, "the fortieth", i.e. a commemoration

session on the fortieth day after *'Âshūrā'*] English majalis, making himself available at all hours of the day throughout his visit with an open door for all who need information and advice. [The] Malay brethren's love and appreciation of Maulana Raza Pasha of India is evident in their large attendances and in the way they refer to him as: our beloved Maulana. Under the leadership of Ustaz Mohammad Rosli Hassan and their management committee, the Malay brethren have instituted during a short period an impressive range of year-round activities focused on moral and religious teachings and prayers with special emphasis on the needs of the young. They have also acquired their own premises and a large collection of books in Malay and English. Driving on the Guillemard Road towards the City, if you look to your right, just before the road ends, you will see a signboard on the second level of a building that reads "HUSSAINIYAH AZ ZAHRA" .... a humble signboard which speaks volumes for the lovers and their love of our Prophet and his pure household. Lost in the noise and the haste of the daily humdrum, the passing traffic may not take much notice but who knows how bright its light shines for the dwellers of the sky when the sounds of dua Kumayl [Arab. *Du'ā' Kumayl*, i.e. a special Shi'ite supplication prayer recited usually on every Thursday night] fill the air on Thursday nights."[48]

With regard to information on the formation of the Association we read that,

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[48] Ibid.

"The Rajabali Jumabhoy Trust had by now bought the adjoining shophouse owned by a staunch shia, the late Haji Tabib Ghulam Mustafa. The trust then built a modern three and a half storey building at the site. Ideas were drawn from Hujjatul Islam [*Hujjat al-Islām*] Syed Mohammad al-Musavi (now based in London), and friends in Bombay and Karachi. Now came the necessity of forming a body to represent all […] [Twelver Shi'ites] in Singapore. Under Singapore's laws all Muslim matters and associations come under the control of a body called MUIS - Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura' (Muslim Religious Council) formed under the Administration of Muslim Law Act. Any Muslim body must be registered with, and permitted by the MUIS before it can carry on [with] its activities. Mr. Ameer Jumabhoy (who had served in the MUIS' wakaf [Arab. *waqf*, plur. *awqāf*, inalienable charitable endowments] committee for many years, and who had been instrumental in building a Masjid [i.e. a mosque] and developing several MUIS properties), started the lengthy process of forming a society for the shia, despite some opposition to the idea. He employed a Malay Muslim lawyer to draw up the constitution. The Jaafari Muslim Association was finally approved in 1998. The first meeting was held on Saturday 9th January of that year, at the Imam Bargah at 43, Lim Ah Woo Road."[49]

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[49] Jaafari Muslim Association of Singapore, "JaafariMuslim.com…Towards a Meaningful Life".

As Mr Rosli also revealed during the interview, Singapore's Shi'ite community finances its cultural and religious activities entirely on its own. This is done mainly by *khums* and donations. In order to reach out to the other communities in Singapore, but also to cater for the religious needs for the island's increasing Twelver Shi'ite community, Mr Rosli has informed the author that the community is planning to purchase another piece of land for about half a million Singapore dollars in order to build a Cultural Centre. This centre, rather than a mere mosque, is intended to be open to other Muslim as well as non-Muslim Singaporeans. To the mind of this author, this project, which has still not passed the planning stage due to lack of funding, could also be a milestone in improving further the relations between the Singapore Government and the local Muslim, mostly Malay, community at large.

According to Mr Rosli, he estimates that there now about 2000 to 3,000 Twelver Shi'ites living in Singapore. Most of them are ethnic Malays, similar as in the case of the country's Sunni Muslims. Since some years, he noticed also in the Shi'ite community certain changes in its social structure. Prominent among them are now also businessmen as well as university graduates, among them a Deputy Public Prosecutor. Very interestingly, in his view, "Singapore's Shi'ites are in no need to resort to *taqiyyah* when interacting with non-Shi'ites as Singapore is an open and multi-religious society". Problems might merely arise on an individual rather private basis, for instance, when a Malay Shi'ite has to interact with other, Sunni Malays. In this case, many Shi'ite Malays still prefer to resort to "prudent dissimulation" in order to find acceptance within their own ethnic community. However, on a purely political level, Singapore's Shi'ite Muslims consider themselves loyal citizens and do not face persecution, as they are able to congregate freely in order to fulfill their religious obligations and to acquire landed property for that purpose, as we have just seen.

However, there are several issues which causes hardship to the country's Shi'ite community at large and which he hoped would improve in future. In Singapore, Islamic affairs are still the domain of MUIS (Malay: *Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura*, "Islamic Religious Council of Singapore"), a Sunni organization established in 1968 by the *Administration of Muslim Law Act* (AMLA) of 1966.[50] MUIS is in fact responsible for the promotion of Muslim religious, social, educational, economic and cultural activities in accordance with the principles and traditions of Islam – of Sunni Islam, one has to add, as the existence of a vibrant local Shi'ite community in the island republic is a recent phenomenon.[51] The Council of MUIS, which comprises, among other members, also the *Muftī* of Singapore, is nominated by local Muslim organizations and recommended by the Minister-in-charge of Muslim Affairs, but appointed by the President of the Republic. Singapore's Shi'ites maintained what could be termed as a 'working relationship' with MUIS, mainly through talks and discussions. Relations with MENDAKI on the other hand, are, according to Mr Rosli, excellent. In the past, there had been incidences of clashes with the representative of the *Muftī*, Ustaz Murad Muhammad Aris, who announced publicly his view that Shi'ite Muslims are *kuffār* – the Arabic term for non-believers – and that marriages with them are therefore not permitted to Sunnis. Although Ustaz Murad quickly took back this seditious remark following protests by the Shi'ite community and other organizations, it poisoned the relations with MUIS.

The 'marriage issue' in itself, however, is a complicated and revealing one. Singapore, a secular multi-ethnic and multi-religious nation, acknowledges Sunni

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[50] Singapore Government, "Administration of Muslim Law Act,", available online at http://statutes.agc.gov.sg/non_version/cgi-bin/cgi_retrieve.pl?actno=REVED-3&doctitle=ADMINISTRATION%20OF%20MUSLIM%20LAW%20ACT%0A&date=latest&method=part (accessed on June 27, 2006).
[51] See also Che Man., *The Administration of Islamic Institutions in Non-Muslim States: The Case of Singapore and Thailand.*

Muslim personal law based on AMLA. *Ja'farī fiqh*, however, falls through the net in this arrangement as the Sunni Shāfi'ite 'legal school' is the one which is officially recognized. Thus, Shi'ites, if they want to marry, have to do it twice – once in front of their own Shi'ite cleric and once again in front of a Sunni one – in order to get it recognized officially! Similar troubles Shi'ites do encounter in terms of divorces or the issuing of Muslim birth certificates and other matters pertaining to personal law. Above all, Shi'ite religious judges or *qādīs,* too, are not recognized officially. This author believes that this anachronistic situation, which dates back to the colonial period and which is perhaps not quite in line with the tenets of secularism, could well be addressed magnanimously in the future by law makers—in consultation with all involved parties. Apparently, the Shi'ite community is currently in contact with MUIS to find some sort of solution.

On the other hand, Singapore's Twelver Shi'ite community enjoys harmonious relations with the Ismā'īlī Dawoodi Bohras of Singapore, as well as with the adherents of other religions on the island.[52] Worldwide, the Dawoodis number about a million and are encountered in India, Pakistan, the Middle East, East Africa, and Southeast Asia.[53] In Singapore, the rather small local Dawoodi (*Dā'ūdī*) community congregates downtown in a recently completed impressive mosque, *Masjid Dawoodi Bohra Burhani* located at 39 Hill Street, just opposite the Malaysian High Commission, close to City Hall MRT Station. Their association, *Anjuman-e Burhani,* was formed in 1997 by the sect's leader, the 52nd *dā'ī al-mutlaq*[54] Mohammed Burhanuddin (Muhammad Burhān al-Dīn), who resides in India. The community is

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[52] For further information see Singjamaat.org, "Anjuman-e Burhani (Singapore)," available online at http://singjamaat.org (accessed on June 27, 2006).

[53] For an introduction and some insights into the contemporary Dawoodi community see J. Blank, *Mullahs on the Mainframe: Islam and Modernity Among the Daudi Bohras* (Chicago, 2002).

[54] The Dawoodis consider him the vicegerent of their particular Imām who, too went into seclusion during the Middle Ages, as the case with the last Imām of the Twelvers.

ethnic Indian and many of its members are involved in various business activities. Aside from the mosque in Hill Street, the community has also followers scattered over other parts of the island, which they 'subdivided' for 'administrative' purposes into five *mohallas* (Arab. and Pers. *mahallahs*).

Returning to Singapore's Twelver Shi'ites, aside from the above outlined constitutional problems (which nevertheless concern the lives of most of community's members at some point of time), Mr Rosli pointed also at another severe problem which until quite recently used to tarnished the image of Shi'ism in Singapore, as well as in the region: the misuse of *mut'ah*, in most cases by individuals who had not been Shi'ites themselves. The most outrageous case in this regard was certainly that of Singapore citizen Abdul Talib b. Harun, who had been a Sunni religious teacher and the head of the Wak Tanjong Mosque, a well-known landmark which is close to Paya Lebar MRT Station and near to what is commonly known as the "Malay Village". Before entering the headlines of local and Southeast Asian newspapers, Talib bin Harun used to resort in public *takfir*, that is, to be considered as non-Islamic the Shi'ite community at large. In 1995, however, when he was residing in Malaysia, his own rather libertine and somewhat 'innovative' lifestyle became a matter of public interest: aside from his four 'permanent' wives, which were permitted to him by any of the Islamic legal 'schools' – Sunni as well as Shi'ite – Mr Talib, then 35 years old, felt an urge to increase this figure. It came to the attention to the Malaysian authorities that he had actually ten wives who he would share his house and bed with. The authorities acted swiftly and Talib was arrested in the State of Johor by the notorious Malaysian 'Special Branch' (Malay: *Cawangan Khas*), who were the Malaysian

government's intelligence agency, and was charged in court. Kuala Lumpur's daily newspaper *New Straits Times* reported on March 9, 1995, on Talib's case:[55]

"Religious teacher Abdul Talib Harun and his 10 Singaporean wives are not genuine Shi'ites but merely claimed to be Shi'ites to justify their marriages, the Syariah [*sharī'ah*] Court was told today. In his submission before judge Zainuddin Munajat, prosecutor Abdul Karim Yusof said Abdul Talib and his wives had claimed to be Shi'ites in their respective cautioned statements. "However, Sabariah Abu (Abdul Talib's third wife), in her cautioned statement, had also said that in terms of their religious practices, they were 'just like other people'," he said. "By 'other people', I take it that she was referring to the followers of Sunnah Wal-Jamaah [*ahl al-sunnah wa'l-jamā'ah*, i.e. Sunnis]," he said.

Abdul Karim said that in Islam, a person's religious practices stemmed from his beliefs, adding that in their testimonies, none of the accused had either said they were followers of a sect whose beliefs allowed contractual marriages or 'nikah mutaah' [*nikāh mut'ah*, "temporary marriage"], or claimed that their parents were followers of such a sect. "This clearly shows that they fabricated the fact that they were Shi'ites, to justify their contractual marriages," he said.

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[55] The eJournal Website. The South East Asia Travelogue, "Prosecutor: Man and 10 Wives not True Shi'ites," March 15, 1995, available online at http://72.14.235.104/search?q=cache:wlfZXGGGgAYJ:www.synaptic.bc.ca/ejournal/insomnia.htm+talib+harun&hl=en&gl=sg&ct=clnk&cd=1 (accessed June 27, 2006), quoting *New Straits Times* (Kuala Lumpur) of March 9, 1995.

In July 1995, Talib was sentenced to two years in prison in Kuala Lumpur for having ten wives, six more than permitted under Islamic law. All ten, with whom he has had 17 children, supported him ardently during his trial. The four lawful wives were also sent to jail for a month each for permitting the illegal cohabitation with the other "wives".

Another, more recent but by any standards far more sickening case was decided very recently, on April 18, 2006, at the Singapore High Court. As in the previous case, the accused apparently claimed to be a Shi'ite at Court, perhaps in order to escape sentencing. The particular circumstances of the case, as revealed to the High Court, are so shocking that they deserve to be quoted here in full:[56]

"The accused is now 45 years old. He pleaded guilty to five charges of rape under s 376(1) and four charges of aggravated rape under s 376(2) of the Penal Code (Cap 224, 1985 Rev Ed). All five female victims named in the nine charges are his biological daughters from his various wives. All the rape charges involved sexual intercourse with his daughters without their consent. Four of the charges were aggravated rape charges because the daughters involved in those instances were under 14 years of age at the material times.

In addition to the above, the accused also admitted and consented to having another 34 charges taken into consideration for the purpose of sentencing. These 34 charges involved 24 charges of rape under s 376(1), three charges of attempted aggravated rape under

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[56] For the proceedings and the text of the verdict see LawNet: Legal Workbench, "Public Prosecutor vs MX [2006] SGHC 67," available online at http://lwb.lawnet.com.sg/legal/lgl/rss/supremecourt/50372.html (accessed on June 28, 2006); emphasis in the text mine.

s 376(2) read with s 511 of the Penal Code and seven charges of outrage of modesty under s 354 of the same.

The accused has ten wives. Four are legal wives while six are contractual wives. He has a total of 64 children from these ten wives, consisting of 33 sons and 31 daughters. They range in age from nine months to 16 years. The accused also has two other daughters from his previous marriage which was dissolved in 1988.

The accused resided with his extended family in three Housing and Development Board flats. Before his arrest, he was running a transportation business, assisted by two of his wives. All the rape offences took place in one of the flats between December 2003 and June 2005. The five daughters named in the nine charges that were proceeded with ("the five daughters") were between 12 and 15 years of age at the time of the offences. Only the eldest has since turned 16. Two of the five daughters are now residing in a girls' home while the other three have been placed under statutory supervision in the custody of their mothers. In the charges that were taken into consideration, a sixth daughter, aged 12 at the time of the offences, was the victim in two of the attempted aggravated rape charges and in one outrage of modesty charge. None of the daughter-victims bears the accused's name as he has changed his name.

Sometime in March 2004, the accused gathered some of his wives and daughters and told them that according to the Koran, a father had ownership over his children and that such ownership extended to having sexual intercourse with his daughters. His family

believed him because he was a devout man who had conducted religious classes for his family. *However, according to the Director of Religious Affairs of the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore [MUIS], the accused's interpretation of the relevant verse in the Koran is not adopted by contemporary or classical Muslim scholars.*

Investigations by the police revealed that before and after that meeting, the accused had sexual intercourse with the five daughters over a period of more than a year. Whenever he wanted to have sexual intercourse, one of his wives would approach one of the five daughters and inform her to go to his bedroom. This went on until 24 June 2005 when the eldest daughter reported to the police that she had been raped by her father. The next day, the accused was asked to go to the police station. He complied and was placed under arrest there. He has been in remand since that day. The accused was examined at the Institute of Mental Health. In a psychiatric report dated 18 August 2005, Dr Jerome Goh stated that the accused admitted to having had sexual intercourse with six of his daughters.

The accused also revealed that he had made two of them pregnant and that they subsequently underwent abortion. The psychiatrist noted that the accused was relevant and coherent during the interviews and was not depressed. The accused was found not to be suffering from any mental illness and was fit to be tried in court.

In his statements to the police, the accused also admitted to having had sexual intercourse with his daughters. However, he was

unable to recall the exact number of times he had sexual intercourse

with each daughter."

Whereas the prosecution pleaded in favour of a deterrent sentencing, the defence argued that

"[t]he accused is a qualified religious teacher who used to give religious talks at mosques and other institutions. After he converted from the Sunni Sect to the Shi'ite Sect, he continued to conduct religious classes in his home and to provide guidance to his pupils, friends and associates. Three of his friends provided testimonials describing him as a humble and hardworking family man, given to imparting knowledge and good advice. He is also said to be a very responsible husband and father."[57]

One wonders where those 'qualifications' as a 'teacher' came from. I have tried to investigate this case a bit further and have been informed that this individual is not known to have converted to Twelver Shi'ite Islam at any of the Shi'ite organizations or personalities in the region I have talked to, including <u>Shaykh</u> Rosli. In fact, it was Mr Rosli himself, who can be considered the head of Singapore's Shi'ite community, who directed my attention to this outrageous case. As in the case of Mr Talib, who was in fact a Sunni –as evidently established by a Malaysian religious court—the present criminal whose identity was not revealed, too, was not a Shi'ite at all, but rather a Sunni religious preacher, as stated by his own lawyer. The

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[57]   Ibid.

man, who is ethnic Malay, was finally sentenced to a total imprisonment term of 32 years and to 24 strokes of the cane.[58] Needless to say, that the case of this man would perhaps warrant somewhat more professional attention by an experienced psychiatrist. According to Mr Rosli, similar cases of "pseudo-*mut'ah*", apparently involving mostly non-Shi'ites, have in the past also occurred in neighbouring Indonesia and Malaysia.

Other issues, however, which indeed do cause concern to the local Singaporean Shi'ite community, involve security issues. As Barry Desker observed,

"In Singapore, inspired by the [Iranian] revolution [of 1979], at least one Sunni organization[59] converted to Shi'ism after its leader[60] returned from Iran. The organization sent its students to study in Shi'a *madrasahs* (schools) in Pakistan and Iran and several of its members became involved with Hizbollah elements in the 1990s."[61]

As a matter of fact, the French news agency Agence France Presse (AFP) reported on June 9, 2002,[62] that the Singapore government is said to have accused Libanon's Hizbullah (Hizb-Allāh) of recruiting five Singapore citizens – apparently Shi'ites – for "special classes" held in the island state and in the Malaysian State of Johor for the preparation of a failed plot during the 1990s to attack in the region American and Israeli shipping bound for the island republic. According to AFP,

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[58] Ibid.

[59] As stated by Barry Desker, "The Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) Phenomenon in Singapore," p. 504, n. 7, the organization in question was *Himpunan Belia Islam* (HBI), headed now by Mr Rosli, the head of the Singapore Shi'ite community.

[60] Apparently *not* Mr Rosli, as he has told me himself.

[61] Desker, "The Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) Phenomenon in Singapore," p. 491.

[62] SingaporeWindow, "Hezbollah had Plans to Attack US, Israeli Shipping in Singapore: Report," available online at http://www.singapore-window.org/sw/02/02069a2.htm (accessed on June 28, 2006).

"[t]he five men were asked to take pictures of the US and Israeli embassies but they refused and subsequently left the group. […] But Hizbollah members continued to carry out surveillance of the Singapore coastline in 1995 to plan their attacks. Last year [i.e. 2001], [Singapore] Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong said a Middle Eastern group tried to recruit five Singaporeans but the identity of the group was not known until the ISD [Internal Security Department] reportedly revealed […].[63]

Although AFP reported the next day that Hizbullah denied the accusations as "absurd" and "without foundation" and denounced them in a statement as "organized campaign of lies by the US intelligence services with the cooperation of international intelligence services",[64] attempts of recruiting local Shi'ite Muslims for terrorist activities seem to have taken place. Mr Rosli confirmed them indirectly in the course of the interviews with him. According to Mr Rosli, there used to be certain radical elements and several of them had been arrested and interrogated by the Singapore authorities. He emphasized his position of rejecting acts of violence, on the one hand because he himself as a scholar could not approve of such acts, and on the other because he did not want to jeopardize the community's activities on the local scene. Among the latter were the earlier referred to outreach to other local religious communities and the plans for the construction of a Shi'ite cultural centre. He

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[63]   Ibid.
[64]   SingaporeWindow, "Hezbollah Denies Plan to Attack US, Israeli Shipping in Singapore," available online at http://www.singapore-window.org/sw/02/020610af.htm (accessed on June 28, 2006).

lamented in particular a "lack of spirituality and depth" in those arrested. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that developments should be monitored and that in the future the community has also to do its part in order to gain the trust of the government and of Singapore society at large.

In this regard, Mr Rosli reiterated that he would like to see more cooperation and mutual understanding with the Singapore authorities in order to avoid issues such as the above one involving the infiltration of some extremists and to improve the image of the local Malay Muslim community at large among non-Muslim citizens. Mr Rosli was in particular referring to the contributions by Shi'ite Muslims to thought and science in the course of their history and to their willingness to cooperate with non-Muslims in general – due to the fact of their own minority-situation within the Islamic setting.

Concluding Remarks

To the mind of the present writer then, the key issue at stake in terms of the presence of Shi'ite Islam in the Southeast Asian nations that has been referred to in this study is the development of an atmosphere of mutual trust. Due to the post-1979 events in Iran, Shi'ism is still perceived as something 'alien', something which is 'controlled' by a 'foreign' and 'rogue' power – Iran – and which is therefore 'suspicious' and ought to be 'monitored'. It is indubitable that security concerns are the legitimate prerogatives of any government. However, it is not always clear why a particular group –in this case the Shi'ites –should be singled out while other, less 'cooperative' and perhaps even dangerous groups and movements are often ignored. On the other hand, Shi'ites of the Diaspora, that is to say 'converts', whether in Southeast Asia or elsewhere, has to learn how to act with self-determination and independently from

Iran where many of them have received their religious education. They have to become a stone in the local mosaic of religions in order to receive full public recognition. As already mentioned above in connection with Thailand, Iran's interest in the local Shi'ite Diaspora appears to be only limited mainly to the question of their 'usefulness' in 'promoting' the interests of that country. As a general feature, in the past, Iran hardly ever interfered with the affairs of another country when the fate of a local Shi'ite community was at stake - such in the case of Malaysia with which the Islamic Republic enjoys excellent economic relations.[65] Southeast Asian Shi'ites should be aware of that fact.

Local authorities, in turn, should perhaps understand that Iran – and in the future also Iraq – are, aside form the Muslim sanctuaries on the Arabian Peninsula, particularly dear to Shi'ites as they house the holy shrines of their Imāms. Aside from this (and somewhat similar in nature as the significance and meaning of the Land of Israel in the experience of the Jewish people), Iran and Iraq are something like the "homeland" of Shi'ism, where Shi'ites are the majority and where they can be 'themselves'. Once these bridges of understanding are completed, the prospects for a tiny minority like the Southeast Asian Shi'ites are rather bright - especially in a 'meritocracy' based on competition like Singapore, which in the course of its amazing development towards prosperity has also seen other rather small communities – such as the Armenian and Jewish one - flourishing as they have to prove themselves on a daily basis.

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[65] The case of Iran's involvement in Iraq is, of course, different, as Iran has strategic interests in that country.

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