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# How to train a mulla: Seminaries in Shi'ite Islam

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THE CLERICAL ELITE of the Shi'ite branch of Islam gain their authority primarily through their learning. Religious knowledge is the quality that distinguishes clerics (the *ulama*) from the rest of the faithful Shi'ite community, giving them this special status. Very rarely, a particular cleric may be a charismatic preacher, or considered to have mystical knowledge through esoteric communication, or deserve particular respect because of his genealogy. But for most of Shi'ite history, a cleric's authority is based on his acquisition of knowledge, and he acquires this knowledge through studying in one of the Shi'ite seminaries, collectively referred to as the *Hawza*. In 2008, the British Academy funded a project, through its sponsored societies programme (BASIS), examining the history, development and future direction of the *Hawza* system. The project, titled 'Clerical Authority in Shi'ite Islam: Culture and Learning in the Seminaries of Iraq and Iran', was supported by the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies (BRISMES) and the British Institute of Persian Studies (BIPS). Over a three and a half year period, the project has set up networks of contacts between scholars working in Western university contexts (particularly within the UK) and those working within the *Hawza* system. The intersection of scholars from the *Hawza* and Western academics and researchers has been perhaps the most exciting element of the project; a sharing of educational techniques and knowledge has created lasting research exchanges which have resulted in important academic studies of the structure and history of clerical training in Shi'ite Islam. The project comes to an end in March 2012, with a major international conference to be held in Oxford.

The main centres of *Hawza* education today are in Iraq and Iran: both are majority Shi'ite countries, and Iran has a political system that is based around the clerical class having special and privileged access to political power. Understanding how the clerical class is formed, and how its authority is acquired and maintained in Shi'ite communities is crucial then to understanding the political dynamics of these two strategically important Middle Eastern countries. But the study of the *Hawza* is not limited to these two countries. The *Hawzas* in Najaf and Karbala (in Iraq) and Qum and Mashhad (in Iran) may form the centres of learning, but the Shi'ite clerics who lead the communities of Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Lebanon, Pakistan and India have invariably been trained in Iraq and Iran, and so the influence of these centres diffuses through the international community. The same is

true in the diaspora Shi'ite community in the West. London, for example, is a major centre for international Shi'ite activity, and has many clerics trained in Najaf and Qum, some even rising to the highest rank within the *Hawza*, that of Ayatallah. This diffusion of influence has led to the establishment of satellite *Hawzas*, the largest being in Damascus and the Persian Gulf – in the UK, *Hawza*-style education is offered in London and Birmingham. The *Hawza* Project, as the British Academy project has become known, has funded research on all these manifestations of Shi'ite clerical learning, emphasising how the *Hawza* system forms a setting where a transnational network of scholarly contacts is established, and how the contacts between scholars formed in the *Hawza* last well beyond their time in education.

## Structure

The *Hawza* system has a number of distinctive features. It is extremely informal and flexible. Traditionally, there is no set curriculum, no tuition fees, no specific examinations and no particular qualification that the student attains. Instead, each prospective student is taken on by a particular school or college (each individually also called *hawzas*, or alternatively *madrasas*), and receives a monthly stipend. This stipend is usually not enough to live on, particularly for a student with a family, and so as students acquire skills in their early years of education, they are able to earn supplementary funds through teaching beginner students, or even school children. Not a few students take on part-time jobs outside of the *Hawza* religious industry, in computing or translation. The monthly stipend comes with an expectation that the student will be studying within the recruiting college, and within each college there are individual classes, given by students at different stages of the hierarchy, all working under an individual or small group of clerics of advanced learning. The college then has a triangular structure, and as students reach the limit of their intellectual abilities, they leave, as clerics, to take on roles within the community. Only a few stay on to reach the apex, and teach at the higher levels of the *madrasa*.

Within this structure, the student has considerable autonomy to study what he (or she, for there are a few female *madrasas*) wishes. There are certain elements that are viewed as essential for progression (at the early stages, Arabic grammar and some jurisprudence, for example), but there are many optional subjects. The student designs his



Figure 1. *Teaching and learning, Hawza-style in small study circles.*

own programme of study, and the process is seen not simply as acquiring a qualification, but as a period of spiritual discovery and growth. Students are given freedom to experiment with subjects and themes, to develop areas of specialism and interest. With little in the way of a centralised organising body, the *Hawza* is, to an extent, a 'do-it-yourself' educational system. How students have constructed their curriculum, and the centrifugal and centripetal forces within the intellectual world of the *Hawza* have been central to a number of studies within the *Hawza* Project. These have changed over time, and continue to do so as the *Hawza* modernises.

### ***Qum and Najaf***

There are also differences of emphasis in curriculum between the main centres, particularly between the Iranian centre of Qum and Najaf in southern Iraq. These two *Hawza* cities, both of which have grown up around revered shrines of past Shi'ite figures, are in fierce competition for students and for reputation. Each thinks itself superior to the other, though naturally there is traffic of students and scholars between them. Generally speaking Qum sees itself as philosophically advanced and more open to new ideas, whilst Najaf views itself as teaching the traditional religious sciences by the 'tried and tested' methods. Before 2003, Najaf was seriously weakened by the Ba'th Regime of Saddam Hussein. His

suppression of the Shi'ites restricted Najaf's development; at the same time, the Islamic Revolution of 1979 in Iran was a huge boost to Qum as former *Hawza* professors, such as Ayatallah Khomeini, gained political control of the country and cemented the clerical class as a political entity. Today, Qum outstrips Najaf in terms of student numbers by 2 or 3 to 1. Najaf, though claims it has the history, the intellectual rigour and the political independence to offer a higher level of learning. Despite the expansion of Qum in the 20th century, the principal Ayatallahs (each known as a 'Source of Emulation' or *Marja' al-Taqlid*) are all based in Najaf and not in Qum.

Amongst the changes occurring within the *Hawza* is the gradual move towards a centralised bureaucracy, and a formalisation of educational qualifications. This has happened more rapidly in Qum, where educational reform has been linked with state intervention within the *Hawza*. There are moves to register teachers, check qualifications, offer western-style 'degrees' such as BA, MA and PhD alongside the traditional *Hawza* learning. The *Hawza*, both in Iraq and Iran, is now in competition, not only with each other but also with the expanding secular higher-education system on the Western model. In Iraq, Iran and elsewhere, the *Hawza* has to recruit students who might be tempted by more formal and internationally recognised qualifications. Recognising this new competitive context is at least part of the reason for the reforms the *Hawza* has witnessed in the last half century.

### *Philosophy and politics*

Of all the debates within the *Hawza*, two interlinked topics appear to dominate: philosophy and politics. Qum, with its greater philosophical emphasis, was the intellectual breeding ground for the ideas of the Iranian Islamic revolution. It was here that thinkers such as Khomeini, his one-time successor Ayatallah Montazeri, and the current leader of Iran Ayatallah Khamene'i, cut their teeth. In time, they constructed a religious political theory which was eventually enshrined in the constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Philosophy, usually based around the Islamicised version of the Greek tradition, was used as a vehicle for political theory, implicitly using paradigms such as the Platonic Philosopher-King notion. Even when Khomeini was based in Najaf (after having been expelled from Iran by the Shah), his intellectual style remained 'Qummi' and not Najafi. Many Najaf-based scholars reacted against this politicisation, and advocated a classical, jurisprudential approach to learning, where knowledge of the ancient legal texts was the primary criterion for religious excellence and community authority. For these Najafis, politicisation was a form of popularisation, and philosophy was a Trojan horse by which it was smuggled into the *Hawza*. The most eminent scholars in Najaf today, Ayatallahs Sistani, Fayyad and al-Hakim are not necessarily against all forms of philosophy being taught in the *Hawza*. Nevertheless, they certainly see

the subject as potentially dangerous and misleading for young students, and have focused their own efforts on developing complex and, to most, arcane systems of jurisprudence.

These tensions and debates are all part of *Hawza* life: the *Hawza* has always been a place where ideas have been challenged and orthodoxies tested by innovatory ideas. The Hawza Project aims to produce the first detailed set of studies on the *Hawza* in a Western language. The main outputs will be three themed collections of papers from the individual research programmes sponsored by the project. These will focus on the intersection within the Hawza of 'Knowledge and Authority', the cataloguing of its 'History and Development' and an examination of its 'Future and Challenges' respectively. A need to synthesise these studies into a comprehensive history of the institution remains, but through the Project's individual studies, a framework for '*Hawza* Studies' has been established, and will hopefully provide a context for future studies.

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Figure 2. Seminary graduates often leave to become popular preachers. Photos: Massimiliano Fusari, [www.massimedia.com](http://www.massimedia.com)