Intellectual Pan-Islamism and the New Islamic Civilization:
The Reformist Vision of an Islamic Publisher in Beirut

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Abstract:

The recently-deceased Shaykh Muhammad Hussain Fadlallah was one of the most influential advocates of what anthropologist Lara Deeb has called “authenticated Islam,” an approach to textual interpretation which stresses the individual pursuit of religious knowledge and the conscious assent to religious injunctions. This approach has dovetailed historically with an increased interest in and concern with the intellectual legacies of Islam on the part of ordinary Muslims, most of whom are living through the postcolonial predicament of establishing the foundations of local political order on the basis of structures of governance whose genealogy extends to the European Enlightenment as well as to colonial legal regimes, local practices, and even older imperial histories. Accordingly, the question of what “Islamic civilization” has been or could be has gained political urgency for many Muslim intellectuals since the formal independence of Muslim-majority nation-states. The Center of Civilization for the Development of Islamic Thought is a Beirut-based Shi’a Islamist publishing house which has entered into this debate by putting forth a new view of Islamic Civilization as a global, pan-Islamic endeavor by Muslim intellectuals to facilitate interconfessional intellectual exchange. Led by a reformist Lebanese cleric of Iranian heritage, Shaykh Yahya Mirzaei, the Center’s employees hope their publishing will spur such intellectual

cooperation, leading to research-based Islamic political theory that neither rejects nor idealizes Western models.

Keywords: Shi'a, Lebanon, Iran, Publishing, Islamism, Fadlallah

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Introduction

The home page of the English-language web site of the Center of Civilization for the Development of Islamic Thought¹ greets visitors with a portrait of the gently smiling Shaykh Muhammad Hussain Fadlallah. Above the picture is the title, “In the Absence of this Great Person,” and to its left is an eloquent tribute to the Shaykh. The Center’s editorial staff notes, “When talking about such a person (May [sic] Allah have mercy on him), emotion and reason conflict with each other . . . He was a loved man by his proponents, and respected by many of his opponents.”²

It is not unusual for a Lebanese research center or publishing house to offer tribute to a beloved religious leader. The publishing scene in Lebanon has historically been religiously and ideologically diverse, with houses owned by people of many religious traditions alongside those owned by dedicated secularists.³ Publishing houses owned by Shi‘i Muslims sometimes align themselves with one of the *marāji‘ al-taqlīd*, or

¹ Markaz al-Hadarah li-Tanmiyyat al-Fikr al-Islami, translated on their English-language web site

² “In the Absence of this Great Person,” Center of Civilization for the Development of Islamic Thought, accessed Feb. 11, 2011, <http://www.hadaraweb.com/English/news.php?id=15&idC=5>.

³ These work mainly in the Marxist political and intellectual tradition, which has grown considerably weaker since the mid-1970’s due in part to the rise of religious political activism.

sources of imitation for the Shi‘a faithful, who compete for followers and authority in Lebanon. Ayatollah Fadlallah is a particularly popular author, whose work sells reliably well and who has cultivated a strong network of supporters in Lebanon. Towards the end of the 1990s, over a dozen publishing houses were dedicated to promoting Fadlallah’s writings and jurisprudence.⁴

For the Center of Civilization for the Development of Islamic Thought (henceforth, “The Center”), Fadlallah represents an inspiration above all in the realms of political philosophy and Islamic jurisprudence. He is the *marja‘* most identified with what Lara Deeb has called “authenticated Islam,” or a religious praxis emphasizing individual questioning and understanding based on personal research and learning.⁵ In addition, he has been at the forefront of calling for an end to sectarianism and dialogue between Christianity and Islam in the wake of the Lebanese Civil War. In this way, Fadlallah’s jurisprudence exemplifies many of the reformist tendencies that have characterized Islamic political movements during the modern period.

However, while the emphasis on Islamic reform and renewal via individual interpretation has led to movements of all ideological stripes, from al-Qaeda to Qur’an-Only Muslims to Progressive Muslims, Fadlallah’s authenticated Islam is anchored decisively in the Shi‘i tradition of the *marja‘ al-taqlīd*.⁶ By preserving this connection to the institutional hierarchy of Shi‘ism, Fadlallah and his intellectual heirs are able to draw upon the weight of Islamic authority and history in a way that lends gravitas to their

⁴ Stephan Rosiny, *Shia’s Publishing in Lebanon. With Special Reference to Islamic and Islamist Publications* (Berlin: Verlag Das Arabische Buch, 2000): 53.

⁵ Lara Deeb, *An Enchanted Modern: Gender and Public Piety in Shi‘i Lebanon* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006).

⁶ For an overview of the major Islamic revivalist figures of the late 19th and 20th centuries, see Ali Rahnama, ed. *Pioneers of Islamic Revival*, rev. ed. (London and New York: Zed Books, 2005).

theoretical output. Similarly, while the emphasis on *ijtihad*, or direct interpretation of the sources, characterizes the religious reasoning of numerous violent and misogynistic movements, Fadlallah has used this approach to argue for greater gender parity and dialogue between religions as well as with “the West.” Most crucially, Fadlallah’s vision has opened up new spaces within religious orthodoxy for discussing the most pressing questions confronting contemporary Muslim societies.

One inflection of authenticated Islam, which, as mentioned earlier, stresses the individual pursuit of religious knowledge and the conscious assent to religious injunctions, has been an increased interest in and concern with the intellectual legacies of Islam on the part of ordinary Muslims, most of whom are living through the postcolonial predicament of establishing the foundations of local political order on the basis of structures of governance whose genealogy extends to the European Enlightenment as well as to local practices and even older imperial histories. Accordingly, the question of what such a thing as “Islamic civilization” has been or could be has only increased in political urgency since the formal independence of Muslim-majority nation-states.

It is not surprising that the character of “Islamic civilization” varies immensely based on who characterizes it. The Center has entered into this debate by prioritizing the thought and contributions of both Sunni and Shi‘i Muslims, giving their view of Islamic Civilization a pan-Islamic dimension which the Center’s employees hope will spur intellectual cooperation between Muslims all over the world. They see inter-sectarian cooperation as a remedy for the political weakness of Muslim countries, but over and above this they hope that it will spur a revival of the intellectual vibrancy that demarcates a flourishing civilization from a declining one. As a corollary, although the Center does

not reject the boundaries of nation-states as such, it promotes a philosophy that is decidedly anti-nationalist as well as anti-sectarian. In a religious climate characterized by interfaith suspicion and even violence, the Center's emphasis on intellectual and cultural cooperation between Sunnis and Shi'a reflects a minority, albeit compelling, vision of Islamic reform. What, then, are the circumstances that helped give rise to such a Center?

This paper argues that the Lebanese multi-confessional context, the presence of a robust international Shi'a community with connections to scholars all over the world, and the jurisprudence of Ayatollah Fadlallah have all contributed to the formation of an anti-nationalist, pan-Islamic discourse exemplified in the work of the Center. To make this case, I first briefly place the emergence of Shi'a publishers in historical context, describing its boom during the Civil War and then the increase in Shi'i immigration to Lebanon after the end of the conflict. I follow this with a discussion of Ayatollah Fadlallah's jurisprudential advocacy of authenticated Islam (although he himself does not use this term), his philosophies with regard to inter-sectarian and inter-religious dialogue and coexistence, and his outlines for workable Islamic rule (*al-ḥukm al-islāmī*). Finally, I discuss the vision of the Center of Civilization for the Development of Islamic Thought, drawing primarily upon an extended interview conducted over many months with its founder, Shaykh Yahya Mirzaei. I discuss both the aspirations of the Center and the challenges it faces. Although a detailed study of the books published by the Center is beyond the scope of this study, which aims to situate the Center in the context of early 21st Century Lebanese and global Islamic religiopolitical concerns, such a study will serve as a fruitful avenue of future inquiry for the student of civilizational discourses in the early 21st century.

A Weak State, Violence, and the Rise of Shi'a Publishing

In their studies of the Lebanese publishing industry, Franck Mermier and Stephan Rosiny have both argued that the unstable, shifting balance of power between Lebanese confessional communities prevented the consolidation of a single-party autocracy in that country.⁷ Accordingly, despite the desire of government officials to censor certain forms of religious and ideological expression, their ability to do so has been limited. This “weak state” theory helps explain why Lebanon has been simultaneously “the public sphere of the Arab world” and an unstable country vacillating between exuberant peace and devastating violence. When this violence does occur, it has two opposite effects: on the one hand, it results in a suspension of research and makes the circulation of information more difficult and dangerous; on the other, by further weakening the state, it opens up arenas of expression that did not exist beforehand. For the Shi'a, in particular, the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990) contributed to the creation of many more publishing opportunities than had previously been available.

As Rosiny notes, Shi'a publishing in Lebanon went through three formative stages. The first, the 1950's, was the foundational period during which a number of secular, commercially-oriented Shi'a-owned publishing houses opened.⁸ Rosiny refers to them as “established” houses. Prior to this, the economic and political marginalization of Lebanese Shi'a had been so acute that they simply had not constituted a market for books. However, by the 1950's, enough economic development and urbanization were occurring to render the Shi'a an emerging consumer base. Another factor giving rise to

⁷ Mermier, Franck. “Beirut: Public Sphere of the Arab World? The Role of the Publishing Sector,” *Cities of the South: Citizenship and Exclusion in the Twenty-First Century*, Barbara Drieskens, Franck Mermier, and Heiko Wimmen, eds. London?: Saqi Books, 2007: 280-303; Rosiny, *Shia's Publishing in Lebanon*.

⁸ Rosiny, *Shia's Publishing in Lebanon*, 17.

the Shi'a publishing industry was the clientelistic nature of the Lebanese economy. By the 1950s, the more powerful confessions, Sunni Muslims and Maronite and Greek Orthodox Christians, had monopolized the more lucrative segments of the economy, largely ignoring the publishing sector because of its relatively low profit margins. The void presented an opportunity for a number of Shi'i families, who were also encouraged by the relatively low amount of capital required to open a publishing house and the fact that publishing was less dependent on suppliers and distributors than were many other industries.⁹

The secular publishers of the 1950s reflected the early involvement of the Shi'a with Leftist and Marxist political ideologies. However, by the late 1960's, that had begun to change. It was then that the first Islamist publishers opened their doors in Beirut. During the following decade, leftist ideologies gradually lost steam across the Middle East. This was due in large part to the mass persecutions of the left organized by Arab and Iranian governments, combined with American interventions in the region as part of its anti-Communist efforts during the Cold War.¹⁰ The Lebanese Shi'a, like their counterparts in other countries and confessions, also became largely disillusioned with the Left and turned increasingly to religious politics to redress their grievances.¹¹

This "religious revival" was not limited to the Middle East, of course; the 1970's and 80's were a time of heightened religious activism all around the world as secular

⁹ Ibid., 19.

¹⁰ Rashid Khalidi, *Sowing Crisis: The Cold War and American Dominance in the Middle East* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2009).

¹¹ Carrie Rosefsky Wickham, *Mobilizing Islam: Religion, Activism, and Political Change in Egypt* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002); Ayesha Jalal, *Partisans of Allah: Jihad in South Asia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008).

ideologies lost their appeal for millions of people.¹² In Lebanon, however, Shi‘i Islamism represented not only a search for spiritual authenticity and differentiation from Western secularism, but also a form of giving voice to the confessional nature of the discrimination against them in Lebanese society. Confessional grievances and power struggles between all sects, in turn, helped give rise to the Lebanese Civil War (1975–1990). Four years after it began, the Iranian Revolution produced an enormous amount of hope among Lebanese Shi‘a that they could indeed take their destiny into their own hands and stand up decisively against oppression. By that time, the Civil War had resulted in a partial collapse of the Lebanese government, eliminating much of the censorship it had exercised on expressions of Shi‘a political consciousness. This opened up the possibility for people to open businesses without state licenses. The violence had also homogenized communities along sectarian lines, creating self-contained economies in which some of the old sectarian control over certain economic sectors was relaxed. After 1979, Shi‘i Islamist publishing in Beirut took off.¹³

The end of the Civil War in 1990, conversely, precipitated a notable abatement of radical Shi‘i political writing in favor of more “moderate” literature. Less than a decade after the War’s end, publishers who promoted overtly sectarian writing arguing for Shi‘i proselytizing, or *tashayyu‘*, were seen in a decisively negative light by the vast majority

¹² José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

¹³ Rosiny, *Shia’s Publishing in Lebanon*, 52-53. Rosiny notes, “Especially during the 1980s, the governing clerics [of Iran] regarded Lebanon as the springboard for their strategy of the export of revolution to the Arab world. Therefore, they co-operated with and presumably even funded some of the Lebanese publishers” (42). Similarly, one of the publishers Rosiny interviewed “stated that earlier a publisher only had to side with Hizb Allah in order to be assured of secure sales in Iran, and the same applied to Amal for Syria” (52). During the Civil War, Lebanese publishers received funding from Syria or Iran depending on their partisan stances.

of other publishers.¹⁴ Indeed, by this time many employees of publishing houses refused to speak of the religious affiliation of the company owners and resented being described as “Shi’a publishers.”¹⁵ Some also refused to name a “favored *marja*” in order to avoid causing strife within their own communities.¹⁶

During the 1990’s, Lebanon also saw a large influx of immigrants from Iran and Iraq, many of them clerics or intellectuals who had fallen out of favor with the regimes of their home countries.¹⁷ This migration was not only the result of political disfavor, however; the Shi’a have a long history of cultivating robust transnational (and trans-imperial) ties in the region, with Shi’a mobility between Lebanon, Iran, and Iraq forming a characteristic pattern of social, intellectual and religious exchange.¹⁸ A number of the new arrivals in Lebanon founded publishing houses, and by the turn of the twenty-first century, about 45% of Lebanese publishing houses were Shi’a-owned.¹⁹ Most of them published works almost entirely devoted to religious matters, often with a self-conscious religiopolitical program. However, there was also considerable overlap between “secular” and “Islamist” publishers, with the former publishing works on Islam and the latter publishing work by social scientists.²⁰

The Center of Civilization for the Development of Islamic thought reflects some of these more recent developments in Shi’a-owned publishing ventures in Lebanon. It repeatedly describes itself as an anti-sectarian initiative dedicated to bridging the divide

¹⁴ Ibid., 48. One publisher Rosiny interviewed even suspected they were plants of foreign intelligence agencies in order to sow dissension among Muslims.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid., 44.

¹⁷ Ibid., 42.

¹⁸ Roschanack Shaery-Eisenlohr, “Territorializing Piety: Genealogy, Transnationalism, and Shi’ite Politics in Modern Lebanon,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 51(3) (Jul. 2009): 533–562.

¹⁹ Rosiny, *Shia’s Publishing in Lebanon*, 8. Rosiny estimates that the Shi’a constituted between 30–40% of the population of Lebanon by this time.

²⁰ Ibid., 48.

between the *madhāhib*, or Islamic schools of law (both Sunni and Shi‘a).²¹ Although its output pertains almost entirely to Islam, which is characteristic of Islamist publishers in general, it solicits work by social scientists as well as religious scholars and strongly prioritizes what it calls a scientific approach to the study of Islamic societies. Its ecumenicism does not, however, prevent it from advocating for the worldview of one particular *marja‘*; in fact, the two are connected. While the Center publishes the thought of several *marāji‘ al-taqlīd*, including Murtaza Mutahhari and Ayatollah Khomeini, the thought of Ayatollah Fadlallah has had the greatest influence on the Center’s philosophy. It is to his work which I now turn.

Shaykh Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah on Ecumenicism and Political Islam

Ayatollah Fadlallah was arguably one of the most influential Islamic scholars of the 20th and early 21st centuries.²² His death on July 4, 2010 brought expressions of grief and mourning from all over the world, yet his loss was felt most keenly in Lebanon, where the Shaykh had lived for most of his life and where he had built up a strong base of students, followers, and charitable organizations.²³

²¹ “Al-Ta‘rīf,” *Markaz al-Ḥaḍāra li-Tanmiyyat al-Fikr al-Islāmī*, accessed February 24, 2011, <http://www.hadaraweb.com/news.php?idC=1>.

²² Although often characterized in by Western intelligence agencies and media as the “spiritual leader of Hezbollah,” this view has been amply critiqued not only by scholars but also, more recently, in the mainstream US media itself. Thanassis Cambanis, writing Fadlallah’s obituary for the New York Times, noted that Fadlallah’s “relationship with Hezbollah was much more complicated and far-reaching. He never considered himself to have any authority over the group and denied any operational links to it.” (“Grand Ayatollah Fadlallah, Shiite Cleric, Dies at 75.” New York Times, July 4, 2010. <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/05/world/middleeast/05fadlallah.htm>) Fadlallah was widely considered an independent voice who did not hesitate to disagree with the leadership of Hezbollah or the Islamic Republic of Iran (Deeb 2006).

²³ Fadlallah was born in Najaf, Iraq, to a Lebanese family. He moved to Lebanon after completing his studies at the Najafī *hawza*.

Many aspects of Fadlallah's political legacy endure after his death, including his commitment to the dignity and political rights of Lebanese Shi'a and his passionate advocacy of the Palestinian cause as well as the Lebanese resistance to Israeli occupation.²⁴ But perhaps his most far-reaching legacy lies in the realm of Islamic political philosophy and jurisprudence. As Lara Deeb has indicated, although working very much within the Shi'i *marja'* tradition, Fadlallah stressed individual interpretation within the realm of action falling outside of allegedly agreed-upon religious commandments and prohibitions.²⁵ A corollary to this was the notion that a "true" believer should be aware of why he or she believes what he or she does, and that conscious choice is what separates modern Muslims from their traditional ancestors.

This "authenticated Islam" in many ways distinguished Fadlallah's jurisprudential approach. He called upon the faithful to follow *marāji'* while exercising reason, rather than blindly imitating them. His emphasis on the individual discernment and moral responsibility of the *mukallaf* (the accountable human being or legal subject) influenced his rulings on the permissibility of certain forms of youth culture (i.e. frequenting cafes, listening to music, painting fingernails) as well as women's rights and mobility: among other things, he has ruled against female circumcision, honor killings, and any form of domestic violence; he has ruled that there is no prohibition against women leading an Islamic state or Muslim country; that women may work in mixed-gender environments so

²⁴ His views, especially on the latter two issues, did not fail to engender controversy, especially in the US and Israel. The intelligence agencies of these two countries held Fadlallah responsible for Hezbollah's attacks on US and Israeli targets in Lebanon. In 1985, the CIA attempted to assassinate Fadlallah by planting a car bomb on the route between his apartment and mosque; the explosion missed Fadlallah, but killed 80 other people (Cambanis, "Grand Ayatollah Fadlallah").

²⁵ Deeb, *An Enchanted Modern*; Lara Deeb, "Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah and Shi'a Youth in Lebanon," *Journal of Shi'a Islamic Studies* 3, no. 4 (Autumn 2010): 405-426.

long as they observe the *hijāb* (proper Islamic covering),²⁶ that female victims of domestic violence have the right to defend themselves;²⁷ that even virgin women do not need the permission of their fathers in personal decisions, including marriage, so long as they have reached maturity (although when this occurs is the topic of much debate).²⁸

In addition to these rulings, the Shaykh also issued *fatwas*, gave sermons, and wrote essays on the topics of transcending sectarianism and promoting a “renewal” of Islamic thought. Sectarianism, he believed, was one of the main factors responsible for the political weakness of Muslims vis-à-vis the West, including Israel. In his work to remedy the problem, he focused his reconciliation efforts primarily on relations between Christians and Muslims in Lebanon and on relations between Sunnis and Shi‘a in the Gulf.²⁹

Fadlallah’s call for dialogue with Christians was aimed primarily at the Lebanese, although it also extended to the West in general.³⁰ He issued one such invitation shortly after the end of the Lebanese Civil War in prominent op-eds, first in the Lebanese

²⁶ Samāḥat al-‘Allāma al-Marja‘ al-Sayyid Muḥammad Ḥussayn Faḍl Allāh, “Qaḍāyat al-Mar’a,” *Bayyanāt*, accessed April 1, 2011, <http://arabic.bayynat.org.lb/ahdathwakadaya/qa.aspx?id=16>

²⁷ Cambanis, *Grand Ayatollah Fadlallah Dies at 75*.

²⁸ Deeb, *Fadlallah and Shi‘a Youth in Lebanon*.

²⁹ During the 1990’s, many Gulf countries (Bahrain, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates) relaxed their restrictions on Shi‘a literature. Fadlallah, as well as another Lebanese theologian, Muhammad Mahdi Shams al-Din, regularly traveled to these countries to promote relations between Sunnis and Shi‘a. (Rosiny, *Shia’s Publishing in Lebanon*, 51).

³⁰ In an interview with an American journal, Fadlallah stated, “We Muslims are always looking for opportunities to engage in dialogue with Westerners and Christians . . . Indeed, when I speak in this fashion I am most emphatically not referring to the American government . . . But our opposition to the policies of the American administration should never impede dialogue with the American people, on any issue whatsoever.” “Improving East/West Relations through Dialogue and Inter-Religious Understanding: Interview with Imam Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah,” *Middle East Affairs Journal* 6, no. 1-2 (Winter-Spring 2000), 129-133: 132-133. In an interview with another journal, he said, “Even when we oppose the West, it is the political and economic West with its monopolistic corporations that we oppose. We do not oppose the humanitarian West. We would like to be friends with the humanitarian West.” Shaykh Muhammad Hussayn Fadlallah and Mahmoud Soueid, “Islamic Unity and Political Change. Interview with Shaykh Muhammad Hussayn Fadlallah,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 25, no. 1 (Autumn 1995), 61-75: 67.

Christian daily *an-Nahar* (in 1991) and then in the Lebanese French daily *L'Orient-Le Jour* (in 1992):

We seek to come out of a Lebanon of confessionalism as this only stands for one aspect of tribalism. A Muslim, therefore, should accept Christianity as a worldview, a conception of life, of the reality of the human being and, consequently, of politics.³¹

Fadlallah's claim that religion cannot but influence a person's politics no doubt reflected his own commitment to the "Islamist movement" in Lebanon (of which he saw himself as one leader among others).³² However, his Islamist inclinations were always articulated in the context of a multi-confessional society whose balance of power he expressed no interest in altering. Accordingly, he openly advocated for "Islamic rule" (*al-ḥukm al-islāmī*)³³ while simultaneously arguing that Lebanon's confessional make-up makes the project of an "Islamic republic" unfeasible for that country:

Lebanon cannot be transformed into an Islamic republic, which is unrealistic, but the Islamists should give free reign to their ideas in Lebanon, taking advantage of the fact that Lebanon is not only a window on the West, but also a window for the West on the East.³⁴

Indeed, the freedom to proselytize for all religious communities constitutes a pillar of Fadlallah's conception of honest religious dialogue. As his op-ed in *L'Orient-Le Jour* argued, "The proselytism we are engaged in belongs to the right of each of us, Christian

³¹ "Christians and Muslims: Is Dialogue Possible in Lebanon?" *International Review of Missions* 82, no. 326 (1993): 217-221.

³² Fadlallah and Soueid, "Islamic Unity and Political Change."

³³ Samāhat al-ʿAllāma al-Marjaʿ al-Sayyid Muhammad Hussayn Fadl Allāh, "al-Dawla al-Islāmiyya bayn al-Islāmiyya wa-l-Madhhabīyya," *Bayyanāt*, accessed March 30, 2011, http://arabic.bayynat.org.lb/alwihda/dawla_islamia.htm.

³⁴ Fadlallah and Soueid, "Islamic Unity and Political Change," 68.

or Muslim, without giving cause to enmity, without impeding the other to do likewise.”³⁵

And in calling for dialogue with the West in an American journal in early 2000, he said,

We know that the American public is open to dialogue. Dialogue has already occurred on many occasions and in many formats . . . I do believe that a dialogue with Americans can quickly enhance understanding of Islam. Some Americans may even wish to convert.³⁶

Although such a call for mutual proselytism may seem on the surface to have the potential to aggravate inter-religious tensions, especially in Lebanon, Fadlallah’s op-eds were well-received by Patriarch Ignatios IV, primate of the Orthodox Church of Antioch, as well as the Metropolitan of Mount Lebanon, Georges Khodr, precisely because of Fadlallah’s respectful and non-polemical portrayal of Christianity. In response to Fadlallah’s op-ed, Khodr wrote:

We have an important heritage, both in the New Testament as well as the Old through our church fathers and theologians, in regard to what the Sheikh calls “the idea of the crucifixion of God, the mystery of that crucifixion and the doctrine of salvation.” This approach distinguishes the Sheikh in making out of him perhaps the first contemporary Muslim of the Arab Mashrek (Orient) who speaks of Christianity in a manner it understands itself.³⁷

Although Khodr went on to critique some of Fadlallah’s theological contentions with Christianity, the Metropolitan did indeed take up the Ayatollah’s invitation to dialogue.

Even more prominent in Fadlallah’s discourse than interfaith dialogue and religious freedom for all (including the freedom to proselytize), however, was the importance of a future-oriented Islamic unity and the transformations in Islamic political

³⁵ “Christians and Muslims: Is Dialogue Possible in Lebanon?” 218.

³⁶ “Improving East/West Relations,” 132-133. In another interview he said, “We see the West as a vast area for a drive to convert Western peoples to Islam.” Fadlallah and Soueid, “Islamic Unity and Political Change,” 67.

³⁷ “Is Dialogue Possible in Lebanon?” 219.

philosophy which he saw as prerequisites for such unity. In an interview for the *Journal of Palestine Studies* in 1995, Fadlallah stated,

Despite this strong [Islamic] identity, the Islamic world is suffering from a lack of a clear and objective understanding of the true situation of Islam and Islamic thought. This is apparent from the proliferation of Islamic movements, some reactionary, wanting to live as if it were five hundred or six hundred years ago, some anarchic, some resorting to violence in situations where peaceful means can be pursued, some with a sound grasp of reality and whose tactics, whether violent or peaceful, are guided by objective analyses.³⁸

According to Fadlallah, misunderstanding Islam contributes to a sectarian mentality, whether by dividing Islam from other religions or by turning Muslims against each other. Sectarianism, in turn, leads ultimately to Muslims' political powerlessness before actual foes:

The Islamic countries are beset by internal squabbles. Muslims are fighting more wars among each other than they fought against Israel . . . The Lebanese could always find justifications for fighting each other, yet many of them speak of the need for realism in politics and say that fighting and resistance are futile when it comes to Israel . . . Still, I believe that an Islamic awakening growing out of the sense of Islamic unity could provide the impetus for future change.³⁹

Fadlallah's message is that by uniting under the banner of Islam, Muslims can together find the strength they need to combat domestic and foreign repression. Hence his contention that "Islamic rule" (*al-ḥukm al-islāmī*) would present the best solution for Muslims seeking to revolt against repression and restore a society based on values rather than exploitation:

The dangerous challenges to the beliefs, *sharī'a*, natural resources, politics, economics, culture, and security that face the Islamic world compel Muslims to strive to establish a state, any state, that commits itself

³⁸ Fadlallah, "Islamic Unity and Political Change," 62.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 62-63.

to facing these challenges from the position of Islamic thought as a foundational principle, as *sharī'a*, and as a movement, such that the Islamic method for deriving thought (*al-nahj al-islāmī fī istintāj al-fikr*) is the wellspring of intellectual *ijtihād* (*al-ijtihād al-fikrī*).⁴⁰

However, as stated above, Fadlallah's commitment to Islamic rule differs fundamentally from the views and methods espoused by various Sunni and Shi'a revolutionary groups. For instance, he has vocally opposed the Iranian model of *vilāyat-i faqīh*, distancing himself publicly from Khomeini's and later Khamenei's regime:

I don't believe that Welayat al-Faqih [sic] has any role in Lebanon . . . Perhaps some Lebanese commit themselves to the policy of the Guardian Jurist, as some of them commit themselves to the policy of the Vatican [Lebanon's large Maronite community is Catholic]. My opinion is that I don't see the Guardianship of the Jurist as the definitive Islamic regime.⁴¹

Fadlallah does not elaborate a vision of a definitive Islamic regime, although certain criteria, like a confessionally sensitive implementation of *sharī'a* and the sovereignty of Muslims in the government of such a regime inform his characterizations of it. He has insisted that minorities and differing religious sects would be no worse under the kind of Islamic state that he envisions than under a secular one: such a state would not interfere whatsoever in the specifics of worship (*ibādāt*) while allowing each person to choose the community by whose personal status laws he or she will abide. Perhaps most important, Fadlallah has repeatedly emphasized the limits of the sphere of legal (*shar'ī*) prohibitions and commandments and stressed the need for both social norms and individual choice to fill the realm of morals (*akhlāq*) and values (*qiyam*).⁴² For Fadlallah, such a broad

⁴⁰ Fadl Allāh, "al-Dawla al-Islāmiyya bayn al-Islāmiyya wa-l-Madhhabīyya."

⁴¹ Robert L. Pollock, "A Dialogue with Lebanon's Ayatollah," *The Wall Street Journal*, March 14, 2009, accessed March 23, 2011, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB123698785743625933.html>.

⁴² Deeb, *Fadlallah and Shi'a Youth in Lebanon*.

latitude for individual choice compares with that which exists under secular governments while avoiding what he sees to be the pitfalls of secularism.

Indeed, it is the political subjugation of Muslims and their concomitant inability to shape legislation to accommodate their religious laws and values which appears to most disturb Fadlallah. He asks, “How can some Muslims or an Islamic movement endure (*yuṣbur* ‘*alā*’) living under non-Muslim rule and not endure the partial differences arising under an Islamic state and the rulings of which its Islamic legal code (*qānūnuhā al-islāmī*) is comprised?”⁴³ Yet Fadlallah’s rejection of non-Muslim rule is not simply a call for revolution, theocracy, or Muslim domination; rather it calls upon Muslims to work to acquire political power and influence in their countries while maintaining sensitivity to and respect for both religious difference and personal choice. The question, in other words, is one of re-establishing parity between Muslim and non-Muslim (whether Christian or secular) laws and norms. In his op-ed in *L’Orient-Le Jour*, Fadlallah stated, “Islam has no desire to abolish the Christian presence but wants to co-exist with it in equality, to engage in dialogue while accepting mutual critique.”⁴⁴ Thus, the “wing” of the Islamic reform movement which has been inspired by Fadlallah’s jurisprudence and philosophy is both deeply confessional and presuppositionally interconfessional.

As one offshoot of that “wing,” the Center of Civilization for the Development of Islamic Thought has adapted Fadlallah’s emphases on Islamic unity and intellectual

⁴³ Fadl Allāh, “al-Dawla al-Islāmiyya bayn al-Islāmiyya wa-l-madhhabīyya.” The reference to an “Islamic Legal Code,” as opposed to simply *sharī’a*, reveals the modernist thrust behind Fadlallah’s political philosophy. Since codification of law was one of the hallmarks of the Tanzimat reforms (and has since been replicated in most Muslim nation-states), a similarity can be detected there. Compare Fadlallah’s philosophy to that prevalent in Saudi Arabia, where fierce battles rage between Sunni ‘*ulamā*’ and reformers within and outside of the government on the implications of legal codification for the authority of *sharī’a* law.

⁴⁴ “Christians and Muslims: Is Dialogue Possible in Lebanon?” 218.

renewal. Although Shaykh Muhammad Zaraket, one of the Center's founders, characterized the recent loss of Fadlallah as a "crisis,"⁴⁵ the Center continues to carry on his legacy by way of its own vision for intellectual cooperation among Muslims of all sects in a politically empowering and reformist vein.

A Reformist Research Center and Publisher

I first met Shaykh Najaf Ali Mirzaei (who goes by Yahya), founder and director of the Center, at a café in Cambridge, Massachusetts during the summer of 2010. We were introduced by an anthropologist colleague of mine doing fieldwork among Lebanese Shi'a. He had recently come to Harvard University for a six-week English-language course, and I was working in Cambridge at the time. Knowing he was a cleric, I expected him to display some visible markers of this status; however, I was surprised to see him wearing plain clothes and a trim beard. I had also expected him to be older, whereas he was in his early forties. When I referred to him as "Shaykh Yahya," he insisted that I call him simply "Yahya."

The first thing Yahya and I spoke about was the passing of Ayatollah Fadlallah. Although Yahya had grown up and received his education in Iran, he told me that he had moved to Lebanon about fifteen years ago and studied under Fadlallah there. He insisted that the *marja'* was not, as many in the West believed, the "spiritual head" of Hezbollah or the leader of a political faction. Instead, he emphasized Fadlallah's spiritual leadership, embodied especially in his kindness, generosity, and compassion.

⁴⁵ Shaykh Zaraket, Interview by Mariam Banahi.

As our conversation continued, Yahya stressed to me that he was deeply committed to the relevance of Islamic political philosophy, so long as it could find new theorists who were neither afraid of the West (or of “seeming Western”), nor resigned to secularism. He seemed convinced that the Islamic reform movements that had been tried so far had all failed and that a radically new approach to religious questions was necessary if the Muslim *umma* (global community) was to emerge from its current malaise. He expressed a sincere interest in secular political theory as well as the newest research on contemporary Islam. It was then that he told me about the research center he had founded in Beirut along with a number of other University professors (these were Shaykh Muhammad Taqi Subhani, Shaykh Muhammad Hasan Zaraket, and Shaykh Hussain Ibrahim). The purpose of this center was to publish classics of Shi‘i and Sunni Islamic thought as well as new research and theories about Islamic Civilization.

The Center of Civilization for the Development of Islamic Thought was founded in 2007. In its four years of existence, it has published approximately 130 titles by both Arab and Iranian authors, rendering it a prolific publisher in a country where Shi‘a-owned Islamist publishers average between 86 to 90 titles.⁴⁶ Because of its ecumenical, pan-Islamic outlook, the Center stresses the need for Arab-Iranian dialogue and intellectual exchange (although for the moment its target audience is Arabs and so nearly all of its books are written in Arabic).⁴⁷ However, its books are certainly read in Iran, and the Center hopes to expand its networks to other Islamic countries. To this end, the Center has partnerships with organizations in Lebanon, Syria, Egypt, Iran, and Turkey

⁴⁶ Rosiny, *Shia's Publishing in Lebanon*, 31.

⁴⁷ Shaykh Muhammad Zaraket, Interview by Mariam Banahi (anthropologist), July 10, 2010, at the Center for the Development of Islamic Thought. Unpublished field notes.

and sends its representatives to book fairs in Iran and all over the Arab world. Its authors and translators come from many countries, whether Arabic- or non-Arabic-speaking.

Mirzaei's own Iranian background and trajectory of work in Lebanon naturally contribute to his internationalist convictions. He stressed to me in later interviews that he sees Muslim elites of all sects as a natural intellectual community who potentially have more in common with one another than they do with the sectarian politicians who claim to represent them.⁴⁸ He is profoundly distressed by the "brain drain" affecting Islamic countries, which he believes has devastating effects not only on the support for research and critical thought in those countries, but also on the very fabric of their societies. He writes, "We face a dangerous breakdown of thought, values, and ethics in our societies due to the loss of elites and real institutions to study these slippages and deteriorations and suggest research-based remedies."⁴⁹ The global, research-based orientation of his "intellectual internationalism" thus differs from the political (and often theocratic or theonomic) pan-Islamism proposed by thinkers like Abu 'Ala' Mawdudi and Sayyid Qutb.⁵⁰

Indeed, this distinction forms the basis of Mirzaei's critique of two other Lebanese organizations with a pan-Islamic dimension, The Assembly of Muslim 'Ulama' (Tajammu' al-'Ulama' al-Muslimin) and The House of Rapprochement between Islamic Sects (Dar al-Taqrīb baina al-Madhahib). Mirzaei says, "I believe in intellectual and

⁴⁸ Here it is important to note that while Mirzaei sees elites as the coveted audience for the Center's work, Zaraket sees youth and University students as its primary readership (Shaykh Zaraket, Interview by Mariam Banahi).

⁴⁹ Shaykh Najaf Ali ("Yaya") Mirzaei, Interview by Natalie Smolenski, March 2011, via email. Unpublished.

⁵⁰ However, it is important to note that the Center has published a study of Qutb's life and work, *Sayyid Qutb: Fī Ḥalāl Ṣāhib al-Ḥalāl*, by Aamal al-Khazzami.

cultural unity, while they believe in political unity.”⁵¹ Along these lines, he also argues that an overly strong focus on political aims can weaken the scholarly integrity of research (causing “scientific and academic weakness” [*al-ḍaʿf al-ʿilmī wa-l-akādīmī*]).⁵²

Mistrust of politicians and politics notwithstanding, the scholarship published by the Center is by no means apolitical. In fact, broad political questions are central to the research of the Center’s authors. Many of their books address the question of how ideologies of governance like human rights and practices of governance like statutory law can be understood by or adapted to Islamic theories of law and statecraft. Often framed by their authors as alternately bridging or maintaining the gap between “the West” and “Islam,” these studies aim to take seriously and benefit from “Western” scholarship while insisting on the impossibility of a wholesale importation of “Western” standards and practices into an “Islamic” context. Here it is important to note that this seemingly essentialist framing is, in practice, often simply a shorthand for lived experience. Mirzaei told me, “I oppose the use of ‘West’ and ‘East’ in such a sharply delineated way. ‘Eastness’ and ‘Westness’ are intersecting conglomerations. They are shared human experiences. However, objective circumstances have sharpened [these] classifications and borders.”⁵³

According to Mirzaei, all of the Center’s employees vociferously oppose, in Lebanese Shiʿi political parlance, “the forces of international arrogance” embodied in the military apparatus and multinational corporations of the United States (and to a lesser extent Europe). Zaraket, who takes on primary editing and managerial responsibilities at

⁵¹ Shaykh Mirzaei, Interview by Natalie Smolenski.

⁵² Ibid. Mirzaei also mentions that the Assembly of Muslim ‘Ulama’ tows a Khomeinist political line, which is confirmed by Rosiny (*Shia’s Publishing in Lebanon*, 26).

⁵³ Shaykh Mirzaei, Interview by Natalie Smolenski.

the Center in Mirzaei's absence (as the latter frequently returns to Iran), also explicitly invokes the continued fear of Israel felt by Lebanese Shi'a. According to him, many Shi'a believe that Israel wants revenge after being expelled from Southern Lebanon by Hezbollah in 2000. He urges vigilance for all Lebanese, arguing that while other sects in Lebanon are not as afraid of Israel as are the Shi'a, they should be.⁵⁴ However, although this larger political context serves as a backdrop for the analyses published by the Center, its elements are not the primary focus of the work it publishes.

The desire to be both politically independent and to be able to speak as honestly as possible about political realities renders the Center's funding situation difficult. Book sales don't cover its operating expenses, and because it is not a theological institute, it is ineligible for religious taxes and tithes (the *zakat* and the *khums*).⁵⁵ Moreover, the state provides no aid to independent research centers. A lack of funds is a widely-shared hardship for Shi'a-owned Islamist publishers; the average number of full-time employees for such publishing houses at the end of the 1990's was five,⁵⁶ and according to Zaraket, that is how many the Center currently has.⁵⁷ This situation has led the Center to seek financial assistance from donors both locally and abroad, especially in the Gulf. However, its strong commitment to intellectual independence has simultaneously led it to

⁵⁴ Shaykh Zaraket, Interview by Mariam Banahi.

⁵⁵ "Some of the theological institutes in Beirut are branches of Iranian institutes. They receive at least a part of their funding from their Iranian mother organizations, which are financed by religious taxes, pious donations or *waqf* (endowments) and which in most cases are not directly linked to the government" (Rosiny, *Shia's Publishing in Lebanon*, 27).

⁵⁶ Rosiny, *Shia's Publishing in Lebanon*, 24.

⁵⁷ Shaykh Zaraket, Interview by Mariam Banahi. Mirzaei says the number is ten (Shaykh Mirzaei, Interview by Natalie Smolenski). My impression from the discrepancy is that the two are using two different definitions of "full-time."

limit its donation requests, and it wishes to remain small; it has no official relations with the government of any country.⁵⁸

Like many Lebanese research centers and publishers, the Center is occasionally forced to collaborate with other centers, publishers, and Universities, in Lebanon or abroad, to make ends meet.⁵⁹ Mirzaei sees this situation as less than ideal, but Zaraket takes the view that cooperation is an important part of the Center's work. He argues that it is not a business and that communication enriches its output.⁶⁰ The rest of the Center's work, including accounting, translation, graphic design, and copyediting, is done on a contractual basis, often with people in other countries.⁶¹ In this way, the Center truly is an international operation, although it is headquartered in al-Dahiyya (Beirut's southern suburb with an overwhelmingly Shi'i population) along with almost all other Shi'i Islamist publishers.

One of the chief obstacles to raising funds for the Center, according to Mirzaei, is its primarily intellectual, rather than charitable, function. He exclaims in dismay,

The mentality of Arabs and Muslims on this issue is tragic . . . They are ready to support orphans, the poor, *hawzahs*, and mosques, but they won't pay a dollar for a research center like ours! And the situation of the governments here is terrible to begin with; they don't want a research center like ours to gain power, since they regard the strengthening of understanding and awareness among the people as the end for them! I am sure of what I say, that Arab states are purposefully keeping thought and universities weak . . . They are afraid of strong universities that graduate strong scholars who will cause problems for them.⁶²

At one point, Mirzaei raised the issue with Ayatollah Fadlallah:

⁵⁸ Shaykh Zaraket, Interview by Mariam Banahi.

⁵⁹ Shaykh Mirzaei, Interview by Natalie Smolenski.

⁶⁰ Shaykh Zaraket, Interview by Mariam Banahi.

⁶¹ Shaykh Mirzaei, Interview by Natalie Smolenski.

⁶² Ibid.

I complained about the lack of funds for research to Ayatollah Muhammad Hussain Fadlallah. I asked him, “Why, with all of your interest in intellectual renewal, are the *hawzāt*, even those you personally direct, weak, modest, and unproductive?” He replied that philanthropists and donors don’t give to the *madrassa* [school] but to the *masjid* [mosque]!⁶³

In addition to financial hardships, the Center also faces criticism from some Muslims hostile to its vision of reform:

We have more challenges than we can count, beginning with the anger of Islamists in Iran, Lebanon, and the Gulf at some of our ideas. Some of them accuse us of being secularists; some that we are Qur’an-only Muslims who do not recognize the Sunna [to be canonical]! And some say that we are politicians . . .⁶⁴

Nevertheless, despite political and financial hardships, the Center perseveres. It will remain to be seen to what extent its small staff can steward it through the vicissitudes of a fickle book industry in a time of great religious and political upheaval across the Middle East.

Conclusion

In 2008, the Center of Civilization for the Development of Islamic Thought reprinted a book by Saudi author Zaki al-Milad, *A Civilizational Question: How Can We Innovate Our Future in a Changed World?* An internationally popular book, it was reviewed by seven different media outlets in both Arab countries and Iran.⁶⁵ Its warm reception added to the reputation of al-Milad, who is a prolific author, as well as that of the Center itself.

In his book, al-Milad tackles head-on the question of where Islamic civilization “fits” in a new global culture transformed by the information age and US hegemony.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Zakī al-Mīlād, “al-Mas’ala al-Ḥaqāriyya: Kaif Nabtakir Mustaqbalina fī ‘Ālam Mutaghayyir?” *Mawqi‘ al-Ustādh Zakī al-Mīlād*, accessed April 20, 2011. <http://www.almilad.org/page/moalfat-text.php?nid=10>.

Beginning with a critique of Frances Fukuyama's thesis that the end of the Cold War had brought about the "end of history," al-Milad goes on to paint an optimistic, albeit vague, picture of the possibilities for "Islamic civilization." He employs "civilization" in the sense of both *hadārah*, a historical presence, and *tamaddun*, a processual building.

Beginning with a historiography of 19th and 20th Century Arab writers who concerned themselves with the study of civilization and continuing on to describe the many conferences and international meetings devoted to the question of "Islamic civilization" or simply "civilization" in Arab countries towards the end of the 20th Century, he conveys a preoccupation with the question of civilization felt by many Arab and Muslim intellectuals during the past two centuries. He shares this preoccupation, writing in no uncertain terms that "The problems faced by the Islamic world are the problem of civilization."⁶⁶

In al-Milad's characterization, civilization is made possible first and foremost by knowledge: "Whoever has knowledge has power and the capability to advance (*al-taqaddum*) and civilize (*al-tamaddun*)."⁶⁷ He invokes the traditional Islamic imperative to "seek knowledge" (*talab al-'ilm*) as the essence of the remedy for "backwardness" and "weakness." He also employs the language of Islamic jurisprudence, or *fiqh*, to describe the nature of civilizations: each has an "internal logic" [*mantiq dākhilī*], while the "fiqh of civilization" is the methodology by which external manifestations of that civilization are derived from its essential principles.⁶⁸ He advocates this as the most salutary, or

⁶⁶ Zakī al-Mīlād, *al-Mas'ala al-Ḥaḍāriyya: Kaif Nabtakir Mustaqbalina fī 'Ālam Mutaghayyir?* (Beirut: Markaz al-Ḥaḍāra li-Tanmiyyat al-Fikr al-Islāmī, 2008): 24.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 30.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 34.

preferred (*al-rājih*), approach to understanding civilization and the civilizing project.⁶⁹

He concludes by stating that while the question of civilization can never be encapsulated with the certainty of scientific terminology, it can be approached first as a vision, then as a program, and finally as a system.⁷⁰ He concludes his introduction to the first printing of the book, in 1998, with the optimistic exclamation, “Yes, hope is permitted to us!”⁷¹

Although al-Milad’s opinions cannot be said to equal those of the Center’s staff, there is significant overlap with his thought and the thought of Mirzaei, most especially in the notions that intellectual and scholarly development, above all, can produce the kind of Islamic civilization which is truly worthy of that name, as well as his conviction that religious idioms are crucial to the formation of that intellectual effort. The researchers at the Center and their authors both think in terms of transnational civilization and (global) *umma* rather than country or nation, although without rejecting the latter as political forms.

The intellectual pan-Islamism embodied by the Center described here is facilitated by the multi-confessional Lebanese context, where the work of intellectuals with this shared orientation can find a reliable publicity apparatus in the form of a well-developed and relatively uncensored (within the region) publishing industry. The Center serves as a conduit for the cycling of ideas from and back into Iran, Iraq, and other regional Shi’a communities, transforming them in the process and adding its own ideas. In this sense, Beirut is a node that amplifies the voices of contemporary Islamic reformists. And it can be this for the Shi’a in part because of the jurisprudential space carved out for such a venture by the late Ayatollah Fadlallah. It remains to be seen whether his vision of an

⁶⁹ Ibid., 242.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 243.

⁷¹ Ibid., 15.

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authentic, individually compelling, and politically unifying Islam will continue to capture the political and religious imaginations of Muslim intellectuals.

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