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# *Intellectual Discourse*

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# The Islamic Republic of Iran's Networking Diplomacy: The Role of Ahl-ul-Bayt World Assembly (ABWA)

**Wahabuddin Ra'ees\*** and **Abdol Moghst Bani Kamal\*\***

**Abstract:** The 1979 Iranian Revolution entailed establishing Iran's hegemony in the region and promotion of shi'ite doctrinal values in the Muslim world. The Iranian State under the leadership of Ayatullah Khomeini was tasked to design a strategy of organizing and connecting the non-Iranian Shi'ites and Sunnite sympathisers of the revolution particularly in the Muslim world with the Islamic Republic of Iran. Networking with the non-Iranian Shi'ites and Sunnite sympathizers of the revolution was crucial for support for Iran's hegemony and export of the revolution. The Islamic Republic established Ahl-ul-bayt World Assembly (ABWA) to carry out its networking diplomacy. ABWA's objectives, networking strategies and activities in Afghanistan and Malaysia suggest that the non-Iranian Shi'ites and Sunnite sympathizers of the Revolution are political and strategic asset and Iran under the guise of the narrative of exporting revolution expects their loyalty and sympathy rather than to the state of their citizenship and residence. Unlike Malaysia, ABWA's networking activity in Afghanistan also entails integrating the Afghan Shi'ites into sensitive positions in the post-Taliban political system, indeed a breach of the claim that ABWA is apolitical and neutral institution.

**Keywords:** The Islamic Republic of Iran, ABWA, networking diplomacy, non-Iranian Shi'ites, the Muslim World, Afghanistan, Malaysia

**Abstrak:** Revolusi Iran pada tahun 1979 melibatkan pembentukan hegemoni Iran di rantau tersebut dan ia turut mempromosikan nilai-nilai Doktrin Syi'ah

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di dunia Islam. Negara Iran di bawah kepemimpinan Ayatullah Khomeini ditugaskan untuk merangka strategi bagi mengatur dan menyambung perhubungan antara pengamal-pengamal Syi'ah bukan berketurunan Iran dengan pengamal-pengamal Sunni yang bersimpati terhadap revolusi, khususnya di dunia Islam dan terutamanya di Republik Islam Iran. Jaringan antara pengamal-pengamal Syi'ah yang bukan daripada keturunan Iran dengan mereka yang berketurunan Sunni adalah penting untuk menyokong hegemoni Iran disamping berharap agar mereka dapat memperluaskan revolusi tersebut. Republik Islam yang ditubuhkan Perhimpunan Dunia Ahl-ul-bayt (ABWA) melaksanakan jaringan diplomasinya. Objektif-objektif ABWA, strategi-strategi jaringan serta aktiviti-aktiviti di Afganistan dan Malaysia mencadangkan bahawa Syi'ah yang bukan daripada keturunan Iran serta pengamal-pengamal Sunni merupakan aset politik dan aset strategik. Iran yang berselindung di bawah cerita-cerita untuk mengembangkan revolusinya mengharapkan agar kesetiaan dan simpati bukannya sekadar sebagai tuntutan kewarganegaraan dan tempat tinggal semata-mata. Tidak seperti di Malaysia, aktiviti jaringan ABWA di Afganistan melibatkan integrasi Syi'ah kepada kedudukan yang sensitif bagi sistem politik selepas Taliban. Namun, hal ini melanggar tuntutan bahawa ABWA adalah institusi politik yang berkecuali.

**Kata Kunci:** Republik Islam Iran, ABWA, Diplomasi Rangkaian, Shi'ites Bukan Iran, Dunia Muslim

## INTRODUCTION

The 1979 Islamic Revolution was a watershed in the Islamic Republic of Iran's history. The Revolution transformed the secular Iranian state into an Islamic Republic. Ayatollah Rohullah Khomeini, the founder of the Islamic Republic, contemplated a regionally dominant and globally influential Iranian state. According to him, a regionally powerful and globally influential Iranian state must turn the Muslim World into an ideological and economic sphere of influence which was possible if Tehran had deep influence in the politics of the Muslim states. Khomeini believed that the Sunnite sympathizers of the Revolution and the non-Iranian followers of Shi'ite Islam were two key forces that could help achieve this vision. Khomeini used the slogan of "Exporting Revolution" to attract Sunnite sympathizers of the Revolution and non-Iranian Shi'ites and influence the politics of Muslim states. Yet, the creation of an institutional base to organize, strengthen and mobilize the Sunnite sympathizers of the Revolution and non-Iranian Shi'ites was necessary. A number of institutions such as Ahl-ul-Bayt World Assembly

(ABWA) (Majma<sup>e</sup>-e Jahānī-e Ahl-e bayt) were founded. ABWA was founded to conduct networking diplomacy and build relationship with non-Iranian-Shi'ites and other like-minded groups, institutions and civil society in the Muslim World and from Asia to Africa and Latin America.

This paper examines ABWA's objectives, networking strategies as well as activities and achievement in two Muslim states: Afghanistan and Malaysia. Afghanistan is Iran's neighbour and unstable. One might assume that factors others than indoctrination of Shi'ite ideology may explain Iran's networking diplomacy in Afghanistan. Hence, a highly stable and distantly located Sunnite Muslim state, Malaysia, is also selected to show that Iran's networking diplomacy is inspired by the narrative of export of Revolution to the Muslim World. Therefore, structurally, this paper first presents a theoretical discussion of networking diplomacy as foreign policy tool of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Second, it discusses ABWA's objectives and networking strategies. Third, it discusses ABWA's activities in Afghanistan and Malaysia in pursuit of the Islamic Republic's strategic interests in the Muslim World under the guise of exporting revolution.

A word of caution is in order about the term *ahl-ul-bayt*. Generally, the term is a neutral compound Arabic word. In the mainstream Sunnite literature, it means members of the household of Prophet Muhammad (s.a.w.). In Shi'ite Islam, it refers to the decedents of Prophet Muhammad (s.a.w.) from the line of his daughter Fatima, the wife of Ali, the Fourth Rightly Guided Caliph. While bestowing love to the members of the household of Prophet Muhammad (s.a.w.) is an essential part of every Muslim's belief, in the lexicon of Iranian religious and political establishment, "lovers of *ahl-ul-bayt*" refers to non-Iranian Shi'ites and Sunnite sympathizers of the revolution. The religious and political establishment in Iran found the usage of *ahl-ul-bayt* more expedient. Waez Zadeh discloses that in view of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the Iranian Supreme Leader, *ahl-ul-bayt* is a more neutral term compared to Shi'ism, Shi'ites or Sunnite sympathizers of the Revolution. The word *ahl-ul-bayt*, Waez Zadeh argues, is at the heart of every Muslim and does not attract criticism and suspicious of any sort (Waez'zadeh Khurasani, Muhammad, 1990, pp. 9-10). However, the term *ahl-ul-bayt* is not a neutral word and its usage throughout this paper should be read as a reference to Shi'ism, Shi'ites or Sunnite sympathizers of the Revolution.

## IRAN'S NETWORKING DIPLOMACY: THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Public diplomacy has become important in modern diplomatic practices (Millissen, Jan, 2005a: 3-4). Paul Sharp defines public diplomacy as the “process by which direct relations with people in a country are pursued to advance the interest of those being represented” (Millissen, Jan, 2005a: 8). Joseph Nye divides national power into two types: “hard power” and “soft power”. Hard power is defined in terms of material factors, such as military, population, etc. Soft power is associated with intangible factors such as culture, idea, and attraction. To Nye public diplomacy is a strategic choice and an alternative to the “costly exercise of hard power” (1990, 153-171). Hence, public diplomacy has become an important element of a nation's foreign policy formulation.

In R. S. Zaharna's view, the exercise of public diplomacy involves at least two methods: informational method and relational method. The informational method focuses on the ways public diplomacy messages are designed and transmitted to the public through a linear process under the initiatives such as media relations, international broadcast, and information campaign etc. (Zaharna, R.S, 2009: 88-91). The relational method concentrates on “relationship building and construction of social structure(s)” (Zaharna, R.S, 2009: 86). Zaharna identifies three types of relationship-building programmes. (1) Programmes which focus on students, teachers and academic matters (Zaharna, R.S, 2009: 92-93) and involves scholarships, educational exchange programmes, workshops, and conferences (Leonard, Mark, 2002: 20). (2) Welfare and cultural programmes which focus on peoples' well-being and livelihood such as aid projects or services provided by cultural and language centres (Zaharna, RS, 2009: 94). (3) Initiatives which aim at coalition building and policy networking among the non-state actors, and personalities in other countries (Zaharna, RS, 2009: 93-96).

Zaharna's typology of public diplomacy initiatives suggests that the initiating state should minimize its appearance in conduct of its public diplomacy in the host state. It instead should channel its messages through “organizations and networks that are separate from, independent of, and even culturally suspicious toward government itself” in the host state (Leonard, Mark, 2002: 55). In Mark Leonard's view, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) are best vehicles to carry out initiating state's messages as they enjoy (1) “credibility” in the host

state, (2) have the “expertise” to effectively disseminate the messages, and (3) have “appropriate networks”, which are often not available to initiating states and diplomats (Leonard, Mark, 2002: 55-56). In some cases, however, diaspora, political parties, politicians, personalities and media are employed instead of NGOs (Leonard, Mark, 2002: 59-63). Melissen argues governments should establish contacts with other countries’ non-state actors and connecting them with non-state actors at home (Melissen, 2005b: 22). Similarly, Jorge Heine argues: “It is no longer enough to count on the goodwill of the ‘Prince’, as ambassadors of yesterday did, to get things done and to keep their job. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, to be effective, diplomats must practice “network diplomacy”. This means engaging a vastly large number of players in the host country” (Heine, Jorge, 2013: 62).

Therefore, public diplomacy like traditional diplomacy is used by states to promote and protect their interests in host states. Building of networking has become a very important part of public diplomacy. It has given rise to a new approach called “public diplomacy communication” which emphasises on network-oriented rather than hierarchical activity among states (Laydjiev, Ivaylo, 2013: 42). In Zaharna’s view in the Cold War era the “communicator with the most information won. Today, the one with the most extensive network and strongest relations wins” (Zaharna, R.S, 2005: 3).

The Islamic Republic of Iran has been effectively employing networking diplomacy to create a global Shi’ite network to exert influence in pursuit of its economic and ideological agenda in the Muslim World. It established ABWA to facilitate building of relationship and networking with Sunnite sympathizer of Iran and mainly non-Iranian Shi’ite in the Muslim World. ABWA has been able to establish relationship and networks with academia, civi rights groups, and neglected communities in the Muslim World through academic excises, welfare projects, religious and cultural activities. A respondent called ABWA’s different initiatives in the Muslim World as different aspects of a single “Global Shi’ite Network” project.

### **ABWA AND IRAN'S NETWORKING DIPLOMACY**

Shi’ite Muslims constitute 10-13% of approximately 1.6 billion Muslims. Demographically, the Shi’ite Muslims make up the majority of the polulation in four (Iran, Azerbaijan, Bahrain and Iraq) of the 49



Muslim states around the world. Yet significant Shi'ite Muslims live in 19 Muslim states with others sparsely residing in different parts of the world (Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, 2009: 10). The Islamic Republic of Iran is home to only 37-40% of world's Shi'ite population and yet considers itself the guardian of all Shi'ite Muslims around the globe. It expects loyalty and sympathy of the non-Iranian Shi'ite communities to the Iranian state rather than the state of their citizenship. Non-Iranian Shi'ites are political and strategic assets that can help promote the Islamic Republic's ideological and strategic objectives. In an interview, Alex Vatanka, a US-based Senior Middle East analyst, argued that Ali Akbar Omid-Mehr, a former senior Iranian Diplomat to Pakistan, had disclosed that Ayatullah Khomeini had issued a decree in 1986 in which he instructed the Iranian state to support the non-Iranian Shi'ites and design strategies for their quick mobilization in the event the Islamic Republic needed them to do so (Vatanka, Alex, 2012: 7). However, In addition to the mobilizing of non-Iranian Shi'ites, the Iranian establishment also contemplated close contact with and mobilization of the Sunnite sympathizers of the Iranian state across the Muslim World.

The strategic importance of the non-Iranian Shi'ites and Sunnite sympathizers of the Iranian revolution persuaded practitioners of Iran's public diplomacy to institutionalize networking diplomacy. Initially, Iran's Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (MCIG) was responsible for networking among non-Iranian Shi'ites and Sunnite sympathizers of the Iranian Revolution. (See. Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, 2013). In addition, other parallel institutions involved in networking diplomacy were ABWA, the Supreme Council of Islamic Propagation, Coordination Council of Islamic Propagation and Qom Propagation Office. In 1996, all these entities were placed under a new institution called the Islamic Culture and Relations Organization (ICRO). Despite formation of ICRO, ABWA though closely linked to ICRO has retained its institutional autonomy perhaps due to focus of its activities and target audience. ICRO conducts a wide range of public diplomacy tasks; ABWA focuses on networking among non-Iranian Shi'ites and Sunnite sympathizers of the Iranian revolution across the Muslim World.

### **ABWA'S ESTABLISHMENT, STRUCTURE AND OBJECTIVES**

ABWA was formally established and its statute was endorsed in its first General Assembly in Tehran in 1994 (Ganjinih-e Majma<sup>c</sup>, 2011: 102). However, its predecessor known as World Assembly for the Proximity



of Islamic Schools of Thought' (Majma<sup>c</sup> Taqrīb Bayn al-Mazāhib Islāmi) (WAPIST) was founded in 1990. On the first anniversary of Khomeini's demise in 1990, on the instruction of his successor, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran convened a four-day Ahl-ul-bayt World Congress (Kungurih-e Jahānī-e Ahl-ul-bayt) in Tehran from 21<sup>st</sup> to 25<sup>th</sup> May (Waez'zadeh, 1990: 13-14). Around 250 non-Iranian Shi'ites political and religious personalities from 50 countries across the Muslim World participated in the Congress (Waez'zadeh 1990: 1). The main purpose of the Congress was to discuss the social and political situation of non-Iranian Shi'ites in the Muslim World and modus operandi of mobilizing them and the Sunnite sympathizers of the revolution (Waez'zadeh, 1990: 8). The Congress, in its third session, declared the Islamic Republic as "Hub of the Muslim World" (*umm-ul-qurāy-e jahān-e Islam*) and established Ahl-ul-bayt World Assembly's permanent headquarters and affiliated institutions under the direct auspices of Iran's Supreme Leader (Waez'zadeh, 1990: 18). The Congress also established WAPIST and a Qom Seminary-based Fatwa Council. The Congress concluded with endorsing Ayatollah Ali Khamenei as the leader of all Muslims around the world and invited all Muslims to support the Iranian revolution with high zeal (Waez'zadeh, 1990: 22). Iran's networking dipolomacy was conducted by WAPIST until formal esatblishement of ABWA in 1994.

Structurally, ABWA comprises General Assembly, the Supreme Council and the General Secretariat. The General Assembly is made up of mainly non-Iranian Shi'ite personalities from different countries (Ahl-ul Bayt News Agency, August 7, 2015). The Supreme Council comprises of real and ex-officio persons selected by the Supreme Leader. Its main responsibilities are to formulate policies, nominate the General Secretary and supervise his performance. The members of Supreme Council are chosen from amongst influential Shi'ite political personalities from Iran and outside Iran. The General Secretary is the highest organizational authority at ABWA. He is appointed by the Supreme Leader.

ABWA's goals according to its statute are: (1) to revive and expand pure Shi'ite culture and knowledge; (2) to create and strengthen political unity among Shi'ites around the world; (3) to preserve and protect Shi'tes' social, economic and political rights; (4) to work for material and spiritual development of Shi'tes around the globe; (5) to improve Shi'tes' cultural, political, economic and social state of

affairs; and (6) to highlight issues related to Shi'ites through media and research (Ahl-ul-Bayt World Assembly, "Introduction to ABWA's goals"). For the realization of these noble objectives, ABWA's strategy will focus on building a network of Shi'ites from different parts of the world. Such a network would provide Iran with a tool to communicate its political and ideological ideas to the non-Iranian Shi'ites and sympathizers of the revolution. It can also be used to promote Iran's foreign policy goals and strategic objectives. ABWA, therefore, for the purpose of building effective Global Shi'ite Network of non-Iranian Shi'ites and sympathizers of revolution should: (1) organize workshops and conferences in Iran and abroad; (2) support, train, dispatch and exchange propagators worldwide; (7) provide financial and material support to Shi'ite mosques, associations and libraries (Ahl-ul-Bayt World Assembly, "Introduction to ABWA's goals").

### **ABWA'S ACTIVITIES, STRATEGIES AND ACHIEVEMENTS**

ABWA's aim has been to build a wide network of non-Iranian Shi'ite and Sunnite sympathisers of the revolution across the Muslim World. Therefore, a steady rise in the number of non-Iranian participating countries attending quadrennial sessions of ABWA's General Assembly indicates that it has been successful in connecting with the non-Iranian Shi'ites and perhaps Sunnite sympathisers of the revolution. ABWA, since its establishment, has held six general assembly sessions. The first General Assembly session was held in 1994. 330 non-Iranian Shi'ite personalities from 61 countries participated. 350 non-Iranian Shi'ite representatives from 56 countries attended the second session of ABWA's General Assembly held in 1998. The third General Assembly session held in 2003 was attended by 500 non-Iranian Shi'ite representatives from 80 countries. The fourth session ABWA's General Assembly was held in 2007 in which 460 non-Iranian Shi'ite representatives from 110 countries were invited (Ganjīnih-e Majma<sup>c</sup>: 2011a: 101-102). The fifth session ABWA's General Assembly was held in May 2011 with 600 non-Iranian Shi'ite personalities from 120 countries (Ahl-ul Bayt News Agency, August 28, 2011). The latest session of ABWA's General Assembly was held in August 2015 in which 1800 non-Iranian Shi'ite elites from 130 countries (Ahl-ul Bayt News Agency, Aughst 7, 2015). Interestingly, the participants were mainly non-Iranian political elites and religious personalities.

Therefore, ABWA contemplated and designed a six-fold strategy which, in addition to political elites and religious personalities, also focused on connecting the non-Iranian Shi'ite masses and Sunnite sympathisers across the Muslim World. Hujjat-ul-Islam Muhammad Salar, ABWA's Deputy General Secretary, enumerates a number of networking strategies for establishing relations with Shi'ites around the world. The first strategy is to establish contacts with Shi'ite masses and sympathizers of revolution through non-Iranian members of ABWA's General Assembly. Secondly, establishing contacts with the non-Iranian Shi'ites through individuals and Iranian institutions involved in propagation of Shi'ite political ideology overseas. Third, ABWA will attract them through organizing conferences, exhibitions and events in different countries of the Muslim World. Fourthly, ABWA will engage the local associations of non-Iranian Shi'ites around the Muslim World to attract the general masses to their activities and ABWA's programmes. Fifth, ABWA will seek assistance of non-Iranian alumni and students of Iranian seminaries such as MIU. Finally, ABWA will establish contact with non-Iranian Shi'ites and sympathisers of the revolution during the annual pilgrimage (*hajj*) event to Makkah. According to Salar, this final strategy is most important as ABWA's agents will initially contact non-Iranian Shi'ites during the pilgrimage (*hajj*) event and this contact, later on, expands through exchange of books, reports and delegations (Akhbār-e Shī'ayān, November 2010: 6).

Notwithstanding the above strategies, ABWA is pragmatic and acts quickly when an opportunity for networking becomes available. In extraordinary situations and circumstances replete with opportunities for networking, ABWA establishes what can be called auxiliary or subsidiary networking institutions on ad hoc or temporary basis to connect with the target audience. For instance, soon after the popular uprising in the Arab World in January 2011, ABWA established the World Assembly of Islamic Awakening (WAIA), headed by Ali Akbar Velayati. WAIA organized its first international conference on September 11, 2011, where 700 delegates from 84 countries were invited (Mohseni, Payam, 2013). In addition, ABWA publishes Shi'ite literature in 40 languages so that they are accessible to all those connected through ABWA's Global Network (Akhbār-e Shī'ayān, January 2012: 30). As of 2011, ABWA has published over 1,000 titles of books. According to Salar, the themes of the books are carefully chosen according to socio-political needs of the target audience (Akhbār-e Shī'ayān, November 2010: 7).

ABWA's networking activities also entails proselytization of Sunnites. They are called *mustabsirs* (lit. new-Shi'ites whose hearts are exposed to the truth of Shi'ism) (Khursandi, 2011: 108). For this purpose, ABWA has a separate office called the Department of New Shi'ites (*idārih-mustabsirin*). It is tasked to regularly stay in contact with *mustabsirs* and utilize them for promotion of Iran's political and ideological goals. In 2007, the Department of New Shi'ites, prepared 53 speeches in Bambara Language. These speeches had been recorded by 11 *mustabsirs* from Africa. "The head of ABWA claims that in last three decades over 50 million people have become *mustabsir* (Akhbār-e Shī'ayān, January 2012b: 32). The growth of Shi'ite *mustabsir* in many countries is quite visible. Among these new Shi'ite are high profile personalities, academicians, politicians and diplomats. It is also to be noted that some of *mustabsirs* are holding important governmental positions in their respective countries. Former president of Comoros Islands, Abdullah Sambi, was a newly Shi'ite-convert and graduate of Qom Seminary (Massey, Simon & Baker, Bruce, 2009: 26).

However, ABWA is aware of its politically sensitive mission. Therefore, despite its huge machinery, the strategy of ABWA is to indigenize its networking activities. Its complex international network is decentralized with virtually no formal overseas branches; rather, it relies on local Shi'ite volunteers and communicates through third party channels. For instance, ABWA's activities in West Africa are conducted through Ghana, in East Africa through Kenya, in South Africa through South Africa and in South East Asia through Indonesia. However, the overall network is supervised by shuttle representatives of ABWA from Iran (Akhbār-e Shī'ayān, November 2010: 6).

Essential feature of ABWA's strategy is that it should gradually make the target state or society tolerant to Shi'ite ideas and principles. Its strategy for creating a tolerant environment involves set of actions or initiatives both at political and societal levels in the target state. At political level, ABWA in every available opportunity strives to buy favour from other countries' diplomats and politicians; thus lubricating the operation of local Shi'ite associations. Dinners, cocktails, etc. are organised for resident diplomats on regular basis. In such events, Shi'ite literature is distributed and diplomats are rather politely urged to view Shi'ism as a normal state of life along Sunnite stream of life in Muslim societies (Ganjīnih-e Majma', August-September 2008: 71).

At the societal level, ABWA through its local allies attempts to generate a historical claim about existence of Shi'ism in a particular region or place. For instance, Lyakat Takim, a member of ABWA General Assembly and an academic at McMaster University, Canada, published a book in 2009 entitled 'Shi'ism in America' tracing the Shi'ite roots in America. Takim argued that three Shi'ite passengers were aboard the famous ship Titanic one of whom survived (Nathani Takim, Liyakat, 2009: 13). In addition, the Supreme Leader instructed ABWA to conduct archaeological studies and field research to explore any kind of evidence which can assist in proving the existence of Shi'ism in a particular region or place. ABWA will promote these archaeological findings through conferences and seminars (Akhhār-e Shī'ayān, November 2010: 8).

Finally, ABWA's strategy makes effective use of communication technology in promoting Shi'ism and expansion of Shi'ite geopolitics. Its portal is operating with 30 websites accessible in five languages and provides its audience with different products ranging from children games to audio visuals. It offers free access to Shi'ite reading materials. These materials are available in 21 languages. One of its websites is *Ahl-ul-bayt News Agency* ([www.abna.ir](http://www.abna.ir)), which gives coverage of Shi'ite news worldwide in 20 languages. Likewise, ABWA is publishing eleven journals in eight languages, and sponsors over 40 other journals and magazines. ABWA is also running *Thaqalayn* satellite channel. According to Akhtari, ABWA is determined to use media and modern communications to update Shi'ite followers about political conditions of Shi'ites in different parts of the world and propmote a single global Shi'ite voice (Imami, & Moqaddam Demeh, 2011: 58).

### **ABWA'S ACTIVITIES IN MALAYSIA**

Existence of Shi'ite and pro-Shi'ite individuals and groups is a basic requirement for ABWA's networking activities. ABWA found itself in serious disadvantage in Malaysia in the early phase of its activities. Malaysia is a multi-ethnic and a multi-religious state. 61.3 percent of its 26.4 million population is Muslims of mainly Malay ethnic background (Department of Statistics, 2010: 5-9). Malaysia's Chinese, Indian, Sikh, Kadazan Dusun, Malanau, etc. ethnic groups are the adherents of world's major religions such as Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, or Sikhism. However, the Malay Muslims in Malaysia are adherents of

Sunni theology and predominantly followers of the Shafi'ite School of Islamic Law and Jurisprudence. Malaysia is a fast developing, moderate Sunni Muslim state and is projected as a role model by many in the Muslim World and around the globe. However, a very small and unknown Shi'ite community exists in Malaysia. Networking with this unknown Shi'ite community and pro-Shi'ite elements became the prime objective of ABWA. ABWA skilfully used and benefited from the popularity of the Iranian Revolution and its leaders among the Malaysian Muslims. Khomeini and the Iranian religious establishment were famous among the Malaysian Muslim youths and were praised for their anti-West rhetorics. Like everywhere in the Muslim World, high profile public intellectuals such as Chandra Muzaffar, President of the International Movement for a Just World (JUST), and Abdul Hadi Awang, President of Malaysia's Islamic Party, praised Iran's anti-American and anti-Israeli rhetorics (See. Muzaffar, Chandra, 2013: 40-50). This overall situation provided ABWA with a favourable environment where it could easily operate and create its desired *nodes*. Yet, at the government level, there existed and still exists suspicion about the role of Iran in spread of Shi'ism in the country.

ABWA adopted a seven-fold strategy for its networking activities in Malaysia. First, the strategy attempted to indigenize Shi'ism and to project it as a local and home grown phenomenon and to show that Shi'ism had its historical roots in Malaysia through publication of interviews, archaeological researches and discoveries of Shi'ite antiquities. ABWA's magazine, the Shi'ite News (*Akhh̄bār-e Shī'cayān*), conducted an interview with a Malaysian Shi'ite scholar, Faizal Musa, who argued that one of the grand sons of *Imam Ja'afar*, the sixth Shi'ite *imam*, came to Sumatra and in 840 AD, a Shi'ite state was established in Perak and five kings were Shi'ites. He, therefore, concludes that Shi'ism was the original version of Islamic teachings in South East Asia (Nouri, 2013: 21) Faizal Musa, later on wrote a 53-page-long article which was printed in the *Journal of Shi'ite Islamic Studies*. Faizal wanted to prove and convince his readers that that Shi'ism is the original version of Islam in Malaysia (See. Musa, Mohd Faizal, 2013: 411-463).

Second, ABWA's strategy was to educate Malaysian Shi'ites about the fundamentals of Shi'ism through systematic advocacy and networking activities. ABWA operates a social media socio-cultural facebook group known as *al-Sajjad Movement* in Malaysia. All Shi'ites

are invited to use this media channel to learn about Shi'ism and its core values. The Movement is named after *Imam Sajjad*, the fourth Shi'ite *imam*. The Movement's *facebook* page is regularly updated (See. Al-Ssajad Movement). The third element of ABWA's strategy is to allay or defy anti-Shi'ite policy of the Malaysian government on grounds of human rights. ABWA aggressively uses its Global Shi'ite Network to highlight that Shi'ism has historical roots in Malaysia and therefore, it is the natural rights of Malaysian Shi'ites to enjoy constitutional rights of preaching Shi'ite core values and forming networks within Malaysia and with Shi'ite organizations abroad (See. Mahmood Muqimi, 2013: 44). ABWA's Global Shi'ite Network comprising of media outlets, think-tank, academics, etc. are actively engaged in rebutting Malaysian Government's anti-Shi'ite initiatives. The Shi'ite Rights Watch (SRW), for instance, wrote a letter to the *Utusan* daily and criticized it for publishing an article on Shi'ite activities in Malaysia. The letter challenged the daily and accused it of violation of fundamental human rights Malaysian Shi'ites (Shia Rights Watch, August 13, 2013). The SRW also published a detailed report on Malaysian Shi'ites and accuses the Malaysian government for violating Shi'ites fundamental rights (Shia Rights Watch, 2013: 30-35). ABWA played effective role in the formation of Shi'ite rights advocacy civil society institutions in Malaysia such as *Projek Dialogue*, *al-Sajjad Movement* and *Islamic Renaissance*. However, Jamil Khir Baharom, Malaysia's Minister for Islamic Affairs, warned the human rights groups against exploiting human rights principles to protect Shi'ism (New Strait Times, July 20, 2013).

Fourth, ABWA believes that it can promote and indeed guarantee an open space for Malaysian Shi'ites under the slogan of dialogue and reconciliation in the name of Islamic or Muslim unity. WAPIST's affiliated news agency, Proximity (Taghrib), reported that WAPIST General Secretary, Aytollah Taskhiri, invited Malaysian religious authorities and intellectuals for inter-Sunnite-Shi'ite dialogue and reconciliation (Taghrib News Agency, January 12, 2011). The WAPIST, discussed earlier, is ABWA's predecessor institution devoted to promoting Shi'ism in the name of so-called inter-Sunnite-Shi'ite reconciliation and dialogue and Muslim unity. Fifth element of ABWA's strategy focuses on networking with relevant state departments, non-governmental organization (NGOs) and civil society institutions. The



Iranian Cultural Council organized a Persian class in collaboration with Kuala Lumpur-based Miftah Institute. The students and teachers and chairperson of the Institute were invited to the Iranian Embassy on April 24, 2013. At the occasion, the possibility of trip to Iran for students and teachers was also discussed (Cultural Center of the Islamic Republic of Iran, April 23, 2012). Similarly, in September 2013, the Cultural Council of Iran and a local NGO, *Kakiseni*, initiated a joint cultural *Silk Road Project* (Cultural Center of the Islamic Republic of Iran, September 23, 2013).

However, the main focus of the ABWA has been to infiltrate into Malaysian religious departments such as Department of Islamic Development of Malaysia (JAKIM), Tabung Haji (TH), etc. In line with this, in February 2012, Ziaee, the Head of Iranian Cultural Council in Kuala Lumpur, met with TH authorities. He reportedly offered them to hold joint workshops and collaborate on settlement of *hajjis* during the *hajj* (Cultural Center of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Feb. 16, 2012). In September 2013, the Malaysian Muslim Solidarity (ISMA) authorities claimed that they had discovered a “Shi’ite master plan” aimed at penetrating into the religious departments of Malaysia. According to them the grand strategy of the plan is to change the policies and approaches of the religious department from within and marginalize the non-compromising scholars with sectarian labels (Sinar, September 29, 2013: 4).

The sixth element of ABWA’s strategy is to train Malaysian Shi’ite intellectuals and provide them with relevant literature. Obviously, this requires translation of Shi’ite literature into local language. ABWA has translated and published a number of books in Malaysia’s National Language, Bahasa Malaysia. One of the books is entitled *Ahl-ul-bayt: their position, approach and direction (Ahl-ul-bait, Kedudukan, Pendekatan dan Perjalanan Mereka)*. The book contains verses and traditions of Prophet Muhammad (s.a.w.) claimed to support *ahl-ul-bayt* on the subject of *vilāyat*. However, the most important technique has been to encourage the local Shi’ite scholars to write books specially novels with Shi’ite footings. Deputy Mufti of the State of Kedah, Mufti Marwazi Dziauddin, claimed that he had identified some novels containing Shi’ite elements (Mohd Ali, Idros & Fakhri Mohamad, Ali Mohd, September 14, 2013: 1). One will find truth in Mufti Marwazi’s claim if he reads the book *Perempuan Nan Bercinta* [Woman in Love]

authored by Faizal Tehrani (Tehrani, Faisal, 2012: 170, 192, 205, 388, 339). Its author clearly encourages the reader to stop learning from 90 percent Sunnites, rather try to learn for the remaining 10 percent which denotes Shi'ism (Tehrani, 2012: 9). Finally and the most important element of the ABWA's strategy is its focus on connecting the Malaysian Shi'ite minority into the global and regional Shi'ite networks. Faisal Musa in his interview also discloses that ABWA is trying to link the Malaysian Shi'ites with the larger East Asian Shi'ite network to safeguard their religion through marriage between Shi'ites of Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia and Singapore (Nouri, Ali Reza, 2013: 25).

The Malaysian state views the threat of Shi'ism as real and divisive. Political leaders, the public, and the law enforcement agencies have frequently raised concerns about the menace of Shi'ism within the Malay Muslim community, the backbone of the Malaysian state. The Malaysian authorities, at federal and state levels, have reacted to threats of Shi'ism. On 16 December 2010, the Malaysian law enforcement agency invaded a clandestine Shi'ite teaching hub in Seri Gombak vicinity of State of Selangore. The police discovered Shi'ite teaching materials and portraits of Khomeini and Khamenei. Mohsin Radmard, an Iranian clergy was arrested (Sinyang, Angelina, December 17, 2010: 1 & 3). The second major anti-Shi'ite offensive took place on 24 May 2011 (Press TV, May 24, 2011). In 2013 the Shi'ite threat was visible in the speeches of high profile politicians, including Malaysia's former Prime Minister, Tun Mahatir (The Sun Daily, October 2, 2013). Malaysia's northern State of Kedah banned Shi'ite teachings through publishing of the 1996 National Fatwa Council's ruling (Bari, Fatah, November 10, 2013: 1). The State of Selangor Islamic Affairs Department (JAIS) invaded a Shi'ite teaching hub on 28 September 2013. The then Malaysian Home Minister claimed that he had A-Grade evidence on Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) Deputy President's involvement in Shi'ite activities (The Star, December 16, 2013: 3). On the ground, a massive anti-Shi'ite campaign was initiated. Among the notable events were series of talks entitled 'Shi'ite virus' (Abd Ghani, Muhammad Shmasul, September 29 2013: 1 & 4).

Despite Malaysian government's anti-Shi'ite policy and initiatives, ABWA appears to have succeeded and has been able to lay down foundation of a Shi'ite network in Malaysia. According to ABWA's news bulletin, "6,000 Malaysians due to the spiritual personality of

Imam Khomeini have embraced Shi'ism and joined the community of well-wishers of Imam (Khomeini)" (Nasiri, Ali Asghar, 2011: 11). ABWA has entered into the stage of empowering the Malaysian Shi'ite network, and setting the ground for its maximum expansion. ABWA's East Asian Shi'ite network operates from its base in Indonesia. The Iranian public diplomacy apparatus uses the Indonesian Shi'ite network for its activities in East Asia. Al-Mustafa International University's *Regional Studies* Journal in its special edition on East Asia presents a long list of opportunities for spread of Shi'ism in and through Indonesia, which, according to the Journal, can help in promoting Iran's political and ideological objectives in East Asia (*Regional Studies*, 2009: 5-7). ABWA operating with such an approach, then Kuala Lumpur's anti-Shi'ite strategy could engage Indonesian public and political authority to prevent infiltration of Shi'ite ideology within the Malay dominated Muslim community of Malaysia.

### **ABWA'S ACTIVITIES IN AFGHANISTAN**

Afghanistan is a multi-ethnic state. The majority of its citizens are adherents of Sunnite theology and followers of the Hanafite School of Islamic Law and Jurisprudence. According to the Pew Center's estimate, Shi'ite Islam is practiced by 10 to 15% of Afghanistan's population. Afghan Shi'ites are predominantly the Twelvers, with a minority practicing Isma'ilite version of Shi'ism, and mostly belong to the Hazara and Qizilbash ethnic groups. The Shi'ites, traditionally with little political influence, began to emerge in the politics of Afghanistan as a significant resistance group against the 1978 Soviet-backed communist coup and 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. The Afghan Shi'ites, like Afghanistan's other ethnic groups, are politically divided. However, the political status of the Afghan Shi'ites, arguably due to the US-Iran so-called anti-terror alliance, dramatically changed in post-Taliban Afghanistan. The Islamic Republic's collaboration with the US was based on the belief that it provided the historic opportunity of integrating the minority Shi'ite population of Afghanistan into the fabric of the Afghan society and making them part of the deep Afghan state, indeed an objective Tehran has pursued since 1979. Shi'ites' rights are guaranteed in Afghanistan's 2004 Constitution and are well integrated into the power structure of the American backed post-Taliban Afghan state. It is interesting to note that the current Shi'ite population of Afghanistan is composed of traditional Shi'ites that is Shi'ites by

birth and hazara by ethnicity and convert shi'ites. The Shi'ite converts belong to Afghanistan's other ethnic groups; making the Shi'ite ethnic demography diverse and widespread across Afghanistan. Converts Shi'ites have accepted conversion in return for offer by the Iranian political establishment of (1) exemptions from legal constraints and (2) citizenship.

Soon after the removal of Taliban, Iran's Supreme Council of Cultural Revolution passed a bill to form a special committee for the education of Afghan students. Provision (2) of the Bill instructed relevant institutions and authorities in Iran to render necessary assistance to "those forces which are in line with (Iran's) ... Islamic revolution inside Afghanistan and help them to form private schools and institutions" ("Creation of opportunities for the...." September 7, 2009).

The Bill recommended Dr. Qomi, a member of ABWA Supreme Council, to chair the Committee, suggesting that Iran's activities in post-Taliban Afghanistan will be conducted under organizational structure of ABWA. It was therefore ABWA's responsibility to organize Iran's Shi'ite and non-Shi'ite allies in Afghanistan. Yet, ABWA focused on mobilization, organization and consolidation of Afghan Shi'ite elites and notable religious personalities living in Afghanistan. It is necessary to note that while Afghan Shi'ites living in Iran were offered a choice of voluntary return, Iran preferred they return under strict conditions (Anonymous interview, May 4, 2013).

ABWA's strategy in Afghanistan was that famous Afghan political and religious Shi'ite personalities should return from Iran with financial and institutional support. They together with the notable Shi'ite personalities living in Afghanistan should establish educational, religious, political and charity institutions and think tanks for socio-cultural and policy related activities with the aim of penetrating into the deep state apparatus in Afghanistan. Ayatollah Mohseni, an influential Afghan Shi'ite clergy and a member of ABWA's Supreme Council and the Head of Shi'ite Clergy (Ulema) Council of Afghanistan returned to Afghanistan after the removal of Taliban. Mohseni, while in exile in Qom, founded the Islamic Unity Party (Hizb-e Wahdat-e Islami) during the anti-Soviet War. Mohseni upon his return under the supervision of ABWA established the Khātam-ul Nabīyīn University. The institution is a huge complex having all modern and state-of-the-art facilities. It

is built on 430,000 square meters of land in Kabul, Afghanistan. The project was carried out by Afghan-Tūs Construction Company, an Iran-Afghan joint venture. The project has reportedly cost \$13 million. Mohseni claims that the University has been funded from the remainder of a larger sum he had collected for war against the Soviet Union. But many believe that the project has been funded by Iran. Abdul Qayoom Sajjadi returned as President of Khātām-ul Nabīyīn University, Kabul. He was a faculty member at Mufīd University, Iran, and a visiting fellow at al-Mustafa International University (Pujhūhish, March-April 2007: 99-101). Sajjadi founded the influential think-tank; the Kabul Center for Strategic Studies (KCSS). The Center publishes *Fajr-e Umīd* (the Dawn of Hope) magazine and *Guftimān-e Nau* (Modern Discourse) semi-academic journal. Belal Quranic Foundation and Saba Foundation (Bonyad-e-Saba) are examples of many other institutions that were established with the support of Iran. The Belal Foundation is engaged in organizing workshops and dispatching Shi'ites propagators to remote areas of Afghanistan. It is also engaged in community service activities (Safīrān-e Nūr, August 9, 2012: 8). It is necessary to note that some of these institutions have their affiliate offices in the City of Qom, Iran's intellectual center.

ABWA has succeeded to empower Afghan Shi'ites and assure them key positions in the post-Taliban political system. For instance, Ayatollah Mohseni was the one who wrote the Shi'ite Civil Law Bill of Afghanistan. Similarly, Sajjadi managed to work at the Afghan Grand Jirga (Assembly) convened to draft Afghanistan's new constitution. Later on, he served as a member of the International Relations Committee of Afghanistan's Wolesi Jirga (lower house of parliament). More importantly, the Belal Quranic Foundation reportedly signed an agreement with Afghanistan's Education Ministry to produce school textbooks on Islamic studies (Safīrān-e Nūr, August 9, 2012: 8). Indeed, producing Islamic Studies textbooks for a Sunnite majority country by a Shi'ite institution is ABWA's great achievement.

Given that Shi'ites in Afghanistan are in minority, the main strategy of ABWA and its Afghan allies has been to work under the guise of Muslim unity. Ayatollah Mohseni, in an interview with Iran's daily *Kayhan*, spoke of establishing a new institution of Islamic Brotherhood Council (*shurāy-e ukhuwwat-e islami*) comprising of both Shi'ite and Sunnite religious personalities. However, he disclosed that the initiative

aims at promoting Shi'ism by adding that: "Maximum unity between Shi'ites and Sunnites is one of the most important requirements for the maximum promotion and spread of Shi'ism in today's world" (*Kayhān*, February 28, 2006: 14). It has been observed that the educational sector of Afghanistan is the prime target of ABWA. The Shi'ite Clergy (Ulema) Council of Afghanistan, in its 10<sup>th</sup> General Assembly Covention chaired by Asefi, demanded, through a resolution, the teaching of Shi'ite jurisprudence and the establishment of Shi'ite chairs in Afghanistan's higher educational institutions (*Akhbār-e Shī'ayān*, September-October 2012: 13).

In 2006, ABWA University, initiated its first post-graduate program with a group of Afghan students. The University authorities admitted that the program had specifically been initiated for Afghans. At the inauguration ceremony of the program, ABWA's General Secretary said that the dispersal of 300 million Shi'ites worldwide had made it imperative for ABWA to focus on their higher education. He called the Afghan students as ABWA's ambassadors and wished them to be the sources of valuable impact in the future, given the kind of training they would receive at ABWA University. He specifically mentioned Hizbullah of Lebanon as successful model for them (*Ganjīnih-e Majma'*, November 2012-February 2013: 5).

Finally, ABWA has been working for a strong presence in Afghan media as well. Participants of ABWA's Third General Assembly Session emphasized on promotion of Shi'ism through control of media (See, Muqimi, 2013: 44-45). In consonance with this, the Iranian Cultural Council in Kabul organized in September 2013 a training workshop for Afghan journalists at Iranian Studies Room of Kabul University. The workshop was conducted by a group of Professors from Communication Department, Mash'had University, Iran. The course outlines included topics such as psychological warfare, agenda setting, propaganda, etc. (Islamic Culture and Relations Organization, September 10, 2013). The workshop was, in fact, the follow-up of an earlier conference held in February 2013 by Higher Education Complex for Jurisprudence where some Afghan Shi'ite officials including *Hujjat-ul-Islam* Naseri, a member of Afghan Parliament, were invited. The participants urged for a comprehensive Shi'ite media in Afghanistan (*Safīrān-e Nūr*, March 16, 2013: 3).

In addition to training, ABWA is highly active in Afghan media on the ground. It is allegedly funding a number of television channels in Afghanistan. In this regard, one can mention the Tamaddun [civilization] Satellite TV, which is run by Ayatollah Mohseni and the Rahe Farda [path of tomorrow] TV, owned by Muhammad Muhaqiq, an influential Afghan Shi'ite political and religious personality. Besides these TV channels, there are a number of newspapers such as *Inṣāf* and *Anṣar*, which are visibly under the influence of ABWA network in Afghanistan. For instance on October 19, 2013, they published Khamenei's message to *hajj* pilgrims in their front page under the title of 'Message of *imam* Khamenei to *hajj* Pilgrims' (See, *Inṣāf*, October 19, 2013: 1 & 3). Using the title *imam* for Iran's Supreme Leader, while it is not even common in Iranian media, indicates a strong affinity of these newspapers with Iran.

The presence of Iran in Afghan political system and civil society has been noticed by international news agencies as well. In May 2012 *Reuters* published a report giving a detailed account of the Iran's influence in Afghan civil society institutions (Ferris-Rotman, Amie, May 24, 2012). Meanwhile, some high level Afghan officials also protested against heavy Iranian influence in Afghanistan's political system. In this regard, perhaps the most important disclosure was an article by Amrullah Salih, the former Head of Afghanistan's Intelligence Service, which was published by BBC's Pashto Service. Salih explicitly accused the Iranian government and its institutions particularly the Islamic Revolutionary Guard for interfering in the domestic affairs of Afghanistan (Salih, Amrullah, January 24, 2013). The above evidence shows that Iran, through its public diplomacy institutions such as ABWA, is active in mobilizing Afghan Shi'ites in order to promote its ideological agenda and interests.

## CONCLUSION

The Islamic Republic of Iran since its establishment in 1979 aimed to establish its dominance in the region, create a Shi'ite crescent and integrate non-Iranian Shi'ites into policy makings circles in the Muslim World. It established ABWA to organize and mobilize non-Iranian Shi'ites and their Sunnite sympathizers. Analysis of ABWA's objectives, structure, activities suggest that it is a complex and effective organization with aim of indignizing its activities and operations around



the world. ABWA's activities in Malaysia and Afghanistan show that it has succeeded to organize and empower their Shi'ite populations and Sunnite sympathisers of the Revolution. ABWA in Afghanistan is more active compared to Malaysia. In Afghanistan, ABWA as a result of the US-Iran defacto alliance in post-Taliban Afghanistan has been able to organize Iran's Shi'ite and non-Shi'ite allies, integrate Afghan Shi'ites into critical sectors of state apparatus, focus on mobilization and consolidation of Afghan Shi'ite elites and notable religious personalities. As the Sunnite majority Muslim World is plagued by civil wars, political stability and lack of political leadership, the Islamic Republic of Iran will continue to employ its public diplomacy in pursuit of its interests in the Muslim World for a long period of time.

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