

## Islamic Education in Qom: Contemporary Developments

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*“Qom is the heart of Iran. The real capital is Qom, not Tehran”* (Qom professor).<sup>2</sup>

### Abstract

This article examines contemporary developments within the sector of Islamic education in Qom since the establishment of the Islamic state in 1979. It concludes that the structural changes have been wide-ranging, encompassing a bureaucratization of the *houze* (Islamic seminaries) as well as a strengthening of the cooperation and competition between ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’ learning institutions. The ancient *houze* system has been supplemented with a diversified body of new Islamic teaching centres, officially aiming at a modernized education for contemporary Islamic society. The changes have

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2 Informant no. 27 (18-x-07).

increased the institutional capacity to educate both male and female *tollab* (students of Islamic theology), and to furnish them with academic degrees. This has contributed to shaping a work force which takes up positions within the media, judiciary, bureaucracy, and the educational institutions of the Islamic state. It has furthermore shaped a generation of preachers and propagators, who work to spread the state's vision of Islam.

Keywords: Islamic education, houze, Qom, Iran, Shi'a Islam, madrasa, marja', ayatollah, womens' madrasa, segregation.

### Introduction

Qom's importance as a centre for the study of Shi'a Islam has been on the rise since the 1979 Islamic revolution and the establishment of an Islamic state. The dusty desert city south of Tehran, which is home to the shrine of Imam Reza's sister, Lady Fatemeh Ma'sumeh, has developed considerably in political importance as well as in terms of a growing student population. Its main theological establishment, the *Houze-ye 'elmiye* (Shi'a Islamic seminaries), has been transformed from an oppositional focal point to an important resource for government and state bureaucracy. In this article we aim to explore the impact this has had on both male and female religious education in Qom. We examine the historical and structural developments within the institutional sector of Islamic learning over the past decades, and discuss how the 'traditional' *houze* system has accommodated the 'modern' version of the Islamic academic institution.

Since Michael Fischer's comprehensive study of 1980, little has been published in Western languages exploring the meaning of the institutional development within the Islamic education sector in Qom, as well as the impact of possible changes in recruitment of students of theology.<sup>3</sup> Books and articles have been published in Arabic and

3 See Roy Mottahedeh's classical work, *The Mantle of the Prophet: Religion and Politics in Iran* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985). Mottahedeh does not, however, mention the development of theological institutions for women and the recruitment of female students. See Ziba Mir-Hosseini, *Islam and Gender: The Religious Debate in Contemporary Iran* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1999), p.

Persian, but none of these has been translated into English or other Western languages.<sup>4</sup> Very little has been published about the entrance of women into the field of Islamic studies in Iran.

This study is based largely on data collected during two field trips to Qom, in 2006 and 2007, during which we visited educational institutions, interviewed scholars and students, collected brochures depicting the various educational programs, aims and objectives of the institutions; and explored the web pages of the most important of them. Among a total of 47 informants, 13 were female and 34 male. All worked or studied within the sector of higher education—in universities, research institutes or *houze*—42 in Qom, and the remaining 5 in Tehran. The 13 women interviewed were all based in Qom.<sup>5</sup>

The field work was challenging, the topic sensitive, and it was sometimes hard to establish direct contact with informants.<sup>6</sup> Upon the cancellation of a meeting with a *houze* scholar, we were informed that:

Mr. A. really wanted to meet with you, but the head of the seminary said no. People in the *houze* are afraid of the reactions they may face, especially because of meetings with foreign scholars. They are all the time afraid that foreign scholars are spies and work for the Americans.<sup>7</sup>

11. See Sabrina Mervin (ed.), *Les Mondes Chiites et l'Iran* (Paris: Karthala-IFPO, 2007). See also Roswitha Badry: "Zum Profil weiblicher Ulama in Iran: Neue Rollenmodelle für 'Islamische Feministinnen'," in: *Die Welt des Islams* 40 (2000): 7–40.

4 See Ali Shirkhani and Abbas Zareh, *Tahavvolat-e Houze-ye 'Elmiye-ye Qom pas az Piruzi-ye Enghelab-e Eslami* (The Development of the Qom Seminary after the Victory of the Islamic Revolution), (Tehran: Entesharat-e Markaz-e Asnad-e Enghelab-e Eslami, 2005); and Farhad Mudarresi, "Az Nokhbe-garayi ta Divan-salari" (From oligarchy to bureaucracy), in *Shahrvand-e Emruz* 18, (Mehr 1386 [2007]): 65–67.

5 The interviews were conducted in English, Arabic or in Persian (in Persian with an interpreter).

6 See Mir-Hosseini, *Islam and Gender*, p. 17. The author was denied access to Zahra University.

7 Informant no. 6 (22-x-07).

Consequently, we have been all the more dependent on assistance from trusted friends in Qom, who could introduce us to informants within the various educational institutions.<sup>8</sup> We are extremely grateful for the help we have received, and for the welcoming attitude with which we were met at the educational institutions visited.

### A brief history of the *houze* in Qom

The word *houze* is often translated as ‘Shi‘a Islamic seminaries.’<sup>9</sup> It was referred to by informants as “a cluster of schools, organizations, and institutes which are more or less officially and unofficially related to each other.”<sup>10</sup> The *houze* system can be traced back to the late thirteenth century, when institutionalized Shi‘a Islamic learning centres were established both in Iraq and Persia.<sup>11</sup> It is this inherited system of learning that is implied when we speak of ‘traditional’ as opposed to ‘modern’ Islamic education. A well respected cleric and university professor in Qom presented it as follows:

The system of education in the *houze* is a continuation of an ancient system—a system of face to face education. The students directly select their professors, and the professors read the classical texts, from introductory level to the level of *kharij* [graduation level; the highest level of the *houze* system]. We have

- 8 We have chosen not to name our informants except for in the few cases in which official spokesmen of various institutions made statements.
- 9 Informant no. 21 (20-x-07).
- 10 Informant no. 38 (20-x-07). See also Rula Jurdi Abisaab, “The Cleric as Organic Intellectual: Revolutionary Shi‘ism in the Lebanese hawzas,” in *Distant Relations: Iran and Lebanon in the Last 500 Years*, ed. H. E. Chehabi (London: I. B. Tauris, 2006), 231–251. The author explains the word *houze* in Iraq and Iran as “the ensemble of madrasas in one city. One thus speaks of the Najaf *houze* or the Qom *houze* (in Persian: *houze-ye ‘elmiyeh*)” (ibid. p. 231).
- 11 Ehsan Yarshater ed., “Education,” *Encyclopaedia Iranica* VIII: 184. Costa Mesa, California: Mazda Publications, 1998. For ‘institutionalized *madrasa*’ in contrast to informal learning circles, see Jonathan P. Berkely, “Women and Islamic Education in the Mameluk Period,” in *Women in the Middle Eastern History, Shifting Boundaries in Sex and Gender*, ed. Nikki R. Keddie and Beth Baron (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992), 146.

three levels in the *houze*, and the number of years at each level depends on the student's capacity. The traditional books are about jurisprudence, ethics, theology and *usul al-fiqh* (the sources of jurisprudence), *tafsir* (Koranic exegesis), and the interpretation of science [versus theology]. The two levels which are introductory take ten or eleven years: *muqaddima* (introductory) is five years, and *sath* (middle level) is between four and five years. The *kharij* level is endless. At the *kharij* level, the ayatollah examines the students and gives them the 'authorization' (*ijaza*) of *ijtihad* (individual reasoning). This means that the students are *mojtaheds* (capable of individual reasoning) in their fields and that they may go to other places and gather circles of students (*halqa*) around them. The student then becomes a representative (*nemayande*) of the *marja'*. The representative receives *khums* (religious tax, lit. "one fifth") and *zakat* (religious tax); he interprets the Koran, and educates in *ahkam* (ruling, law) and *fiqh* (jurisprudence), and in the political position of the *marja'*,<sup>12</sup> both at the individual and the public level.<sup>13</sup>

The *houze* schools (*madrassa*, pl. *madaris*) which were established in Qom during the late thirteenth century did not survive, and the institutions found in the city at present are therefore of much newer date. The establishment of today's *Houze-ye 'elmiye* is usually traced back to the year 1920, when the well-known scholar, *shaykh* Abdulkarim Ha'iri Yazdi (d. 1937), was invited by colleagues to settle in Qom. When the *shaykh* finally accepted to leave the city of Arak, in which he was based, he brought several of his best students with him. The event was to have far-reaching consequences, as it marked the

12 *Marja'*, pl. *maraji'*, 'source of imitation', highest ranking authority (on the law) in Twelver Shi'a Islam.

13 Informant no. 9 (27-x-07). For more on the classical *houze* system, see Michael M. J. Fischer, *Iran: From Religious Dispute to Revolution* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 1980), pp. 63, 247–248; Mottahedeh, *The Mantle*, pp. 71–78, 89–91, and 103–09; and Chibli Mallat, *The Renewal of Islamic Law: Muhammad Baqer as-Sadr, Najaf and the Shi'i International* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), with particular reference to Najaf, pp. 35–45. (Cf. also Sabrina Mervin: "La quête du savoir à Nagaf. Les études religieuses chez les chi'ites imâmites de la fin du XIXe siècle à 1960," *Studia Islamica* 81 (1995): 165–85.

beginning of a renaissance of Qom and its *madaris*.<sup>14</sup> In the years that followed, many Iranian students preferred Qom to the Iraqi *houze* city of Najaf. Students from the Arab countries and South Asia still travelled to Iraq, but when Saddam Hussein came to power, his suppressive policy towards Shi'a Islam and the Shi'a population dealt a severe blow to Najaf as an Islamic study centre.<sup>15</sup>

The transformation of Qom into a main centre for Shi'a studies was thus linked both to changes in the recruitment of teachers and students, and to political events outside Iran. In the context of the former, the administrative and political skills of the highly respected scholar, Grand Ayatollah Burujirdi (1875–1961), deserve specific mention. He was vigorously engaged in Sunni-Shi'i rapprochement (*taqrib*), sent his representatives to Europe for missionary work (*tabligh*), and perhaps more importantly, brought order to the *marja's* affairs—with the introduction of accurate bookkeeping and a complete register of the *maraji's* representatives. The network of communication that was set up by Burujirdi served to disseminate guidance in political as well as religious matters, even after he passed away.<sup>16</sup> Hamid Dabashi evaluates his and Ayatollah Yazdi's achievements in these words: “The two Grand Ayatollahs Ha'iri and Burujirdi were thus the moral and intellectual pillars turning Qom into ‘The Vatican’ of Shi'ism. That was indeed a remarkable achievement given the fact that it materialized during the reign of two successive autocrats determined to ‘modernize’ Iran on the model of Mustafa

14 Fischer, *Iran*, p. 109. An exodus of students and teachers from Najaf to Qom was already a fact after the rebellion of the *shaykhs* in Najaf in 1918 and the 1920 revolt, both against the British authority. See Yitzhak Nakash, *The Reaching for Power: The Shi'a in the Modern Arab World* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006), p. 75–77; see also p. 10: “The establishment of modern Iraq under Sunni minority rule in 1921 ... dealt a blow to Najaf's semiautonomous status and its welfare and academic standing. Najaf spiralled into a socioeconomic and intellectual decline, and in the middle of the twentieth century was superseded by Qum in Iran as the major academic centre.”

15 Juan Cole, *Sacred Space and Holy War: The Politics, Culture and History of Shi'ite Islam* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2002), p. 180.

16 Hamid Algar, “The Oppositional Role of the Ulama in Twentieth-Century Iran,” in *Scholars, Saints, and Sufis: Muslim Religious Institutions since 1500*, ed. Nikki R. Keddie (Berkeley: University of California Press 1972), 243 p.

Kemal's model in Turkey."<sup>17</sup>

A new period of growth started in the early 1970s. Fischer made note of fourteen *madaris* in Qom in 1975, four of which had been established during the Safavid era (1501–1722), and were abandoned before being reopened in the Qajar period (1779–1925). The remaining ten were established during Pahlavi rule (1925–79), at least seven of them between 1973 and 1975.<sup>18</sup>

Certain aspects of the old *houze* system were heavily criticised already during the pre-revolutionary period, notably by a number of high-ranking clerics:<sup>19</sup> The lack of matriculation examinations, inadequate guidance and counselling, a weak financial basis, the lack of methods for teaching language, and the failure to update the *fiqh* education, were topics frequently and fiercely debated. As a consequence, the grand ayatollahs founded a number of new schools in the 1960s and 1970s. *Madrasa Haqqani (Montazeriyya)*, which was established in 1964, *Dar al Tabligh* and *Madrasa Golpayegani*, established in 1974, and *Imam Amir al-Mu'minin* in 1975, are the most important. These schools were all set up to serve the needs unmet by the traditional system, accommodating a changing student body as well as a changing society. Disciplines such as sociology, psychology, English and spoken Arabic were introduced in a number of institutions, and emphasis was placed on recruiting well-trained and motivated students.<sup>20</sup> The 'modern' education thus included many of the disciplines commonly associated with Western academia, but

17 Hamid Dabashi, "Introduction" to Morteza Motahari's "The Fundamental Problem in the Clerical Establishment," in *The Most Learned of the Shi'a: The Institution of the Marja' Taqlid*, ed. Linda S. Walbridge (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 162 p.

18 Fischer mentions the following institutions: Faydiyya; Dar al-Shafa; Mehdi Goli Khan; Hojjatiyya; Razaviyya; Mu'miniyya; Mar'ashi; Mahdiyya; Jani Khan; Fatima, Vahid, Amoli; and S. Sadeq; Kirmani. See Fischer, *Iran*, p. 82.

19 See the translation of Morteza Motahari, "The Fundamental Problem in the Clerical Establishment," in Walbridge, *The Most Learned*, pp. 161–182. Ayatollah Motahari's article, published in 1962, can be seen as "a crucial document of the Shi'i clerical establishment trying to reinvent the medieval institutions of religious leadership (marja'iyat) in a revolutionary realignment with modernity" (Dabashi, 'Introduction', p. 163.)

20 Fischer, *Iran*, p. 81.

following an Islamic ideological rather than critical approach.<sup>21</sup>

Today, the *Haqqani*, the *al-Hady*, the *Ma'sumiyye* and the *Sadug madaris* are mentioned by informants as some of the most influential new *houze* schools in Qom. The *Haqqani* School, established by three grand ayatollahs, is known for having fostered famous activists for the revolution: "People who studied there entered the new revolutionary regime directly," a *Haqqani* cleric claimed.<sup>22</sup> Whereas Western media invariably characterize the school as one of the most militant *madaris*, it is simply ranged as one of the many conservative schools by Qom informants.<sup>23</sup>

### Number and social background of students

From a small town of approximately 200,000 inhabitants in 1975, Qom has become a town of around one million people today.<sup>24</sup> The influx of students of theology (*tollab*) has been a natural part of this growth. Turning to the first half of the twentieth century, available data suggest that Iran had about 5,000 *tollab* at the beginning of the Pahlavi regime. The government's anticlerical policy made the figures drop considerably during the reign of Reza Shah (1925–1941), but during the course of the next four decades, the number of religious students rose again. Compared with the general population growth, however, the number of *tollab* was still lagging behind: while the Persian population tripled between 1920 and 1979, enrollment in

21 The term 'ideological' here refers to the well known Islamic religio-political discourse in which Islam is presented as an all-encompassing ideology and guiding principle for society and culture.

22 Informant no. 41 (21-v-06).

23 See for example "Tehran Commemorates Americans' Death," in *Iran Report*, Number 17, 30 April 2001 (accessed 27 March 2008 from <http://www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/library/news/iran/2001/17-300401.html>): "The Haqqani School is noteworthy because it serves as a connection between so many individuals, but nowadays it also denotes an extremist school of thought advocating violence against one's enemies and strict clerical control over social and governmental affairs."

24 For 1975 numbers, see Fischer, *Iran*, p. 76; and for 2006 numbers, see "Qom", *Encyclopaedia Britannica Online*: <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9062128> (accessed 27 March 2008).

*madaris* only doubled. During the 1980s, on the other hand, the number of *tollab* again rose considerably. At this time, both public and private funding was channelled into religious educational development, making the city of Qom a centre for Islamic learning for the entire region.<sup>25</sup> A new influx thus started in the pre-revolutionary years and reached a peak during the decade after the Islamic revolution in 1979.

From around 6,500 *tollab* in 1975, the estimated number for 1990 was 30,000.<sup>26</sup> The registered number of *tollab* in today's Qom is not considered public information, and only known to a limited number of trusted persons at the Statistics Office (*Edare-ye Amar* or *Mo'avenat amar va barresi*) located in the Madrasa Dar al-Shifa-building in the centre of Qom. According to one Qom informant, this office meticulously registers the names, achievements and activities of all theology students.<sup>27</sup> Although these data remain inaccessible to outsiders, it seems plausible that the *tollab* population has risen considerably during the last decades—the veritable explosion of grand new institutional complexes is a visible indication of this. The director of international relations at Zahra University (*Jami'at al-Zahra*) informed us in 2006 that Qom has more than 200 registered study and research institutions, accommodating approximately 40,000 Iranians and at least 10,000 foreign *tollab*. These numbers correspond well with other estimates, such as those presented in 2004 by B. Samii, who quotes the administrative director of the *Houze-ye 'elmiye*, Hossein Boucheiri, as stating that there are 50,000 *tollab* in Qom originating from seventy different countries.<sup>28</sup> Exactly the same

25 Yarshater (ed.), *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, "Education," vol. 8, p. 185.

26 To compare, there were 1,800 students of theology in Mashhad, 1,000 in Isfahan, 500 in Tabriz, 250 in Shiraz, and 300 in Yazd in the year 1975 (Fischer, *Iran*, p. 77). For the 1990 estimates, see Yarshater, ed., "Education," *Encyclopaedia Iranica* 8, p. 185.

27 Informant no. 33.

28 Samii also refers to Boucheiri's statement that in the entire country there are around 3,000 seminaries. See Bill Samii, "Analysis: Iran's Theological Community Contends with Changing World," in *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 16 September 2004, <http://www.rferl.org/featuresarticle/2004/9/AC80CD24-24DB-438D-B007-27F04DB8AE7E.html> (accessed 27 March 2008). In 1989, Nikola B. Schahgaldian gave slightly different estimates, indicating that among Iran's 40,000 theology students, at least 25,000 were

numbers are given by Vali Nasr.<sup>29</sup>

According to Fischer, Qom's *houze* students of 1975 were largely sons of farmers or clerics (*ruhani*, collective term for cleric).<sup>30</sup> As reliable statistics for today's situation are unavailable, statements made by Qom informants are our only source for assuming that much of the same is valid today: A majority of Iranian *tollab* have village background; high-ranking clerics prefer to send their sons to good universities rather than to the *houze*, but *ruhani* families occupying more modest levels are still likely to encourage their children to study at the traditional institutions. Unemployment may also motivate young men (and women) to approach institutions where boarding and financial support is secured. Additionally,

Iranians in big business [outside the bazaar circles] are now familiar with the idea that it can be profitable to have a son with *houze* background. Insight into the Islamic rules and regulations is an asset, but [even] more important are the efforts to strengthen the links to powerful religious-political networks and to give a sign of political correctness.<sup>31</sup>

Although foreign students constituted only a small percentage of the student body in Qom in 1975, they represented many different parts of the Shi'a world. In order of numbers, they came from Iraq, Azerbaijan, Pakistan, Afghanistan, India, Lebanon, Tanzania, Turkey, Nigeria, Kashmir, and Indonesia.<sup>32</sup> New generations of students come from the same countries, although not in the same numerical order. The Iraqis and Afghans are now likely to constitute a more significant percentage of the total student body, and active recruitment of students from Africa and South Asia as well as from Europe and Central Asia is also taking place.<sup>33</sup>

living in Qom. See Nikola B. Schahgaldian, *The Clerical Establishment in Iran* (Santa Monica, California: The Rand Corporation, 1989), p. 23.

29 Vali Nasr, *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future*. (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 2006), p. 217.

30 Fischer, *Iran*, p. 78.

31 Informant no. 33.

32 Fischer, *Iran*, p. 78.

33 An Afghan alumnus from *Madrasa Faydiyya* claimed that more than 10,000

The growth in number of Iranian *tollab* in the country as a whole must of course be seen in relation to Iran's growing population, as well as to the general increase in the number of students involved in other fields of study. In 2002 there were more than one million students enrolled in Iranian universities altogether,<sup>34</sup> and compared to this, 50,000 *tollab* in Qom may seem rather modest. In this context, it is rather the influence of Qom graduates in society—on social, cultural and political affairs—that needs to be explored.<sup>35</sup>

Afghan students are pursuing their studies in Qom today (Conversation, 08.ii.08). The numbers may be exaggerated, but considering the number of Afghan refugees who are Shi'a in Iran, it seems likely that a number of them find their way to religious institutions, the more so as most Iranian universities are closed to them. Many of the foreign students are organized according to language, home town and ideology: "Apart from various cities in Iran, clerical students of Qom seminaries hail from various countries including Arab states, Pakistan and Afghanistan ... Most clerical students have formed assemblies which are named after their respective cities ... Such assemblies play two important roles: firstly they bring other clerics who come from the same city under their control and, secondly, they bring clerical students to support the Islamic government and Supreme Leader Khamenei in various ways." See *The Echo of Iran*, no. 216 (1. Dec. 2007–15. Jan. 2008), p. 18.

34 Cole, *Sacred Space*, p. 206.

35 According to J.P. Digard, B. Hourcade and Y. Richard, eds., *L'Iran au XXe Siècle*, (Paris: Fayard, 1996), p. 13, 15 per cent of the Iranian population are Sunni; and according to Nikki R. Keddie, *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006), p. 332, 9 per cent are Sunni. In this context it could be noted that Iranian Sunni Muslims have no comparable *madaris* or Islamic research centres. Their only option to study theology is at the section for jurisprudence in the Faculty of Theology at Tehran University, where the Shafi'i *madhhab* (one of the four Sunni schools of law) is taught. Consequently, Sunni students go to countries like Saudi Arabia and Pakistan to study theology. The cleric who gave us this information underlined that he thought it better for the state to establish Sunni *madaris* within Iran, rather than having students indoctrinated at *madaris* in Saudi Arabia and Pakistan with an ideology that could pose a security risk for Iran. See also Wilfried Buchta: *Die iranische Schia und die islamische Einheit, 1979–1996* (Hamburg: Deutsches Orient-Institut, 1997), 171ff.

most influential. There are differences between some [Iranian] provinces. In Qom, it is Sistani. People have different opinions. But Sistani is great, and his influence covers the whole world.<sup>41</sup>

Ayatollah Ali Sistani, of Iranian origin but based in the Iraqi city of Najaf, is named as the most popular *marja'* by our Qom informants. He is deeply involved in cultural life (according to his representative he even reads novels) and has established study programmes, libraries and schools all over the world. Qom is no exception. In the years following the fall of Saddam Husain (2003), Sistani has set up a great number of institutions, and according to his powerful representative (*nemayande*), Sayyed Javad Shahrastani, twenty-seven of these are based in Qom alone.<sup>42</sup> Shahrastani carefully chose his words when asked to explain Sistani's popularity: "You have to ask the people. One possibility is that Sistani is a religious man who distances himself from political activities. And he is a divine person. All people in the world like Sistani."

Ayatollah Sistani's presence in Iran is manifold, and among other things linked to major investments in infrastructures and student welfare. One cleric pointed out that:

Sistani supports important institutions in Iran, like pharmacies and sanitation ... He also supports religious students, making homes in the student cities—like Mahdiyye city [in Qom]—which is for religious students only. He influences the whole *houze* because his financial support is important. It is the same as Khamenei's support to the *houze*. Sistani supports the *houze* in two ways: by giving money [directly] to the *houze*, and through his other institutions. Some of his students also have high academic positions; Ayatollah Vahid Khorasani is influenced by Sistani, and Golpaygani too.<sup>43</sup>

41 Informant no. 24 (21-x-07).

42 Information given by Shahrastani and other informants. We visited five of Ayatollah Sistani's institutions in Qom: two libraries, a centre for Astronomy, The Islamic Data Bank, and Aal al-bayt Global Information Centre; we were also given the opportunity to conduct interviews with employees.

43 Informant no. 9 (27-x-07).

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**“From oligarchy to bureaucracy”<sup>36</sup>**

Traditionally, the notion of the *marja'-e taqlid* (lit. ‘source of imitation’—often rendered ‘Grand Ayatollah’) has been central for understanding the role of religion in society. “The *marja'* is at the centre of the *houze*—the whole system converges on him,” a Qom informant claimed. And indeed, most of Qom’s *madaris* were founded by *maraji'*; they are the scholars around whom most religious students gather, and are not only considered authorities in legal interpretations, but also function as providers of stipends and practical support. Both students and teachers are active in promoting their *marja'*, and a Qom cleric pointed out that:

The religious schools in Qom and other cities exercise massive propaganda to support certain *maraji'*, in the villages, cities and in other countries. The students play an important role in this. If an influential student of one [particular] *marja'* goes to Afghanistan, all the Afghan Shi'ites may start to support this *marja'*. We have two kinds of *tabligh* (propagation; proselytising; mission): the moral and religious propagation, [the teaching of] history, *tafsir*, and *akhlaq* is one kind of *tabligh*. Another kind of *tabligh* is for the *marja'*, by publishing and disseminating his books and distributing them among Shi'ites, both the educated and uneducated; for example to promote his *fiqh* view points on *zakat*. These students and the message they convey can be in conflict with Iranian politics.<sup>37</sup>

These statements reflect both the traditional *tabligh* activities of the *marja'* and a possible conflict not only with Iranian politics at large, but with the official policy of *tabligh* in particular. Today, Iran’s Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei promotes *tabligh* as an independent discipline at the *houze*, and the *houze* activities are “themselves geared, at least in part, towards proselytizing ends”.<sup>38</sup>

36 In Persian: ‘Az Nokhbe-garayi ta Divan-salari’, title of an article on the traditional *houze* by Mudaressi (see above).

37 Informant no. 9 (27-x-07).

38 Muhammad Qasim Zaman, “Epilogue: Competing Conceptions of Religious Education,” in *Schooling Islam: The Culture and Politics of Modern Muslim*

In 1975, the following six *maraji'* dominated the *houze* scenery, both as scholars and as founders of schools: Ayatollah Khu'i and Khomeini in Najaf, Golpaygani, Shari'atmadari and Mar'ashi-Najafi in Qom, and finally Khunsari in Tehran.<sup>39</sup> Today, the number of *maraji'* is considerably larger—according to one informant, at least seventeen. He provided us with a list of names, and spontaneously classified the *maraji'* as being either “governmental” or “non-governmental”, which indicates how he and many fellow Iranians understand the relationship between the *marja'* and Iranian political authorities.<sup>40</sup> In the words of another Qom scholar, we are urged to:

...separate between those [*maraji'*] who are more influential in religious matters, and those who are more influential in politics. The latter is Khamenei. I think in religious matters, Sistani is the

*Education*, ed. Robert Hefner and Muhammad Qasim Zaman (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), pp. 251-52. Iranian authorities have strongly invested in religious propaganda and propagation (*tabligh*), and a number of *tabligh* institutions were established after 1979. Two (of the most important) are based in Tehran, two in Qom. *Daftar-e tablighat-e eslami* in Qom has a direct link to the *houze*, and *Markaz-e jahani-ye 'olum-e eslami* is based at the *Madrassa* Imam Khomeini where foreign students are studying. *Sazman-e ertebatat eslami*, a governmental institution linked to the Ministry of Cultural Affairs, has its centre in Tehran, and specializes in propagation abroad; *Sazman-e tablighat-e eslami*, headed by Ayatollah Sobhani, disseminates the message within Iran and has its offices in every Iranian city. For more on Iranian *tabligh* activities abroad, see also Christoph Marcinkowski, “Aspects of Shi'ism in Contemporary Southeast Asia,” *The Muslim World* 98 (Jan. 2008): 36–71; and Roschanack Shaery-Eisenlohr, “Iran, the Vatican of Shi'ism?” *Middle East Report*, No. 233 (Winter 2004), pp. 40–43.

39 Fischer, *Iran*, p. 88.

40 The “non-governmental *maraji'*” mentioned were Hossein Ali Montazeri, Ali Sistani (in Najaf), Vahid Khorasani, Yosuf Sane'i, Musa Shobari Zanjani, Mohammad Sadeq Ruhani, Mohammad Ali Gerami, Abdolkarim Musavi Ardabili, Mohammad Sadeghi Tehrani, Mohammad Hosein Fazlollah, and Mohammad Hosein Shahrudi. “Governmental *maraji'*” are the Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei; Mohammad Taqi Behjat; Naser Makarem Shirazi, Safi Golpaygani and Hosein Nuri Hamadani. The informant also added that “only Ayatollah Montazeri has expressed a clear and unambiguous critique of the regime.” The system of appointing a *marja'* is, however, quite flexible, and there are a number of persons who claim the title and who also may have small circles of followers.

most influential. There are differences between some [Iranian] provinces. In Qom, it is Sistani. People have different opinions. But Sistani is great, and his influence covers the whole world.<sup>41</sup>

Ayatollah Ali Sistani, of Iranian origin but based in the Iraqi city of Najaf, is named as the most popular *marja'* by our Qom informants. He is deeply involved in cultural life (according to his representative he even reads novels) and has established study programmes, libraries and schools all over the world. Qom is no exception. In the years following the fall of Saddam Husain (2003), Sistani has set up a great number of institutions, and according to his powerful representative (*nemayande*), Sayyed Javad Shahrastani, twenty-seven of these are based in Qom alone.<sup>42</sup> Shahrastani carefully chose his words when asked to explain Sistani's popularity: "You have to ask the people. One possibility is that Sistani is a religious man who distances himself from political activities. And he is a divine person. All people in the world like Sistani."

Ayatollah Sistani's presence in Iran is manifold, and among other things linked to major investments in infrastructures and student welfare. One cleric pointed out that:

Sistani supports important institutions in Iran, like pharmacies and sanitation ... He also supports religious students, making homes in the student cities—like Mahdiyye city [in Qom]—which is for religious students only. He influences the whole *houze* because his financial support is important. It is the same as Khamenei's support to the *houze*. Sistani supports the *houze* in two ways: by giving money [directly] to the *houze*, and through his other institutions. Some of his students also have high academic positions; Ayatollah Vahid Khorasani is influenced by Sistani, and Golpaygani too.<sup>43</sup>

41 Informant no. 24 (21-x-07).

42 Information given by Shahrastani and other informants. We visited five of Ayatollah Sistani's institutions in Qom: two libraries, a centre for Astronomy, The Islamic Data Bank, and Aal al-bayt Global Information Centre; we were also given the opportunity to conduct interviews with employees.

43 Informant no. 9 (27-x-07).

The funding of each *madrassa* has largely come from the *sahm-e imam*—the ‘imam’s part’, meaning half of the *khums*. The faithful usually pays his *khums* directly to his or her selected *marja’*, and according to one informant:

Every *marja’* has an office, so when I want to pay the *khums*, I go to the office of my *marja’*, Ayatollah Behjat; I go to one of his secretaries, and say that I want to pay, and they give me a receipt. Then they give the money to the ayatollah. I don’t know how many people who do this, but maybe 50-60 per cent. In the bazaar most people believe that if they don’t pay their *khums*, maybe something will go wrong with the business, the *baraka* (blessing) will leave them, and they will not get more miracles from God.<sup>44</sup>

Both students and clerics benefit from this system, as the *marja’*’s secretary comes to the school to distribute fixed amounts of money among students and clerics.

This is at least the traditional arrangement—a system that witnessed a number of changes during the 1990s. The decade became a turning point for the role of the *marja’* in the administration and to some extent also the funding of the Qom seminaries. The Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, had emphasized the need for a fundamental reform in the seminary structure and educational programmes, and after a visit to Qom in 1995, a number of adjustments were introduced.<sup>45</sup> The Management Council of the Seminaries (*shura-ye modiriyat-e houze-ye ‘elmiye-ye Qom*), was the main focus. It was renamed the Management Centre of the Seminaries (*markaz-e modiriyat-e houze-ye ‘elmiye*), and directly placed under the leadership of the High Council of the Qom Houze (*Shura-ye ‘ali-ye houze-ye ‘elmiye-ye Qom*), in which all members are approved by the Supreme Leader.<sup>46</sup> The latter council is among other things responsible for appointing the administrative head of the *houze* system

44 Informant no. 40 (18-x-07).

45 Mehdi Khalaji, *The Last Marja’: Sistani and the end of Traditional Religious Authority in Shiism*, *Policy Focus* 59 (Washington: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2006), p. 28; and Informant no. 33.

46 Islamic Development Organization, <http://www.ido.ir/a.aspx?a=1385051409> (accessed 4 February 2008).

(*modir-e markaz-e modiriyat*), who in turn is responsible for selecting the leaders of each particular *madrassa*.<sup>47</sup>

In the writings of Mehdi Khalaji, the changes that were introduced in the 1990s were both bureaucratic and political, and the economic balance of the *houze* came into absolute favour of the Supreme Leader.<sup>48</sup> As each *marja'* distributes monthly payments to his own students according to his income and how much he receives in *khums* from followers, it is now the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, who tops the list. He is able to distribute more generous funding than other *maraji'*, and is therefore the most influential *marja'* in the Qom *houze*. According to Khalaji these changes have transformed the *houze* from a "previously amorphous and unstructured seminary into a manageable center ... ." <sup>49</sup> The web pages of the International Center for Islamic Studies in Qom may be interpreted as support for Khalaji's argument. According to its own presentation, "The center's management system was a traditional one until 1993, during which Ayatollah Khamenei designated the center's president, with whom the management system was organized, and the center from then on is supervised by the office of the Supreme Leader himself." The board is headed by "the leader of Islamic revolution," who is also responsible for selecting the Centre's president as well as four of the board members.<sup>50</sup>

Khalaji strongly argues that the *maraji'* have lost much of their previous authority over the *houze*. There are, however, a number of clerics who argue differently, and maintain that the *marja'* still plays an instrumental role in the seminaries. According to these sources, the Council is mainly an administrative unit, taking care of matters outside the interest of the *maraji'*.<sup>51</sup> One cleric asserted that: "When you have a scientific community like the *houze*, it is understood that the most knowledgeable should be the leader of the *houze*. The people who obtain this recognition ... become *maraji'*, and everyone tries to support them. It is the kind of leadership that comes from the grass

47 The administrative leader of the High Council today is Hossein Boucheiri.

48 Khalaji, *The Last Marja'*, p. 29. Khalaji's report was published by the neo-conservative think tank, Washington Institute for Near Eastern Policy.

49 Ibid, p. 30.

50 "International Center for Islamic Studies, Qum, Iran," <http://www.imamreza.net/eng/imamreza.php?print=6705> (accessed 29 February 2008).

51 Informants no. 9 (27-x-07) and 38 (20-x-07).

roots.”<sup>52</sup> Grand Ayatollah Sistani’s representative, Shahrastani, underlined that the High Council of the *Houze* in Qom (*shura-ye modiriyat-e houze*) was established as a result of the expansion of the *houze* and the huge influx of students in the aftermath of the revolution “...to make more order, and to give structure to the system.”<sup>53</sup>

With the establishment of an Islamic republic based on the principle of *velayat-e faqih*—the rule of the jurispudent—the content of what was taught in the Islamic seminaries became a direct concern for the national government. One of Shahrastani’s employees in Qom maintained, however, that the *houze* has its own system, and that it does not belong to the state as such. He nevertheless underlined that “because the state is now Islamic, the *houze* is the official voice of the state (*al-natiq al-rasmi*), supporting the *velayat-e faqih*. The state consults the *houze*—it is the think tank of the state.”<sup>54</sup> In addition, he claimed that “the *houze* sends its students around the country and abroad to spread the religion and propagate for the policies of the state”.<sup>55</sup>

The *marja’* institution (*marja’iyat*) is, of course, still debated in Qom, and the current situation was summed up by a Qom professor who stated that: “*Maraji’* who are not supported by the government have increased their popularity.”<sup>56</sup> Whatever Ayatollah Sistani’s position towards the Iranian government’s interpretation of *velayat-e faqih* might be, it seems plausible that his large following in Qom is linked among other things to the conviction that he does *not* support the idea of the ruling jurispudent.<sup>57</sup> As one informant explained,

52 Informant no. 38 (20-x-07).

53 Shahrastani (24-x-07).

54 Informant no. 34 (22-x-07).

55 Informant no. 34 (22-x-07).

56 Informant no. 27 (18-x-07). For an outline of the debate on *velayat-e faqih*, see Keddie, *Modern Iran*, pp. 307–310; see also Saskia Gieling, “The *marja’iya* in Iran and the nomination of Khamenei in December 1994”, in *Middle Eastern Studies* 33, no. 4 (1997), pp. 777–787. See also Mariella Ourghi: “Shiite Criticism of the *Welayat-e faqih*”, *Asiatische Studien/Etudes Asiatiques* 59 (2005), pp. 831–44.

57 For a discussion on Sistani’s views on the concept and Iranian practice of *velayat-e faqih*, see Reidar Visser, *Sistani, the United States and Politics in Iraq: From Quietism to Machiavellianism?* (Oslo: NUPI, 2006), pp. 13–15; for Kalaji’s objections to certain aspects of Visser’s interpretation, see Khalaji, *The*

“Persons like Sistani do not accept the system that we have—the system that Imam Khomeini accepted and that Khamenei now accepts—Sistani and some other *maraji*‘ think differently”.<sup>58</sup>

### Something old, something new

Qom’s importance as a centre for Islamic learning no longer bases itself on the classical Islamic *madaris* alone. As mentioned earlier, there may be more than 200 registered Islamic study and research institutions in Qom today.<sup>59</sup> There is a private and a governmental sector, and the differences between new universities and old *madaris* are considerable when it comes to both curriculum and teaching. The *houze* has thus received competition from a number of educational institutions—some of which are emancipated from the *houze* itself, some that are closely affiliated with it and others which have largely emerged as independent and different from it. In many cases the new institutions may just as well be understood as modern extensions of the *houze*, as many of them are strongly connected to the seminaries and have scholars who teach at both places.

The establishment of an Islamic republic speeded up the process of educational reform. This included efforts to Islamize or “rejuvenate” modern science. The aim was to uproot what was seen as “colonial education,” as explained by Ayatollah Khomeini: “Our universities are foreign dependent. Our universities are of the colonial type. Our university students are Westoxicated ... The university must become Islamic.”<sup>60</sup>

After the Cultural Revolution which hit Iranian universities at the beginning of the 1980s, “the Islamic rejuvenation of the universities” was to include a review of the social sciences, such as economics,

*Last Marja*‘, p. 15–16.

58 Informant no. 43 (22-x-07).

59 Informant no. 38.

60 Cited in Sohrab Behdad, “Islamization of Economics in Iranian Universities,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 27, no. 2 (May 1995), p. 194. (On “Westoxication,” cf. Brad Hanson: “The ‘Westoxication’ of Iran: Depictions and Reactions of Behrangi, Al-e Ahmad, and Shari’ati,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 15 (1983), pp. 1–23.

sociology, law, political science and psychology.<sup>61</sup> Ayatollah Muhammad Taqi Mesbah Yazdi is identified by several informants as being instrumental in this work. Among other things, he has headed the Centre for Cooperation of Seminaries and Universities (*Daftar-e hamkari-ye houze va daneshgah*), an institution which was to encourage cooperation between the *houze* and the universities.

Although controversial in many circles, Mesbah Yazdi was frequently referred to by informants as one of the most influential clerics of Qom. He is not a *marja'*, but nevertheless retains a powerful position through his political skills and his role in establishing academic learning centres. The Imam Khomeini Institute for Education and Research is probably the most important of these.<sup>62</sup> Although an institute in its own right, it is closely affiliated with the *houze*; only male *tollab* are admitted, and as one of the professors underlined, all students

...must have done at least five to six years of *houze*. The institute puts as a condition that our students also study at the *houze* at the same time. They study at *houze* in the morning and at the institute in the afternoon. This is a requirement. The student must continue his traditional studies, and these studies must go on in parallel. Our curriculum is different from most curricula. Here, our courses have additions to what is taught in other universities. ... Our institute is thus very much in coordination with the *houze*, our deputy of research is a member of the high council of the *houze*. We are not founded by the *houze*, we do not need approval from them, but we have their blessing. Our institute wanted to give accredited degrees to the students, so all our studies are finally approved by the ministry of higher education. What we offer is recognized by the *houze* and also by the ministry. Our certificates

61 See *ibid.*, p. 194.

62 Yazdi has also had a central position at the Haqqani School, and according to Informant no. 21, he is also behind the Dar-e Haqq Institute, which was established prior to the revolution, as well as Dar-e 'Olum. On Mesbah-Yazdi's view of the *velayat-e faqih* see Katajun Amirpur, "A Doctrine in the Making? Velayat-e Faqih in Post-Revolutionary Iran," in *Speaking for Islam. Religious Authority in Muslim Societies*, ed. Gudrun Krämer and Sabine Schmidtke (Leiden: Brill, 2006), pp. 218–40, esp. 228ff.

are signed by Mezbah Yazdi. We are not part of a government establishment, like universities are, but we are something in the middle—well connected with *houze*, but also independent. We may receive funds from the government, but they don't dictate the way we work.<sup>63</sup>

The institute aims at giving the student a thorough basis in Islamic studies before plunging into the topics of humanities and other, often Western-based sciences. Christianity and Western philosophy are among the courses taught here, and a number of trusted and talented students are sent abroad to Western universities to complete their studies. The main objective is to educate people for governmental and state related jobs, as well as for propagation of Islam:

Our specialty is to provide the seminary students with subjects that were missing there [in the *houze* system]. Whoever joins the institute first undergoes a more general training. This includes Islamic philosophy, Koranic teachings, English language, and some other issues, like logic, but mostly the first three. Then they choose one of twelve departments, like the department of religious studies, economics, psychology or English. ... But if you ask what the most popular subject is, it is law studies. At this institute, the students focus on constitutional law and the Jafari law as it is applied by the Iranian state. They can specialize in constitutional law or international law for example. Traditional *fiqh* studies have a different orientation.<sup>64</sup>

Whereas a professor at the Baqer al-Ulum University argued that it was representatives of the *houze* itself that strongly felt the need for introducing modern methods and sciences to their students,<sup>65</sup> a professor at the Research Centre for Houze and University Studies (*Markaz-e pazhuhesh-e houze va daneshgah*) explained that the establishment of his workplace was a direct product of the new Islamic state: "This institute is a result of the revolution. After a while

63 Informant no. 38 (20-x-07).

64 Informant no. 38 (20-x-07).

65 Informant no. 28 (22-x-07).

we realized that the new system needed a bridge between the *houze* and the university.”<sup>66</sup> A professor at the centre explained that the main challenges revolve around combining academic theories with religious values:

I have studied law, and in my field of studies, the challenges between Islam and the West are mainly that the West pays more attention to material issues. We believe in Judgement Day, and therefore man has to observe Islamic regulations and moral values. ... In all our regulations and enactments we pay attention to God and Islam. ... In the West the authorities pay attention to the material needs of society.<sup>67</sup>

Although the process of reforming education and Islamizing the modern sciences had started some time before the revolution, the establishment of the Islamic government can clearly be seen as a major pull factor for the founding of new institutions. According to informants, there was a need for people with religious knowledge to fill positions within state bureaucracy and administration:

This university [Baqer al-Ulum] and others have been established to elevate the knowledge of the religious students and make them familiar with the needs of the Islamic society, and to give them some new methods—new knowledge about the modern sciences. In the long term to educate and train people so that they can act later on as officials of the state, become the president of the Islamic assembly, the president of the university, etc. We need different people to act in the different layers of government. In the traditional system they are not able to do so.<sup>68</sup>

The former head of the judicial system in Iran, Ayatollah Mousavi Ardabili, established the Mofid University in 1989.<sup>69</sup> The university is private, but like all Iranian learning institutions, it follows the

66 Informant no. 12 (25-x-07).

67 Informant no. 12 (25-x-07).

68 Informant no. 12 (25-x-07).

69 Mofid University, brochure published by Public Relations and International affairs, 2005, p. 1.

governmental guidelines developed by the Ministry for higher education. According to one of its professors, it was established in order to provide "a link between the *houze* and the modern university".<sup>70</sup> This and the other institutes mentioned are often based on the same fundamentals of introducing the *houze* student to modern sciences, but clearly differ with reference to how tight their bonds to the *houze* are. They require varying levels of *houze* education in order to accept students for modern studies at the B.A., M.A. and Ph.D. levels, ranging from Mofid University which has moved away from requiring *houze* studies, to the *Pazhuhesh-e houze va daneshgah* which demands that their students and researchers reach the *kharij* level of *houze* prior to starting a modern degree study.<sup>71</sup>

At the Baqer al-Ulum, they ask the student to document that he or she has reached the *sath* level in their *houze* studies prior to starting work to obtain academic degrees: "Only those who have graduated from a certain level of the *houze* can study at this university. All our students, both male and female, are religious students. ... Those who want to study M.A. here should have finished the *sath*."<sup>72</sup> The requirement of documentation has pushed the *houze* into commencing a new practice of issuing certificates confirming the students' institutional belonging, an entirely new development in a system based on informal (and paperless) recognition from fellow students and scholars. The students of Baqer al-Ulum University are thus checked for their *houze* knowledge prior to starting their academic degree studies. When matriculated, on the other hand, they are encouraged to bring their *houze* studies to a temporary halt:

If they [the students] want to study seriously in the university, maybe they cannot be as active ... in the *houze*, because one cannot study the M.A. and Ph.D. at the same time as being a serious *houze* student. So in reality, for some time the students' *houze* studies will be affected. We think that the students already have enough knowledge from the *houze* when they are admitted here, and they can compensate afterwards. We think that when

70 Informant no. 23 (21-x-07).

71 Informants no. 43 (22-x-07); 38 (20-x-07) and 12 (25-x-07), accordingly.

72 Informant no. 28 (22-x-07).

they are admitted here, they should be devoted to the M.A. and Ph.D.<sup>73</sup>

Even though the students are encouraged to take a break from their *houze* studies, our informant believed that many students retain their seminary contacts, particularly the males. While the Baqer al-Ulum university is only open to female students in the morning, the male students have ample opportunities to continue their studies with high-ranking scholars in the *houze* before noon.

Regardless of the changes that have taken place in the educational system, the *houze* itself remains true to the traditional system of face-to-face education, with students gathering around the scholars of their choice. This is at least what the representative of Grand Ayatollah Sistani in Qom, Javad Shahrastani, claims. He acknowledged that some universities, like Mofid, the Imam Khomeini Institute and Baqer al-Ulum, have combined new and old ways of learning, but maintained that this had not affected the *houze*.<sup>74</sup> However, it is evident that the huge increase in the number of students as well as the immense institutional development that has amalgamated the 'traditional' with the 'modern' has had some impact on the *houze* as well. As shown above, there have been amendments with reference to administration and supervision of the seminaries, as well as with the number of students and scholars relating to both old and new systems. Therefore, many of these new institutions are not seen as alternatives to the *houze*, but rather as extensions meeting the needs of society.

Students who choose to fulfil their *houze* education without supplementing it with academic degrees have different work options than those who study at the new 'combination institutes'. *Houze* students of some talent may take up positions and become researchers, writers, teachers or preachers at important mosques. "Bad students end up as ordinary preachers," one informant claimed.<sup>75</sup> Students who combine the *houze* education with modern science, on the other hand, have wider options: They may become employees within the state

73 Informant no. 28 (22-x-07).

74 Shahrastani (24-x-07).

75 Informant no. 33.

apparatus, work in national teaching institutions, or in the media.<sup>76</sup> Law is invariably mentioned as the most job-giving study subject: "Maybe some students have theology as a first choice, but because people consider employment [opportunities], it is law that becomes the first choice."<sup>77</sup>

### The Sisters

Little academic work has been done on *madaris* for women, and Iran is no exception.<sup>78</sup> Yet a few general points seem well established: The old *madrasa* system excluded women, and scholars were only able to teach girls in informal settings, such as through study circles in mosques and private homes.<sup>79</sup> Some ulama taught their daughters and female relatives, and the most capable of these occasionally carried the knowledge on to other students, women as well as men.<sup>80</sup> In the 1960s, Qom had at least one highly respected female scholar who was institutionally independent, namely Banu Amin Isfahani (d. 1977).<sup>81</sup> Today, Mrs. Monir Gorji and Mrs. Sefati seem to be the most re-

76 Informants no. 41 (21-v-06); 28 (22-x-07); and 21 (22-v-06).

77 Informant no. 8 (18-x-07).

78 See Mareike Jule Winkelmann, *From behind the Curtain: A Study of a Girls' Madrasa in India* (ISIM dissertation, Amsterdam University, 2005), p. 20 and Mir-Hosseini, *Islam and Gender*, p. 17. For a short account of the Hizbullah women's seminary in Lebanon, see Abisaab, "The Cleric," in *Distant Relations*, ed. H. E. Chehabi, pp. 252–254. See also Mariam Abou Zahab, "Madrasas de femmes entre Pakistan et Qom," in Mervin, *Les Mondes Chiïtes*, pp. 287–299.

79 Berkely, "Women and Islamic," p. 146; See also Joyce Wiley, "Alima bint al-Huda: Women's Advocate," in Walbridge, *The Most Learned*, p. 152.

80 The French-Iranian sociologist, Ehsan Naraghi, told one of the authors (Vogt) that his grandmother was counselling and instructing people in her home in Kashan; personal communication, Paris 1998. See also Ehsan Naraghi, *Enseignement et Changement Sociaux en Iran du VIIe au XXe Siècle* (Paris: Éditions de la Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, 1992), pp. vii–xi.

81 Informant no. 1 (21-x-07). See also Fischer, *Iran*, p. 163: Banu Amin was informally called a mojtahede, and claimed to have *ijaza* (license) from Ayatollah Mar'ashi-Najafi. Her book *Kanz al-irfan* served as a textbook at courses in *houze* on rules of conduct and law in the Qur'an. Fischer, *Iran*, p. 250.

nowned female clerics, the former being one of the founders of Zahra University.<sup>82</sup>

The ideological foundation for establishing *madaris* for women was laid in the 1960s and 1970s, following Ayatollah Motahhari's line of ideas. Published five years prior to the revolution, his book *The System of Women's Rights in Islam (nezam-e hoquq-e zan dar islam)*, is still valuable for understanding central aspects of the Islamic Republic's official view on women's rights and duties today.<sup>83</sup> In these pre-revolutionary years, a new trend emerged: Studying Islam was considered as preparation for the needs of a future Islamic state. An Islamic society required knowledgeable mothers, female preachers and missionaries, and to accommodate this, *madaris* for girls had to be established. *Dar al-tabligh* built a school for girls in 1973, and two years later 150 female students communicated with their male teachers through a curtain;<sup>84</sup> *Dar al-shifa* established the Centre for Female Students (*Markaz motala'at-e zanan*); and as Fischer notes, even the Haqqani School had a girls' *madrassa* associated with it, which in 1975 had thirty students and five female teachers.<sup>85</sup> Ever since these early developments, the recruitment of sisters (*khaharan*) to Islamic education has accelerated in an unprecedented way. According to the official website of the *Houze 'elmiye-ye khaharan*, Iran had more than

82 Mrs. Gorji was mentioned by several informants in Qom; for Gorji's work and positions see Mir-Hosseini, *Islam and Gender*, p. 84. Mrs. Sefati was mentioned as a respected religious teacher; she has her own website where she names herself "Banu mojtahede Sefati". Her claim to be a mojtahede seems to be accepted by a number of people; she has female students and teaches at Zahra University (informant no. 33). Mrs. Sefati's website: <http://www.sefaty.net>.

83 See Mir-Hosseini, *Islam and Gender*, p. 25: "Motahhari's arguments remain the most eloquent and refined among those who hold the concept of gender equality to be contrary to the shari'a. ... The bulk of the vast post-revolutionary literature on women, especially that produced by the official Islamic Propaganda Organization, not only follows Motahhari but reproduces his arguments." Motahhari's book was the summing up of his numerous lectures in the 1960s, and his ideas were widely disseminated.

84 Fischer, *Iran*, p. 83.

85 Fischer, *Iran*, p. 83; for developments in the Sunni world, see for example Azyumardi Azra, Dina Afrinaty, and Robert Hefner, "Pesantren and Madrasa: Muslim Schools and National Ideals in Indonesia," in Hefner and Zaman (eds.), *Schooling Islam*, p. 180-181.

100 such schools in 2007,<sup>86</sup> all of them working under the authority and direct control of the administrative centre for the *Houze* (*Markaz-e modiriyat-e houze-ye 'elmiye*) in Qom.<sup>87</sup>

Doctor E. is one of an increasing number of women who have chosen Qom for religious studies. She has finished a Ph.D. degree abroad, and argues that women who want to study in order to find work are better off going to a modern university. This will give the student an opportunity to be employed in schools and official offices, in the army or in the media. "Only if you don't have an idea about work, should you go to *houze*," she says.<sup>88</sup> And this is what a number of women are doing. According to a professor at the Baqer al-Ulum institute, women are now invited to study Islam in order to become clerical leaders, lecturers in the universities, as well as propagators: "I was for some time a leader of a *hajj* (pilgrimage) caravan, and [observed that] before there were just a few female leaders, but now they try to invite more and more female clerics to handle the affairs of the women," the professor tells.<sup>89</sup>

A brochure published by Zahra University, the most important Islamic learning institution for women in Qom, states that:

Women play a unique and vital role in society. The late Imam Khomeini, the founder of the Islamic Republic of Iran, maintained that women form half of our society and they are the trainers of the other half. So important is the education of women that Jami'at al-Zahra was established in 1984 by the sanction of Imam Khomeini to provide the highest quality of learning and education solely for Muslim women.<sup>90</sup>

86 <http://www.whc.ir/>; <http://womenhc.com/>.

87 One informant pointed out that all schools for women are strictly controlled by the *Markaz-e modiriat*. He argued that some of the schools for men, like *Madrassa Vahid Khorasani* and the *Madrassa Golpaygani*, have some degree of independence when it comes to setting up a curriculum—a privilege that cannot be found within women's *madaris* (informant no. 33).

88 Informant no. 8 (18-x-07).

89 Informant no. 28 (22-x-07).

90 "Prospectus for full and part-time entry for overseas students 2006–2007," brochure (Qom: Deputy of International Affairs, Jami'at al-Zahra, 2006), p. 5 (not paginated). See also Mir-Hosseini, *Islam and Gender*, p. 17: "The College [Zahra University] had its origin in the activities of a small group of women in

Zahra University regards itself as “the largest Islamic university and seminary dedicated to education for women from all over the world.”<sup>91</sup> The school is governed by a board of trustees, which includes *houze* scholars and the Director General of the *Houze* in Qom. The University has a number of branches around the country, and at the Qom department, there are approximately 5,000 students (in 2006), 900 of whom are foreign nationals from 40 different countries<sup>92</sup>—“from China to Canada, from the U.S.A. to Argentina.”<sup>93</sup>

The Department for International Affairs was established in 1986, following increasing interest from women around the world,<sup>94</sup> and as one of the (male) directors explained:

...after the revolution there was great interest and also many people from outside Iran wanted to study here, so Khomeini decided to have a unified institution for women. Many people thought it was too ambitious, but the fact was that it was not enough. The director and board then decided to find a much bigger [plot of] land. We moved to this new campus two and a half years ago, and now we have 2,000 places in the boarding school. There is one dormitory, but two more will be built—to house 7,000 people. We have better facilities than for men even—the best in Qom.<sup>95</sup>

The director also underlined that the students are not taught to “become anything in particular.” Piety, knowledge and sincerity are at the centre of attention, and the institution aims at giving their graduates an opportunity to be “instrumental in delivering the universal message of mercy, justice and peace.”<sup>96</sup> The women are not

the 1960s who lobbied the Qom seminaries for teachers and courses in religious sciences. By the mid-1970s, the group and their classes became a conduit for religio-political awareness of the young generation of women who were increasingly drawn to Islam.”

91 “Prospectus”, p. 4.

92 Interview (21-v-06) and “Prospectus”, p. 4.

93 Interview (21-v-06).

94 “Prospectus”, p. 6

95 Interview (21-v-06).

96 “Prospectus”, p. 4.

particularly trained to become preachers, but every graduate is important, because she can influence her brothers, family, and children.<sup>97</sup> Nevertheless, the students are encouraged to be active in society: "Some write books, some start preaching, and others teach," we were told.<sup>98</sup> The important aim is to provide high quality Islamic learning, "helping them [the female students] to become knowledgeable individuals and educators in society."<sup>99</sup>

The *houze* students are in fact engaging in a number of activities, and a former student of Zahra University, now a university teacher in Qom, drew a vivid picture of the ritual and missionary contribution of female *houze* students:

Women are very interested in *tabligh*. The *houze* sends them out during Ramadan, gives them money and lets them practice *tabligh*. During particular times of the year, they spend their time in *jalasat* (lit. seatings, study circles). Now there are very good opportunities for women for doing this. Sometimes they go to the homes of people, for example during the days around Ashura and in Muharram. They recite some religious matters, and people repeat after them. They do not necessarily go to schools. The families sometimes give them money, and sometimes they may be part of a program. In Mashhad they have a special program, to which they invite people from the *houze*.<sup>100</sup>

A student with Western background at Zahra University told us that her studies were motivated by an urge to become familiar with her own religion: "I decided that I wanted to be a kind of Muslim who knew why I was a Muslim, and I thought the best place to get my answers would be in Qom." In Qom she has found friends from all over the world, from countries such as Tanzania, Pakistan, Kashmir, Indonesia and Malaysia.

The majority of the Zahra students come from Asia and the neighbouring countries in the region—such as Afghanistan, Pakistan

97 Interview (21-v-06).

98 Interview (21-v-06).

99 "Prospectus", p. 5.

100 Informant no. 8 (18-x-07).

and Iraq, but there are also students from Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Syria, and Lebanon. Some Arab countries have, however, been restrictive in letting their young travel to Iran: "In the past some of the governments were suspicious, because we are Shi'ite and they are Sunni," but according to the director at Zahra University this has changed in recent years.<sup>101</sup>

Zahra University takes good care of its 900 foreign students, 250 of whom are boarding students:

We pick them up at the airport, and we are like a family. We have women who are here, and they are like their mothers. Every single student is important. ... People are concerned about their daughters when they send them abroad. We have a good reputation. ... Iran is also a safe place. In Lebanon and Iraq you don't have security.<sup>102</sup>

In the dormitories the students seem to share everything. According to one Zahra student, six girls share a sleeping room, twelve share a reading room, and approximately thirty share a kitchen. They learn about Iranian language and culture, but live separately from their Iranian sisters: "Our dorms are separated and our classes are separated, because teachers talk more slowly to us. The Iranians can move faster in Arabic, because they have studied it at school. Their culture is different from ours. We try to live side by side, but mostly we are separated."<sup>103</sup>

There are many different options for the foreign student who enrolls at Zahra University. There are short courses stretching over weeks or months, and there are possibilities to stay for years on end. "Every course is different. Some come for just learning Farsi. We have also designed a one-year course. They learn six months' Farsi and after that they have basic Islamic studies. But our main course is five years. One year for studying Farsi and foundations (*usul*), and four years for the B.A."<sup>104</sup>

101 Interview (21-v-06).

102 Interview (21-v-06).

103 Informant no. 32 (24-x-07).

104 Interview (21-v-06).

The Western student introduced above is an M.A. student. She described her study program in the following words:

They put you into Farsi right away. After that there is a four years' obligatory program: two and half years' Arabic, history of the prophet and imams, theology, philosophy, and *usul al-fiqh*. After four years (eight terms) you can stay on for your M.A., and choose between *tashayyu'* (Shi'a-studies), *akhlaq*, or *tafsir*. I chose *tafsir*. ... In this term we study Mulla Sadra, al-Tusi, al-Bayad, Fakhr al-Razi, and Zamakshari. ... My class has 13–15 girls. In the other classes at the B.A. level there are between 15–20 students, so we get a lot of attention; we have both male and female teachers. ... This term I have seven units, and have to deliver seven papers. ... A lot of our students are students of Jawadi Amoli, and one is a student of *Rahbar* (the Supreme Leader). *Rahbar* has a circle of women, and these have the privilege to study directly with him. ... I have to study a lot. I am using money provided by the government, so I feel obliged to study. I left my family, my country, and feel I have to spend the time studying not to waste it. ... The *houze* is free; we don't pay, and we are given allowances—food and necessities—from the *houze*. We can get these allowances all the way to the mojtahed level.

Despite the sacrifices this student has made, being away from family, and the large efforts put into studies, she does not plan to look for a job after graduation:

I don't have to worry about income, because my future husband will have to provide for us both. I can do what I want. I like to travel, and I would like to see Palestine and Iraq and see firsthand what they are going through. I have time because I don't have to work. This is my future husband's responsibility.<sup>105</sup>

She adds that teaching in schools and universities is among the most popular job for women, "but anything they do to teach their children

105 Informant no. 32 (24-x-07).

right, that is important too.”<sup>106</sup>

This corresponds to the objectives of the Women’s Research Centre (*Daftar-e zanan*) in Qom. The centre was established in 1997 as part of the *houze*, and represents the first organized research institute for women in the holy city. The research staff has its education from the *houze*, and the institute’s aim is to explore what the Islamic teachings say about issues related to women.<sup>107</sup>

We want to find an Islamic basis for women and family. ... We have started researching, and we try to obtain the basic theories, but we have a problem, and that is the combination of modern theories and Islamic programs. We have modern methods and modern theories, but we want to create an Islamic approach. For example, we studied English books from European countries and America, and in these books it says that we should accept different types of families, for example unclear and abnormal families. ... We don’t believe in these families. We don’t accept them.<sup>108</sup>

The researcher explained that by ‘unclear’ and ‘abnormal’ families she meant lesbian marriages, cohabiting (but unmarried) couples and the like. She claimed that these families were both non-existent and unacceptable in Iran. As researchers in an Islamic institute they therefore have to develop their own theories, adequate for studying the Islamic family in accordance with the process of Islamic rejuvenation and reform.

As shown above, both Iranian and foreign women study in these schools, but little is known about the students’ social background. One Qom informant claimed that many of the Iranian *khaharan* come from villages and from *ruhani* families, thus sharing the same social background as their male colleagues. He added that some rich families in the big cities today also prefer to send their daughters to the *houze*. When asked why they choose religious schooling instead of secular, he explained that “families with daughters think that the *houze* is a

106 Informant no. 32 (24-x-07).

107 Informant no. 19 (21-x-07).

108 Informant no. 1 (21-x-07).

good and safe place, and that a girl with *houze* education will attract a good husband. Marriage is very important. Education is also considered very important in Iran."<sup>109</sup>

When it comes to the choice of courses, the duration, and level of study, on the other hand, our informants immediately pointed out differences between male and female students. A professor at the Baqer al-Ulum University confirmed that there is a gap between what is expected of women and men:

For the M.A., the second level of *houze* is enough. But the second level for male is different from the female. For male it is much higher. But the females are more serious and more motivated for religious studies than men. They are so dedicated and study so hard that in the future they will swallow up the men's part.<sup>110</sup>

Having entered the field of traditional *houze* education, women are nevertheless allowed to follow the same study path as men. This, at least, is the opinion of several of our informants in Qom, both male and female. However, the scholars differ when it comes to which clerical status a woman can achieve. Dr. E, who studied at Zahra University and has her Ph.D. from a European country, argues that:

As a woman you cannot become a mojtahed, because you need a following (*moqalledin*). Women can only be mojtaheds for themselves. It is very limited for women, maybe because the women that reach *kharij* level are very few. There is a long way to become a mojtahed, and the woman has family and children. I was very interested in reaching that level, but I got interrupted, so I haven't had the opportunity to continue.<sup>111</sup>

A professor of the Research Centre for Houze and University answers an unambiguous "yes" when asked if women can complete the level

109 Informant no. 33.

110 On the Lebanese *houze* for women, see Abisaab, "The Cleric," p. 253: "Their curriculum differs most from that of the men in that advanced legal studies are not open to them, even though a woman can in theory attain the rank of mojtaheda (but not that of marja')."

111 Informant no. 8 (18-x-07).

of *kharij* to become a mojtahed. When asked if they can have followers, which is generally regarded as a major requirement for utilizing the title of ayatollah, he is less certain: "There is a discussion among the *ulama* on this, and some believe that women can have followers. But they cannot become the leader of the country."<sup>112</sup>

There are certain limitations as to how far a female cleric can reach, and a researcher at the *Daftar-e zanan* institute concurs with the argument that it is possible for women to obtain the level of mojtahed, at least in theory. She is less convinced, however, that female scholars would be interested: "Any person who becomes a mojtahed has a big responsibility for society. And women see this responsibility as difficult for them [to handle]. The test is very difficult, and you must practice for many years. Society doesn't let us focus for so many years," she explained.<sup>113</sup>

### Segregating the genders

There are a number of different models for gender segregation of students in Qom, and according to the Research Centre for Houze and University, *Markaz pazhuhesh-e houze va daneshgah*, there are two separate views on this:

In our universities we have coeducation systems, but here [at the Centre] we have no female students. There is physical segregation. Coeducation is mostly criticized by Islamic thinkers, and also by some feminists. Some feminist thinkers believe that it is a disadvantage to have coeducation, as they believe that coeducation gives disadvantages to women, and that men get priority over women. But Islam also values coeducation. There is no priority of men over women in Islam, and in some cases coeducation can be good for the women.<sup>114</sup>

112 Informant no. 28 (22-x-07).

113 Informant no. 1 (21-x-07). Alima Bint al-Huda (1937–80), the sister of the Iraqi Ayatollah Baqir al-Sadr, announced herself as mojtaheda in a religious treatise she wrote before she was twenty years old; see Wiley, "Alima bint al-Huda", p. 149.

114 Informant no. 5 (25-x-07).

If there are two views on gender segregation among clerics, there is definitely more variation as to how the gender segregation is practiced in universities and study institutions in Qom. The norm for the *houze* is full segregation, with women and men at different institutions or in different buildings.<sup>115</sup> These rules are upheld in all situations: when we visited Qom in 2006, two scholars from the Haqqani School agreed to meet us and answer our questions. As women are not admitted at the *madrassa* itself, the meeting took place at a Qom hotel of their choice.

Another way to practice the rules of gender segregation is to split the day in two, and allow women to study in the morning and men in the afternoon. The latter is the model practiced at the Baqer al-ulum University. Exempted from this however is the Ph.D. level, at which men and women can be part of the same classes.<sup>116</sup> At Mofid University, men and women study together in the same classrooms. There is no compulsory segregation, but according to one of Mofid's lecturers, the girls often prefer to sit on one side of the room. "But they enter from the same doors and they talk with each other," he added.<sup>117</sup>

There are also study institutions where female and male students are kept apart by separate buildings on the same campus, as practiced among other places at Qom University. In the words of one of its heads: "We are close to the *houze*, and for this reason we try to separate women and men. In the small seminars we cannot always separate, but in the classes this is the rule. The faculty is one, but it has two branches, one for women and one for men."<sup>118</sup> When asked why they choose segregation, he explained that it is based on the Islamic teachings: "According to some understanding of Islam, this is best for the health of men and for the security of women. Some students oppose the system, and we have received complaints, but when they start studying here, they know that we have this policy."<sup>119</sup>

Talking to some of the female students and teachers of Qom University, we learned that the motivations for studying in a segre-

115 Informant no. 43.

116 Informant no. 28 (22-x-07).

117 Informant no. 43.

118 Informant no. 17 (23-x-07).

119 Informant no. 17 (23-x-07).

gated university could be mixed. According to one of the female lecturers, some parents choose to send their children to Qom University simply because it has a clear segregation policy. Other students have chosen to come there themselves, because they feel that it is safer and that they can focus more on studies.<sup>120</sup> A Ph.D. student claimed that statistics had proven that learning in a segregated environment gives better results: "Sometimes the students tell me that if they are with boys, the girls stand back and boys take over for them. With segregation you can develop a safer society," she concluded.<sup>121</sup>

Discussing segregation policies made us wonder how men and women got the chance to get to know each other in a segregated university, and we thus asked if they had any chance to meet after classes. The answer was explicit: "Yes, last year we had 200 weddings," one of the teachers said. "The students have a special centre where they can meet—where they register their names, family, and other details. And when they marry, they receive gifts from Ayatollah Khamenei, and the university makes a big wedding party."<sup>122</sup> The teacher added that the establishment of centres like this were encouraged by the Supreme Leader, and thus existed in many universities. They are called *Daftar-e zawaj daneshju'i*: "...they emphasize family, and want to encourage marriage. If you are a new student and want to marry, you register and say what kind of man [or wife] you want."<sup>123</sup>

## Conclusion

The 20th Century witnessed the establishment of Qom as a fast growing international centre of Shi'ite learning. Nearly three decades after the Islamic Revolution the city has strengthened its position in the competition with Najaf. A large number of theological institutions receive consistent and substantial support from the Iranian government, and the upheaval in Iraq (and other neighbouring states)

120 Informant no. 14 (23-x-07).

121 Informant no. 10 (23-x-07).

122 Teacher at Qom University.

123 Teacher at Qom University.



professional preachers, publications or the internet.

Iranian women constitute 60 per cent of the student population in Iran today, and this is without doubt a success for the state's politics of education.<sup>125</sup> Exact numbers are not available, but it seems beyond doubt that the percentage of the 'sisters' (female students of theology) is nowhere near the share found in the educational sector as a whole. The *houze* seminaries are still mainly open to male students only, and our data show some of the inconsistencies regarding the level of competence attainable for women. It is also clear that very few women study at the *kharij* level and their opportunities to obtain the title of *mojtahed* are debated. Women who wish to follow the traditional path of *houze* studies have in reality few places to choose among, although the opportunities are much wider today than they were a few decades ago.

An Islamic government will obviously have an impact on the institutions that provide religious education, and observers may easily recall Muhammad Qasim Zaman's pertinent remark that the question of Islamic education "reveals the contours of a debate that is as much about religious authority in contemporary Islam as it is about the nature and scope of Islamic learning."<sup>126</sup> A city that many saw as an oppositional hub to the Pahlavi regime has thus become a valuable resource for the Islamic government, in terms of ideological as well as academic production. The diversity of interpretation within Qom's Islamic seminaries and teaching institutions nevertheless remains.

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125 Cole, *Sacred Space*, p. 207.

126 Zaman, "Epilogue," in Hefner and Zaman (eds.), *Schooling Islam*, p. 242.

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