

FROM MAIN COMPONENT TO EQUAL CITIZEN: RECONSTRUCTION OF THE JA'FARI IDENTITY IN TURKEY

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Abstract

The ethnic, sectarian, and political conflicts in Iraq and Syria serve as significant catalysts for Turkey's Ja'faris to redefine their social identity. This article comprises a sociological analysis of the Ja'fari community who are predominantly Azeri Turks adhering to the Shiite sect. The article addresses the parameters they pursue in order to construct and position their own social identity in light of the developments in foreign and domestic politics in Turkey where the Sunni population constitutes the quantitative and political majority. Since the foundation of the secular Republic up until today, the establishment has pursued the policy of homogenizing citizens via its ideological apparatus based on Sunni Islam references. As a response, Ja'faris have been rebuilding their identity in tandem with the social changes. In order to integrate with the national policies and overcome the barriers that arise from sectarian differences, Ja'faris constantly underscore in the public sphere that they are the founding components of the nation as "Turks" and "Muslim"s. However, Turkey's foreign and domestic politics during the conflicts in Iraq, and particularly in the post-Syrian crisis has engendered, citing the Ja'fari leader's own words, a "shocking effect" within the Ja'fari community. Given the new state of affairs, Ja'faris are rebuilding the Ja'fari identity using a dual language: On one hand, they continue to highlight the "superior" Turkish and Muslim identity that is embraced by the unofficial state ideology, and on the other hand, they embark on a quest for a more civilian equal citizenship within social movements.

Keywords: Ja'fari, Shi'ite, sectarian war, identity, integration, Turkey

Introduction:

The civil war that has been going on in recent years in Turkey's neighboring countries Iraq and Syria, has evolved into a Shi'ite-Sunni⁴⁰ "sectarian war"⁴¹. The conflict between Sunni and Shi'ite communities concerns the countries in the region as well as the sectarian communities living in those countries.

Though the intensity and outcomes may be different from those in Iraq and Syria, sectarian conflict is not an unfamiliar concept for Turkey, which is a country with a heterogeneous social structure. Particularly the Alawi⁴² (Alawi jurisprudence is deemed the heterodox interpretation of Shi'ite sect, yet despite some common religious beliefs, Alawis and Ja'faris have very different religious practices) pogroms⁴³ in various provinces of Turkey in the last quarter of 1970's linger in the collective memory of sectarian minorities. Therefore, the Shi'ites in Turkey closely follow the developments in the Middle East, and reconstruct their sense of belonging as citizens on the basis of the discourse generated by the political power, as well as the symbols they use and the decisions they take.

The majority of the Shi'ite population in Turkey is Sunni Muslims. Their visibility in the public space has increased since the 1980's, through internal dynamics such as the empowerment of identity movements, rise of pan-Islamism, urbanization, efficient use of the media, as well as external dynamics that have emerged as a result of the political and social developments in the Middle East geography (Iran Islamic Revolution,

⁴⁰ There are two main sects in Islam: Sunni and Shi'ite. The demographic breakdown between the two denominations is difficult to assess and varies by source. According to PEW Research Center, "Of the total Muslim population, 10-13% are Shia Muslims and 87-90% are Sunni Muslims. Most Shias (between 68% and 80%) live in just four countries: Iran, Pakistan, India and Iraq". (Mapping the Global Muslim Population, 2009: 9-10)

⁴¹ Ali Bulaç defines religious and sectarian conflict as "positioning a religious or sectarian group as the enemy or fighting against it solely on the basis of their religious beliefs or practices, or a different interpretation of the religion within the same religion and the religious practices based on such interpretation" (Bulaç, 2006). Although the tension in the Middle East stems from the effort to expand the sphere of political influence; there is a rising toll of news coverage from the region regarding attacks, arson, murders and massacre solely because of people's sectarian beliefs. Cf. (Nordland and Rubin, 2014 : Fire erupts at Shiite Mosque in Istanbul amid threats to community, 2014).

⁴² Alawis emerged as a result of the Shi'ite origin insurgencies in the 16th century. (Bozarslan, 2010: 201)

⁴³ More than 200 people got killed and hundreds of people- most of whom were Alawis- were wounded during attacks mainly aimed at Alawi neighborhoods in Malatya (April 18, 1978), Maraş (December 24, 1978) and Çorum (May 29, 1980). On July 2, 1993, thousands of people besieged and set fire on a hotel where an Alawi association had organized a festival. 33 writers, poets and artists and 2 staff present at the hotel at the time of the incident were killed, while 51 intellectuals who could escape by their own means were heavily wounded (Şahhüseyinoğlu, 2012).

invasion of Iraq, Arab Spring, etc.). The visibility in the political and social sphere has brought to the agenda the discussion of the problem areas regarding citizenship that the Shi'ite community experiences due to state policies. The article analyzes the reconstruction of the sense of belonging and citizenship across the Azeri-origin Ja'faris of Turkey⁴⁴, adherents of the Ja'fari jurisprudence of the Shi'ite Islamic faith, which is also the official sect of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

METHODOLOGY

In this study, Azeri-origin Ja'faris were selected as an authentic community adhering to a particular ethnic and political stance within the Orthodox Shi'a jurisprudence. The political and sociological literature on Azeri Ja'faris is scarce. Three methods were followed for an analysis of how the Ja'faris built their own identity vis-à-vis the state and government policies. First, a field study was conducted in Istanbul, Halkalı, a neighborhood that is densely populated with Shi'ites of the Ja'fari school. Towards the end of 1970's, there was a flurry of immigrants to the neighborhood from provinces such as Kars and Iğdır, which are heavily populated with Ja'faris of Azeri⁴⁵ origin. The neighborhood houses the largest Ja'fari mosque in Istanbul as well as a cultural complex under construction. The neighborhood was visited 3 times during June 2012- July 2014 period. Following the snowball method, interviews were held with 10 Ja'fari individuals from various economic, social, and age groups. The interviews helped keep pulse of the community and understand the experiences and problems of Ja'fari individuals as citizens of the Republic of Turkey. No recording device was used to enable the participants to talk comfortably on the sensitive issue of identity and to gain their trust; only notes were taken. Furthermore, the Valide Han Mosque in Istanbul, the mosque of Ja'faris of Iranian origin, was visited, and an interview was held with Mehmet Kitay, the religious officer of the mosque. Based on an evaluation of the impressions of the community members and review of the literature, interviews were held with Selahattin Özgündüz, the leader of Ja'faris in Turkey who played an active role in the organization and identity

⁴⁴ The phrase "Azeri Ja'faris" in this text refers to "Ja'faris of Azeri origin who live in Turkey.

⁴⁵ The mass of the Oghuz who crossed the Amu Darya towards the west left the Iranian plateau, which remained Persian, and established themselves more to the west, in Anatolia. Here they divided into Ottomans, who were Sunni and settled, and Turkmens, who were nomads and in part Shiite (or, rather, Alawi). The latter were to keep the name 'Turkmen' for a long time: from the thirteenth century onwards they 'Turkised' the Iranian populations of Azerbaijan (who spoke west Iranian languages such as Tat, which is still found in residual forms), thus creating a new identity based on Shiism and the use of Turkish. These are the people today known as Azeris." (Roy, 2007 :6)

movement of the Ja'fari community; and Kasım Alcan, the Director of Zeynebiye Social and Cultural Events. The main axis of the interviews was the relations between the Ja'fari community and the state, and Turkey's Middle East policy, as factors that determine the reconstruction of the Ja'fari identity. Lastly, Ja'fari news sites were scanned for news coverage during 2012-2014 for an analysis of the controversial views and statements of Ja'fari leaders from different regions of Turkey. Using the methods mentioned above, the study identified how Azeri Turks in Turkey form a minority sectarian identity via the leaders of the Ja'fari community within the context of Islam.

SECT AND IDENTITY WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK OF INTEGRATION THEORIES

Religion assumes an important function in forging an identity, identifying the boundaries and roles of the community members, protecting them against external threats, and forming the “other” concept. One of the founding fathers of sociology, Emile Durkheim, and scientists such as Talcott Parsons and Robert Bellah that followed, emphasized the role of religion in society within the framework of integration theories. According to Durkheim's functional analysis, religion assumes 3 main functions in the sustainability of a society: Social solidarity, social control, contributing a meaning and goal to one's life (Durkheim, 2003). However, not always does religion play a role that reinforces the notion of social cohesion in society as underscored by Durkheim. Therefore, as noted by Parson's student Robert K. Merton, this necessitates making a distinction between functions and dysfunctions (Merton, 1968). As opposed to functions, when dysfunctions arise, this disrupts the cohesion and harmony between religion and other social phenomena, giving rise to social problems. A religion that emerges within the same community or a religion that is present simultaneously in the same community, or a different religious interpretation burgeoning from the same religion, may lead to the disintegration of social cohesion, and turn solidarity into conflict and control into rebellion. This condition of dysfunction, in its most severe form, manifests itself as religious and sectarian wars.

“In religious and sectarian wars, the religious interpretation or practices of the targeted religion or sect are not included within law. That group is deprived of the right to live. It is either forced to surrender its faith and religious practices or suppressed. As observed frequently, it is subjected to mass destruction” (Ali Bulaç, 2006). Although it is the economic and political interests of those in power that is in the background, the parties that build their legitimacy and discourse on the basis of religious arguments attack sacred monuments during times of conflict; they inflict damage,

massacre the members of the religious faith that they deem the enemy, and above all, they torture the leading figures of that faith.

The Crusades that lasted for about 200 years between Christians and Muslims may serve as an example of the struggle between two different religious communities. Meanwhile, the 30 Years War (1618-1648), essentially a Catholic-Protestant conflict that occurred on the European continent, was one of the most violent sectarian wars in history, whereby most of the warring states had economic and political goals on their agenda (Pages, 1991).

A conflict caused by dysfunction ruptures the social bonds among people from various religious and sectarian groups, while it weaves novel networks of solidarity among people of the same religion or sect. It increases social cohesion, and leads to a restructuring of a solid religious identity and a sense of belonging. The German-origin American sociologist Lewis Coser who studies the functions of social conflicts states that external “conflict sets boundaries between groups within a social system by strengthening group consciousness and awareness of separateness, thus establishing the identity of groups within the system” (Coser, 1956: 34). In his analysis of social conflict he also argues “external conflict can often strengthen a group. It makes group members conscious of their identity by introducing a strong ‘negative reference group’ to which they contrast themselves; it also increases their participation” (Wallece and Wolf, 1995: 157). For instance, throughout the European history, Christians have condemned Jews over and over again for centuries due to their religious beliefs. They have been outcast, suppressed, isolated, banished or massacred. This physical and symbolic violence forged unique networks of solidarity among Jewish communities, while leading to the reconstruction and rebuilding of the Jewish identity (see Levine, 2001; Sand, 2009).

A new version (see Hass, 2014) of the extremely violent sectarian wars of Europe in the 17th century has been persisting in the Middle Eastern Islamic geography for the last 30 years. In the beginning of the 20th century, the Sunni-Shi’ite relations continued in harmony against common enemies (secular attacks on Islam in the form of imperialism, colonial occupations (Batatu, 1978: 173) and the Israeli “threat”), took on a new dimension particularly in the wake of the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran (Nasr, 2006: 106). During the first years of the new Islamic regime and ensuing the occupation of Iraq by the USA, there was an attempt to strengthen its presence in the region, and a project to create an anti-Western, anti-Israeli Shi’ite crescent in the geography with a Shi’ite majority, such as Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Iraq, and Lebanon, and in countries like Syria, Turkey, Yemen, and Afghanistan where they represented a minority. In response to this foreign policy move, the Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey-Western axis defiance and the

attempts to create their own sphere of influence, tensed up the Sunni-Shi'ite relations in the region (Güneş, 2013 : 52-55). In addition to the tension between countries with diverse sectarian majorities, and the struggle to create a political sphere of influence, “those in power deprive the different sectarian and ethnic groups of their Constitutional rights and freedoms (Ayhan, 2012) conferred to them on the basis of equal citizenship, causing problems such as sectarian civil wars, conflicts, tension, and disruption of the sense of citizenship” in individual countries. Especially the new political balance or unbalance following the US occupation and the democratization demands that have transformed into a sectarian conflict in Syria evoke excitement in the Sunni and Shi'ite communities that live in the countries of that region and causes them to reconstruct their sense of citizenship in line with the policies that their respective governments pursue regarding the matter. Given this context, in the “secular” Republic of Turkey where Sunni Islam exists as a social identity beyond a mere religious practice (Zubaida, 2000), which is a development that is recently observed to have its reflections in foreign policy as well, Shi'ite Ja'fari “minority” becomes more visible in the public sphere, and voices its demands more forcefully as an identity movement. Consequently, in the social sphere, Ja'faris are redefining the identity that they have been building since the foundation of the Republic.

JA'FARI JURISPRUDENCE AS AN IDENTITY IN THE INTERNATIONAL PLATFORM

Ja'fari jurisprudence is a school of *fiqh* whereby Shi'ites constitute the majority. It is derived of Ja'far as-Sadiq, the 6th Shi'a imam. The Ja'fari jurisprudence is followed by Twelvers⁴⁶ and Ismailis (severer) in general, as well as a small minority of Zaidis (fiver, the second largest branch of Shia Islam), a group called Zaidi Wasītīs. Turkish Shi'ites, just like Iranian, official sect of Islamic Republic, belong to the Ja'fari tradition. Despite the ethnic, linguistic and cultural differences between Turkey's Shi'ites, those in Iran and the rest of the Shi'ite world, there are bonds that go beyond these differences, national boundaries and identities (transnational). When a Shi'ite

⁴⁶ “The so-called Twelvers (*ithna 'ashari*), like other Shi'ite sects, believe that 'Ali was the rightful successor to the leadership of the community of believers after the death of the Prophet Muhammad. But what makes the Twelvers distinct from others is the belief that there were a total of twelve Imams, all descendants of 'Ali and his wife, Fatimah (the daughter of the Prophet), each designated by the previous one, and that the last Imam, the young Imam al-Mahdi, went into occultation and will reappear shortly before Judgment Day. Until the day he reappears, the Shi'ite community will be in need of guidance.” Shaery-Eisenlohd, 2008: X)

chooses his '*marja al-Taklid*'⁴⁷ (source of imitation), he is not interested in the national, ethnic or linguistic identity of the imam. The Shi'ite world does not have only one source of imitation as a *mujtahid* (the independent legal thinker). A Shi'ite chooses any *mujtahid* as a guide, and none of them is viewed as superior to the other. The *marja al-Taklid* that Turkey's Ja'faris adhered to in religious matters for a very long time was Ayatollah Mirza Jawad Tabrizi from Iraq. Tabrizi was an Azeri Turk. After his demise in November 2006 at the age of 82, the Shi'ites of Turkey in general selected the Iran-born Hüssein Vahid Horasani as their *marja al-Taklid*, and the Iran-born Ayatollah Ali Sistani who has been living in Iraq since 1951 (such as the Iraqi Turkmens who are Shi'ites by 75%), as their guide (K.Alcan, personal communication, 25 July 2014).

Turkey's Ja'faris are in close relations with other Shi'ite countries due to the transnational network structure of Shi'ia. However, before religious belonging, they emphasize the Turkish identity that they are affiliated with via ethnic and citizenship ties:

“By whose side do we stand? In terms of our sect, we are similar with Iran, yet our national state is the Turkish state. Azeris, who are not citizens of Turkey, view Turkey as their second homeland. And they do not call us Iranian, they call us Azeris; of Azerbaijani origin.” (S. Özgündüz, personal communication 27 June, 2012).

Indeed, although religion and sect are important factors that determine identity; other elements such as nationality, race, language, and culture are the inseparable parts and important components of the identity. As seen in the 8-year-long Iraq-Iran war (1980-1988) in the Middle East, the Arab Shi'ites that constitute the majority in Iraq have fought against Iran as Arab nationalists under the regime of the Sunni Saddam Hussein.

THE SOCIODEMOGRAPHIC STRUCTURE OF THE JA'FARI JURISPRUDENCE

The population of Turkey today is about seventy-seven six million⁴⁸, of which ninety-nine percent are at least nominally registered Muslims.

⁴⁷ “Authority to be followed. Highest-ranking authorities of the Twelver Shi'ite community that practice shariah. The term is usually applied to between four and eight high-ranking jurists (ayatollahs) locally or nationally; on the world scale, it is applied to only one or two jurists. The position is informally acquired and depends on patterns of loyalty and allegiance and the perceived conduct of the jurist. Two major ayatollahs holding this status after 1970 were Ayatollah Khomeini and Ayatollah Abu al-Qasim al-Khoi . Their followers included most Arabic-speaking Shiis in Iraq, the Gulf states, Lebanon, and Syria, and the majority of Shiis in India, Pakistan, East Africa, and Iran.” (Esposito, 203:192).

⁴⁸ According to the Results of Address Based Population Registration System, 2013 The population of Turkey became 76 667 864 on December 31, 2013. (TurkStat, 2014)

However in official documents there is no statistics about the sectarian or cult links of the Muslim population. Therefore, the rate of Sunni groups or Shi'ites (Ja'faris, Nusayris (Alawites), Alawis) within the general population is not known for sure. Various institutions and organizations cite various figures. For instance, according to the Turkey section of the International Religious Freedom Report issued by the US Department of State annually, there are approximately 500.000 Ja'faris living in Turkey (Department of State, The Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor 2012: 2). Selahattin Özgündüz, who is referred to as Hujjat al-Islam-proof of Islam and Sheikh of the Muslims, and is acknowledged as the leader by the majority of Turkey's Ja'faris, asserts that this figure reaches around 3 million:

“It has been noted in the minutes of the Assembly that there are around 3 million Azeri Ja'faris, based on the declaration of the former Minister of Culture Namık Kemal Zeybek who spoke at the Assembly regarding the law of mosques passed in 1998. Although almost all of them are Turkish citizens, they are Turks of Azerbaijani origin” (personal communication, 27 June 2012).

However, in his article titled “The geographical distribution and estimated population of Islam-based sects in the Middle East”, Büyükkara (2013) notes that the actual figure is much lower than 3 million. He asserts that this figure may be slightly above half a million, taking into account the pre-migration and the current population in settlement areas predominantly inhabited by the Ja'faris (332). Based on the data from the “Research on Religious Life in Turkey”, commissioned by the Presidency of Religious Affairs and conducted by TurkStat, 1% of the population in Turkey is of Ja'fari jurisprudence. In other words, there are 760.000 members of the Ja'fari sect living in Turkey. Ja'fari population mostly lives in the Northern Anatolia Region of Turkey. In this region, the members of the Ja'fari sect constitute 4,6% of the total population. Quantitatively speaking, the most crowded city where Ja'faris live is Istanbul, the city of Turkey that receives the highest number of immigrants. 2.1% of the 14 million population in Istanbul are Ja'faris⁴⁹ (Research on Religious Life in Turkey, 2014: 8).

The Ja'fari population in Turkey may be analyzed under four groups. The first is the Azeri-origin Ja'faris that represent almost the entirety of Turkey's Ja'faris. They live in the North East of Turkey for the most part, along the border of Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic, in the provinces of Kars, Ardahan, Iğdır, Ağrı and Erzurum (Bulut, 2004: 87). Nevertheless, the people of the region have migrated heavily from rural to urban areas due to

⁴⁹ The research does not include information about Alawis that make up the largest religious minority in Turkey and are cited within Shi'ia heterodoxy.

daunting economic and safety concerns. Especially in 1950-1960 and 1980-1990's, the people of the region have migrated to various metropolitan cities across Turkey, such as Istanbul, Ankara, İzmir, and Bursa. Today, in addition to these provinces, cities such as Bursa, Aydın, Manisa, Çorum and Kocaeli accommodate Ja'fari people and their places of worship as well (Üzüm, 1994: 84–92.) Ja'faris of Azeri-origin have around 30 mosques and masjids in Istanbul and about 300 across Turkey.

Azeri Ja'faris principally include Alawis and Nusayris (Arabic Alawis) as Ja'faris. These communities are estimated to represent approximately 7 to 15% of the population in Turkey. Özgündüz explicates this demographic calculation as follows:

“In general, Ja'fari community is merely perceived as the Azeri Ja'faris. However, there are more than 20 million Alawis living in Turkey, and about 2 million Alawi Nusayris in the south of Turkey, in Hatay, Adana, and Mersin provinces. If were to ask them what their sect is, they would tell you that they are Ja'faris. The Ja'fari population reaches some 25 million in total”.
(personal communication, 27 June 2012)

Although there are some common beliefs across Ja'faris and the Alawis and Nusayris (adoration of imam Ali and ehl-i Beyet and twelve imam), there are significant distinctions regarding their religious practices and political stance (Massicard, 2005: 361). In practice, all Ja'faris are Azeri Turks, whereas about 80% of Alawis are Turkmen clans and the rest are Kurds and Zazas. Nusayris, on the other hand, are of Arabic origin. Ja'faris are generally part of nationalist right political entities, whereas Turkey's Alawis generally support leftist political entities. Yet, Turkey's Alawis do not exhibit a monolithic structure (Bilici, 1998), since some of them define themselves as Ja'faris (7,46%) or Shi'a (2,8%) (Aktaş, 1999: 461) while some others adopt the Shi'ite belief. For example, in the Çorum province of Central Anatolia, a group of Alawis parted with the “heterodox way” in the aftermath of the Islamic Revolution of Iran. They adopted the Ja'fari sect and opened their own mosques⁵⁰.

The third group of Ja'faris in Turkey includes those that have chosen the Shi'ite fiqh over time, although their family may be of Sunni origin.

⁵⁰ The leader of the congregation is Teoman Şahin, the son of the former SHP (Social Democratic Populist Party) MP Cemal Şahin. During the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979, Şahin was a student at the School of Law in Ankara University. He was impressed by the Iranian Revolution and switched from Alawi jurisprudence to the Ja'fari sect of Shi'ia. In 1987, the father and the son founded the Ehl-i Beyt Mosque in Çorum. Today, the mosque has a congregation of around 1000. (Erdoğan, 2007)

Although there is no statistics regarding the number of followers from this group, it is estimated that they are very few in number (Albayrak, 2008).

A fourth group within the Shi'ites of Turkey are Iranians, who settled in Istanbul in the 18th and 19th centuries, though their population has dwindled significantly over time (Zarcone, 2007: 136). Organized around the Philanthropic Society of Iranians in Turkey, this community has two places of worship in Istanbul: One is the *Iranian Valide Han* Mosque on the European continent, and the other is the *Seyid Ahmet Deresi İranlılar* Mosque on the Asian side. Made up of Azeri-origin Iranians for the most part, this group is more urbanized and secular in comparison to the other Ja'faris who came to Istanbul at a much later stage. They experience the Shi'ite faith as a cultural element rather than through religious means. (Zarcone, 2007:138). There is no current link between this group and the Ja'faris of Anatolia today (M. Kınay, personal communication, 21 June 2012).

The Azeri-origin Ja'faris of Turkey do not constitute a homogeneous group regarding their faith or worldview. This community is organized under various groups, publishing houses, and NGO's such as Kevser, Zeynebiye, İğdir Ehl-i Beyt Association Scholars. The largest and most efficient of these groups is the Zeynebiye group based in Istanbul's Halkalı district. The religious scholars of this community (*ahund*) have undergone *fiqh* education in Iraq for the most part. For instance, the community leader, Selahattin Özgündüz, and an important imam, Hamit Turan, have undergone a brief education in Iran and then moved to Iraq because of problems with residential permit. There, they underwent religion education in the city of Najaf (Erdoğan, 2007). However, particularly following the first Gulf War, the new generation attended religious education in Iran, since the Shi'ite madrasas in Iraq were subject to oppression.

As a result, the Ja'faris of Turkey engage in multidimensional relations with countries such as Azerbaijan, Iran, Iraq and Syria that occupy an important space in Turkey's foreign politics due to various dynamics such as ethnic elements, sectarian brotherhood, affiliation with a marja-i, taklid, and sacred landmarks.

THE EXTERNAL WORLD OF TURKEY'S JA'FARIS

Support for those in power by the ethnic, religious, sectarian and class components that constitute the political majority within the social structure⁵¹ (those that have a control over the state apparatus) play an important role in the institution of foreign politics. An outcome of the

⁵¹ What we mean by political majority are those groups that are effective in the management of the state apparatus regardless of their rate in the total population.

foreign politics that is implemented upon the impact, contribution or support of internal dynamics, is the redefinition or reconstruction of the identities of those that make up the social structure inside (particularly minorities). In that regard, the level and dimension of relationships between the governments of the Republic of Turkey and the other Islamic countries in the international sphere, affect the reconstruction of Ja'faris' attitude towards political authority and their sectarian and ethnic position as citizens.

Throughout the Republican history, part of the problems and tensions between the state and the ethnic, religious, sectarian minorities began to dissolve and soften up during the “conservative democratic” Justice and Development Party (JDP) period who put into effect legal and political reforms on the path to full membership to the European Union. JDP came to power in 2002 upon support of a huge portion of the society, and won the following 2 general elections increasing its votes further. Despite those positive developments during the JDP period, the perception and certain practices (particularly during the end of the 2nd and 3rd terms of the JDP rule) that suggested that domestic and foreign politics were under the impact of religious symbols and discourse, created discomfort in the Ja'fari community. Especially the civil war in Syria has been a breaking point regarding the relations between the government and the Ja'fari community. In fact, until 2011, JDP's approach to foreign politics in the Middle East was to act as a balancing force and a mediator between the Sunni and Shi'ite groups. During the 2002-2011 period, Turkey extended political and economic support to those Shi'ite groups that tried to thwart the Israeli attacks against Lebanon. She has established constructive relationships with the Shi'ite groups in Iraq. Since the Ottoman Empire, for the first time, a Sunni statesman, the Turkish Primer Minister Erdoğan, visited the tomb of Ali, the fourth caliph and the cousin of Prophet Muhammad, in Najaf, the holy city of Shi'ites (Dinçer, Coşkun and Yegin, 2011). Here, Erdoğan used the term “second Karbala incident” to condemn the suppression of the demands of the Shi'ite majority who were governed by a Sunni monarchy in Bahrain (Al Rashed, 2013). There were initiatives for lifting the international isolation on the Assad regime and common meetings were held between the cabinets of the two countries. Ankara vetoed the draft resolution in the United Nations Security Council that stipulated sanctions against Iran due to nuclear activities. These policies in the international realm were regarded positively by the majority of the Shi'ite world, and specifically the Shi'ite groups in Turkey (Veysel Ayhan, 2012). However, Ankara sided with the Sunnis in the Sunni-Shi'ite tension in Iraq, made announcements and took initiatives that almost represented an intervention in Iraq's domestic politics (Balçı, 2013), supported the predominantly Sunni opposition in Syria, and opened its doors to the NATO missile shield that aimed against

Iran, all of which caused tension not only between the government and the Shi'ite world, but also with the Ja'fari community in Turkey⁵².

That is because Turkey's Ja'faris particularly care about three neighbors of Turkey that they have sectarian brotherhood ties with.

“As the Ja'fari community, we are emotionally wounded by any attack targeting Iran, Iraq, or Azerbaijan. We are against any external intervention to the affairs of any Islamic country, but we exhibit a more intense reaction when it comes to those three countries, given our religious and sectarian bonds. It is the circumstances that determine such reaction” (S. Özgündüz, personal communication, 27 June 2012).

It is necessary to include Syria among those three countries, because Syria acts as a bridge between Iran and Lebanon, the stronghold of the Shi'ite organization Hizbollah, and is effective in the administration of the Nusayri minority.

“We are by the side of the Syrian state and people. Take your hands off Syria. That is our request. Stop providing weapons, stop killing the Syrians.” (S. Özgündüz, personal communication, 27 June 2012).

Ja'fari leaders criticized the foreign politics pursued by the government during 2011-2014, and began to bring to the agenda the issues pertaining to their problems. As we will see in under the next chapter, in this new order, Ja'faris who had been defining themselves as Turks and Muslims, hence the “main component” in the country since the foundation of the Republic, embarked on a democratic struggle for the first time to earn their political and social rights since they fail to fully exercise those rights as equal citizens.

EMPHASIS ON THE NOTION OF MAIN COMPONENT IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE JAFARI IDENTITY

⁵² Özgündüz who spoke at a TV program voiced the problem with the government's foreign politics: “Mr. Prime Minister joined the Universal Aşura Mourning Ceremony last year and honored us. He then visited the Shrine of Prophet Ali at Najaf-ul Ashraf and had talks with Ayatollah Sistani. All of that generated an incredible affection towards Mr. Prime Minister in the Shi'a world. If this process was sustained without any damage, great things could have been done. This way the Syrian problem would be resolved without inflicting any harm on the region, and the incidents in Bahrain could be resolved through a formula that would not serve the Great Middle East Project. The love for the Prime Minister would contribute immensely to the solution of these problems. However, the attitude of our government regarding Syria as well as the attitude of the media circles close to the government tarnished that sentiment. That was how it had its repercussions in that area.” (Türkiye ve İran Suriye'de Çarpıştırılmak İsteniyor, 2011).

The Treaty of Lausanne (1923), which is the constituent document of the Republic of Turkey in the international realm, had conferred minority status to non-Muslims living in Turkey⁵³. However, non-Turkish Muslim ethnic groups such as Kurds or Circassians, or Turkish groups belonging to different sects of Islam such as Ja'faris, had not been conferred minority status. Following World War I, all Muslim nations who fought a common war against the occupying powers of the West were included as the main component of Turkey, solely on condition that they accepted the Turkish identity regardless of their sectarian or ethnic membership. This situation that came about with the Treaty of Lausanne was important in the formation of the Ja'fari identity of Turkey. The Azeri Ja'faris that we conducted the study with and that constitute the overwhelming majority of Turkey's Ja'faris view themselves as the founding component of the nation as Turks and Muslims⁵⁴. The Director of Zeynebiye Social and Cultural Events, Kasım Alcan defines "main component" as "the understanding that makes this land (Turkey) the land of Turks and Islam". Although they are a sectarian minority and are subject to the homogenizing policies of the state, Alcan refuses being referred to as a minority: "The state may pursue erroneous policies but we are the essence of this state as Turks and Muslims". (K. Alcan, personal communication, 25 July 2014)

In particular, for most of the Azeri Ja'fari community who fled from Caucasia and settled in Turkey due to the Russian oppression during the final periods of the Ottoman State or during the conflicts with the Armenians (Andrews and Benninghaus, 2002: 107), Turkey was the major harbor that they could take shelter in and sustain their presence. This historic background was one of the most crucial factors that guided Azeri Ja'faris to pursue Turkish nationalist political structures in the political realm. Especially in the 1970's when political violence was at a peak, Azeri-origin Ja'faris sided with the state and mainly organized around the Nationalist Movement Party against the Kurds who were involved with leftist organizations in provinces such as Kars, Iğdır, and Erzurum (Bozarslan, 1999: 239-240). In 1990s, the right-left conflict in the region was replaced by the fight between Kurdish and Turkish nationalists. The Ja'fari population continued to embrace state policies and sided by the state against Kurdish

⁵³ Religious minorities, recognized under the terms of the, monasteries, and schools, are regulated by a separate government agency, The Office of Foundations (Öktem, 2002: 375).

⁵⁴ The Muslim groups of Turkey are generally views as the main component of the country although they may not be of Turkish ethnicity or of Sunni sectarian identity. In 2004, the progress report issued by the EU included the terms "Alawi minority" and "Kurdish minority", which saw severe protests by the members and representatives of those identities. (DEHP ve Aleviler: Azınlık değil, Asli unsuruz, 2004).

nationalism. Ja'faris see themselves as the founding component of the country and follow the strategy to be involved in nationalistic movements. This resonates with the approach of the broader Shi'ite communities of the Middle East in 1960's and 70's who wanted to be integrated with the national policies in their own land and the political strategy they followed in order to overcome the sectarian barriers in that regard (Sinkaya, 2007: 40). Throughout those decades, within the Middle East equation, the Shi'ite congregations adopted secular political doctrines in countries where they represented both a quantitative and political minority⁵⁵ (Glave, 2005: 98-99) and steered towards Arab nationalism. Within this context, Turkey's Ja'faris removed sect-related differences from their discourse as much as possible, and emphasized the common ethnic element of being Turkish, thus seeking full integration with the Turkish society and state.

Although Ja'faris see themselves as the founding component of the Turkish State, their failure to fully integrate with the state policies historically is due to the efficient role that Islam's Sunni interpretation plays in the functioning of the state and its politics. As underlined by Ocak (2003), Sunni Islam, which is institutionalized among Turks, rests in the center of the state policy (60-63). In particular, following the rule of Selim I who enabled the transfer of caliphate from Memluks to the Ottomans (1517), the Ottoman State's ideological ascendancy was institutionalized by imposing Sunni orthodoxy (Jacoby, 2004: 30). This marked a breaking point, after which being a Sunni Muslim turned out to be more valuable than being a Turk who follows another faith or sect. The massacres⁵⁶ against the Shi'ites and Turkmen Alawis (Qizilibash) who were regarded as heretics broke out during the reign of Ottoman Sultan, Selim I (1512-1520). Referring to those massacres that led to the death of ten thousands of those people; Özgündüz asserts, "Through history, it was the Turks who suffered most due to the practices of the state ...The state suppressed Turks throughout history. Particularly, starting with the rule of Selim I...". During the transition from the multicultural and multiethnic Ottoman State to the secular Republic of Turkey, Sunni Islam gained a central position in the DNA of the state. In the USA, the group that dominates the political system and the state is

⁵⁵ What is meant by political minority is that although a group may represent the quantitative majority in a geography, they do not have a say in the administration of political powers or do not participate in the political arena.

⁵⁶ In Anatolia, there was religious support for the eradication of Shi'ite and Turkmen Alevi. Mehmed Ebussuud Efendi, who used to be the sheikh-el-Islam during the rule of Suleiman the Magnificent and Sultan Selim II had given fatwas, including, "The lives and property of the Qizilibash are *halal*; the highest level of martyrdom is dying in a war against them", and "Animals sacrificed by the Qizilibash are deemed impure and may not be eaten". (Düzdağ, 1972: 109-117)

sociologically defined as WASP (White, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant). In a similar vein, in the Republic of Turkey, the sociological counterpart of that is a Turkish, Muslim, Sunni and Hanafi origin. Though belonging to another identity different from those origins may support the primary structure of the political regime, such as in the example of Alawis (see Massicard, 2002), they have been viewed as a potential threat by the establishment, kept under control, and categorized as the inner enemy by certain organs such as the National Security Council, the body that establishes national politics.

Since the foundation of the Republic, those who run the state have seen the ethnic and sectarian differentiation within the Muslim community as a potential threat against the security and continuity of the state, and attempted at homogenizing those groups by using the ideological and pressure apparatus depending on the times and the prevailing trends⁵⁷. The Presidency of Religious Affairs is financed by the taxes collected from each citizen regardless of their religious or sectarian differences, the official Radio and Television organization that develops and broadcasts religious programs, the Ministry of National Education that offers compulsory religion education⁵⁸, have served as the most important instruments in re-production and internalization of the Sunni state policies in the society. As the Sunni identity becomes more consolidated in the society through such institutions, there is an attempt to assimilate other faith groups in line with Sunnism. Furthermore, Muslim groups that do not adhere to the Sunni faith have been deprived of the opportunity to build and generate their own religious and cultural organizations. For instance, none of the prayer houses for the Ja'faris enjoy legal status, and there is no budget allocated to their prayer houses. In Turkey, there is no legal educational institution to raise religious functionaries in line with the Ja'fari faith. All of the religious programs on state radio and TV channels are produced in accordance with the Sunni faith. Since the ID card of Ja'fari students bears the statement "Muslim", at school they are subject to compulsory religious education curriculum developed in accordance with the Sunni faith.

⁵⁷ Sevres Paranoia refers to the fear of the elites of the Republic of Turkey who are concerned about the repetition of the failure of Sevres Peace Treaty. This Treaty stipulated the fragmentation of a wide portion of the territory of the Ottoman Empire, which was defeated in World War I. The founders and intellectuals of the Republic believed that it was the ethnic and religious differentiation that caused this process, and enacted the homogenizing nation-state project based on this concern (Kieser, 2006: 232).

⁵⁸ One year after the Islamic Revolution in Iran, the military junta that took over the administration in Turkey passed the 1982 Constitution. Religion education, which was previously selective, was made compulsory from elementary school to high school. (Alasania and Gelovani, 2011: 42)

Though they do not fully enjoy equal and democratic rights as citizens, particularly prior to the migration from the rural to the urban areas, Ja'faris have never claimed equal citizenship rights in the public space. However, urbanization, creation of their own civil organizations (associations, media networks, cultural centers, foundations) and new social developments in the world and in Turkey that are shaped around the notion of identity have caused an important shift in the dynamics of the Ja'fari community.

Ja'faris who previously organized around the association of building and sustaining mosques in the civil society arena established the Association for the Promotion, Research and Education of Ja'fari Faith in 2006. The local court ruled it illegal to establish “a religion-based association” and decided to close down the Ja'fari Association Ja'fari-Der. However, the Supreme Court reversed the judgment within the scope of the new law on associations enacted in 2004. By 2014, the number of NGO's belonging to the Ja'fari community exceeds 20. (Taştekin, 2014)

At a time when civil society understanding ascended among Ja'faris, the work around a new “democratic” Constitution had begun in Turkey. In tandem with that development, Alawis, the Roma, and then for the first time Ja'faris held a Workshop with the participation of 117 religious and opinion leaders in March, 2010, where they identified their problems as citizens. What rendered this Workshop important was the strategic change that the Ja'fari community exhibited with regard to announcing and negotiating their problems. Prior to that date, they used to have one-on-one talks to discuss their problems with the state authorities when they could⁵⁹. At this Workshop, they shared the problems that hindered full integration with the Turkish society for the first time, and submitted a report to the government regarding this issue. The report included the following statements:

Ja'faris want to be able to speak about their community on Turkish Radio and Television Corporation, or, and other mass-media outlets. They also demand that the state not intervene with their mosques, the management of their Koran classes and the property of those institutions. Though Ja'faris do not want to be governed under the framework of the Affairs Directorate. They ask to receive a share of the payment allocated from the state

⁵⁹ In 1998, the Government led by Mesut Yılmaz issued a decree that called for the transfer of all mosques, including Ja'fari mosques, to the Presidency of Religious Affairs. Selahattin Özgündüz held talks with the government officers in Ankara, halting this process for Ja'fari mosques. Özgündüz said, “In accordance with the good will agreement signed at the Prime Ministry, the state does not “harass” the Shi'ite community”. (Personal communication, 27 June, 2012).

budget for religious affairs. They also want texts prepared by the community to be included in schoolbooks (Turkish Shia Organizes Workshop, 2010).

JDP sent the first signal that it would respond positively to the equal citizenship demands of Ja'faris regarding their identity. The same year, in December, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan became the first Turkish Prime Minister who attended a ceremony in Istanbul's Halkalı district to mourn the Karbala tragedy that took place 1,370 years ago. Delivering a speech at the ceremony, Erdoğan said: "This is our mourning. We are all first-class citizens in this country" (Aşure Türk Basınında Geniş Yer Aldı, 2010). In 2010, the positive relations between the government and the Ja'fari community⁶⁰ and the positive signs that the problems would be resolved was swept away by a taut process marked with changes in the domestic and foreign politics landscape. As the axis of balance that Turkey maintained between the Shi'ites and the Sunnis in its Middle East policy shifted towards the Sunnis, and the sectarian discourse and perceptions ascended in domestic politics, Turkey's Ja'faris engaged in an overt criticism of the government for the first time.

"We, the seculars, were suppressed when we were in power (...). Now, they provoke people against us on a daily basis. You were the ones who said yesterday that all Muslims were brothers and that the seculars tried to set us against each other." (Friday Sermon of Özgündüz, 2014).

During anti-government protests that broke out in Istanbul in June 2013 and spread across the nation, there was active participation from the neighborhoods populated by Ja'faris, particularly from Halkalı⁶¹. As a result of the occasionally violent interventions of law enforcers to suppress peaceful demonstrations, 8 Alawi youth lost their lives and more than 7.000 demonstrators were wounded, 100 of which were severe cases. Participation in the civilian protest that enjoyed the highest level of participation in the history of Turkey represented an important experience for the democratization of the Ja'fari community who had always sided with the official law enforcement throughout its political history. As Ja'faris raised their voice against the government and its discriminatory policies that had been in place since the foundation of the Republic, there were official

⁶⁰ The first time Ja'faris were recognized at the state level according to Zarcone (2007) was the invitation of Selahattin Özgündüz to the fast-breaking meal in 1997 organized by the then Sunni Islamist Prime Minister, Necmettin Erbakan of the Welfare Party of which Tayyip Erdoğan was also a member.

⁶¹ Özgündüz who visited the protesters at Gezi Park (the heart of the protests) could not enter the area due to forced polic evacuation at the time of his visit. (K. Alcan, personal communication, 25 July 2014).

reports⁶² that came to light that claimed that Ja'faris were running fifth arm activities against Iran as a discriminatory force that posed a threat against the nation.

For instance, a report issued by the Presidency of the Religious Affairs (Bu rapor ortalığı karıştırdı, 2013) shows how the *establishment* sees any sect of Islam but Sunnism as a threat:

“Our citizens who are members of the Shi'a do not come to the mosques of the Office of the Mufti because of the pressure of mullahs. In the future, the discourse and behaviors that encourage Shi'ia (Ja'farism) jurisprudence will accelerate ideological separation among the youth. Therefore it is deemed very important to closely monitor these initiatives that are carried out on behalf of religion in religious spheres and that lay the ground for negative social structures that threaten our state, nation, and integrity”

Another significant detail in the report of the Presidency of Religious Affairs is the relationship between the religious practices of the followers of Shi'ia and Iranians who are of the same sect as well:

“They recite their *azan*, *imsak* and *iftaar* prayers only a few minutes apart, celebrate their religious holidays in tandem with Iran, invite Iranian mullahs as speakers in their religious programs regularly. All of these are deemed as acts of fundamentalism or encouraging fundamentalism.”

The Presidency of Religious Affairs, which reports to the Prime Ministry, attempts at homogenizing religion in social life within the scope of the Hanafi school of Sunni Islam. It associates all other initiatives with treacherous external powers. This attitude engenders reactions from the Ja'fari community. In response to the discriminatory practices of the state and the government, and being categorized as an internal threat element, Ja'faris pursue a defense strategy shaped around their Turkish nationalism arguments:

“All that is being done is an effort for othering us- the pure Turks of the Ja'fari jurisprudence. As the main component of the Republic of Turkey, we have never betrayed and will never betray

⁶² An example of a news article in the Turkish media claiming that the Turkish Azeris spied against Iran: “They accessed the statements of the spies of the Iranian intelligence agency Savama who got caught in Iğdır (...) The informants are generally selected from among Ja'faris living in Iğdır and its vicinity. It is reported that this preference stems from the sectarian ties between the Iranians and Ja'faris. It is reported that Iran gathers spies from Turkish citizens who go to Iran's Kum city for training...” (İran'ın derin Türkiye Oyunu, 2012).

our land or nation...”(Veli Beder, President of Iğdır Ahlul Bayt Association, 2013)

The eminent figures of Ja’fari organizations address the collective memory that constitutes the collective identity of the Turkish society in defining the “real” internal and external enemies of the nation. They depict themselves as the “main” and “legitimate” components of the nation as Turks and Muslims:

“We are Turks, and just like our ancestors who refused to give away one piece of gravel to the Armenians, we will not give away a single piece of gravel to Al Qaeda, Al Nusra or their supporters who behead people, eat their livers, massacre women and children.” (Veli Beder, President of Iğdır Ahlul Bayt Association, 2013)

Particularly in the first two terms of JDP, the Turkish nationalism argument played a major role in curbing the military and bureaucratic tutelage that was supported by a nationalist/secular discourse. However, in today’s Turkey where social movements have ascended in importance, the Turkish nationalism discourse alone is not sufficient for the social legitimacy of an identity movement. The social restraints, and the internal transformation that the community has undergone from time to time, have led Ja’faris to include the concepts of equality, rights, and freedoms to their nationalist discourse in areas that they deem problematic for themselves. For example, Beder, the President of Iğdır Ahl Bayt Association, who defended against the report of the office of mufti using nationalistic arguments, demanded the democratization of the Presidency of the Religious Affairs by inviting them to offer equal services to all citizens as an organization that is financed with the taxes collected from all citizens. Using nationalistic and even racist arguments throughout, Beder concluded his speech by saying, “the Presidency of Religious Affairs should be restructured, and societies and individuals of all faiths should be represented equally, fairly and freely”.

INSTEAD OF A CONCLUSION: THE PATHWAY OF IDENTITY FROM SYMBOLIC TO PHYSICAL VIOLENCE

The leadership of Turkey’s Ja’faris have been describing the “the shock they’ve experienced” regarding the change of “attitude”⁶³ and “discourse”⁶⁴ they have been subject to after the changes in internal politics

⁶³ For example, while Selim I ordered death penalty for 10.000s of Shi’ites in Anatolia, the 3rd Bosphorus bridge under construction is named after him.

⁶⁴ For example, as Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan targeted the Gülen Community, he made hurtful comments about Shi’ites: “They have three character traits: Hypocrisy, lies, and slander; and as a result of these three traits, they engage in plots to instigate disorder. They

and particularly in foreign politics since 2011 (K. Alcan, personal communication, 25 July 2014). 2014 was a turning point for Ja'faris who had only been subject to symbolic violence in the political arena, differently from the Sunni and Shi'ites in the Middle East. The arson of 2 Ja'fari mosques consecutively in Istanbul may be perceived as the first signals of physical violence. President of the World Ja'fari Scholars Association, Hasan Karabulut voices his assumptions with respect to the new term as follows: "There will be similar incidents from now on. As the state pursues such politics, and as we keep quite and refuse to be provoked by such games, they will continue to give us a hard time." (Ünal and Akın, 2014).

An important question ahead of us pertains to the reaction of Ja'faris to state policies, and specifically to government policies, and the identity they will define themselves with in Turkish society as an outcome of this reaction. Similar to other societies, Turkish society is a living organism that is composed of diverse ethnic, religious, sectarian and class layers. Within this structure, the Turkish-Muslim-Sunni and Hanafi identity make up the quantitative and political majority. They accept other social structures that try to integrate with the society on condition that they demonstrate the will to assimilate. Those who seek an equal presence and an acknowledging of their differences within this organism are faced with resistance and exclusion. However, the parts that make up a whole can handle pressure only up to a certain limit. Societies redefine their limits to be able to sustain their existence. They either tone down their differences to better integrate with the whole, or assimilate, or separate from the whole by accentuating their differences.

Since the foundation of the Republic, Ja'faris have emphasized their Muslim (without a focus on the sect) and Turkish identity, trying to be part of the integrated whole. Despite such discourse, they were denied access to certain fundamental citizenship rights. Recently, Ja'faris have included an emphasis on equal citizenship to their discourse.

In today's Turkey, the language that dominates domestic and foreign politics is built around a focus on Islamic brotherhood (Sunni) and Muslim identity rather than on being Turkish or pro-Turkish. This change of discourse at the state level has the potential to further jeopardize the social integration of Ja'faris as citizens. Although Iraq's historic, social, political, and demographic structure is very different from Turkey, seeing how the change in the discourse of political authority influences Shi'ites may give an idea about the future of Turkey. During the Iran-Iraq war, Iraqi Shi'ites were viewed skeptically by the Baas regime, and their leaders were murdered. Yet

are worse than the Shi'ia. The Shi'ia can't beat them in those areas. The same is true for telling lies." (Başbakanın canlı yayın açıklamaları, 2014)

they remained loyal to their country on the basis of the Arabic nationalism discourse. However, after the first Gulf War, they were completely expelled from the system through the discourse and practices of Saddam Hussein that shifted from Arabic nationalism to Islamic nationalism (Luomi, 2008, 10). Eventually, they rebelled in the south regions of Turkey where they constituted the majority, and around 60.000 of them were killed (Pollack, 2002). Surely, a direct comparison between Turkey and Saddam Hussein's Iraq would be wrong. Despite all the setbacks, Turkey has a rooted and ever-developing democracy experience that dates back to a considerably long time ago. The homogenization policies that have been implemented since 1920's with a view to prevent social conflicts and enable integration were a failure. This has been acknowledged by both the ruling and oppositional political parties who have repeatedly voiced the need for legal and social reforms in recent years. Giving equal rights to all citizens on a Constitutional basis regardless of their ethnicity, religion or sectarian differences, and the creation of such discourse and services by the public authority, serves as the most prominent tool to prevent separation and conflicts that arise from the differences within the Turkish society. Unless the social and political dynamics in Turkey take a sufficient or timely step towards democratization, as in the case of other "minorities", Ja'faris' desire for belonging of citizenship and social integration may potentially weaken.

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