

Minorities at War

Cultural Identity and Resilience in Ukraine

Edited by
Elmira Muratova and Nadia Zasanska

First published 2025

ISBN: 978-1-032-73063-9 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-032-74735-4 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-003-47060-1 (ebk)

Chapter 6

Shia Muslims of Ukraine during the Russian invasion

Akif Tahiev

(CC-BY) 4.0

DOI: 10.4324/9781003470601-8

The funder for this chapter is Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity, Göttingen.

6 Shia Muslims of Ukraine during the Russian invasion

Akif Tahiev

Introduction

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has not only had a global impact but has also significantly affected the lives of millions of people within the country. Both before and during the war, the Shia communities in Ukraine and the ongoing processes within them have largely gone unnoticed. The majority of Muslims in Ukraine, including Shi'ites, resided in the eastern and southern regions, making them among the first victims of the conflict. Many were internally displaced in both 2014 and 2022. The traumatic events resulting from the war have influenced various social and religious groups in Ukraine, including Muslims, and have played a role in shaping transformations in religious, ethnic, and national identities.

Shi'ites constitute a significant minority and are barely visible in the Ukrainian public life. Also, the local Shia communities and Shi'ism in general are little studied in the Ukrainian academy (Tahiev 2023a). The largest number of studies are devoted to political Shi'ism, namely the political system of the Islamic Republic of Iran (Krushinskiy and Semchynskiy 2010). In this context, it is worth noting Iran's highly contradictory policy. Iran faced accusations of supplying drones to Russia, planning missile deliveries, and offering instructors to train Russian soldiers (Mason and Holland 2023). Prior to all these events, Grand Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, during a meeting with Putin on July 19, 2022, duplicated the pro-Russian rhetoric about the hopeless situation of Russia and that the latter was forced invade Ukraine in order to avoid the war within Russia itself (*The Iran Primer* 2022). Such statements and actions can lead to a negative attitude toward Shia Muslims living in Ukraine. Also, Khamenei is one of the most popular *marja' at-taqlid* (highest cleric in Twelver Shi'ism) in the world and many Shi'ites in Ukraine followed/follow his religious decrees, and the question arises whether his political decisions affect religious authority in local Shia communities and their life in general.

In this regard, in the period from March–May 2023, I conducted ten interviews with Ukrainian Shi'ites of different ethnicities. Most of the interviewees were Azerbaijanis since they constitute the majority among Shi'ites of Ukraine. The interviews were based on questions about their reflections on

current events and Ayatollah Khamenei's views on this, as well as about whom they do *taqlid* (follow in religious matters) and whether they know of cases when a Shi'ite stopped following or changed *marja' at-taqlid* because of the latter's political or other views. I also used data from my brief conversations with representatives of the Shia communities of Kyiv and Kharkiv for the most complete mapping of Ukrainian Shia communities. The theoretical basis of the study was the existing literature about Shi'ism in Ukraine (Tahiev 2021), Eastern Europe (Shanneik, Heinhold, and Ali 2017), and the world in general (Takim 2009), as well as sources on collective memory, (Halbwachs 1980) and the Shia doctrine of *marja' at-taqlid* (Mavani 2013).

Based on the results of the study, I argue that the war in Ukraine affected traditional religious authority constructs for some Shia Muslims and is closely related to the trauma and collective memory which in the present cases are the intersections of religious, ethnic, and national identities. The chapter begins with an introduction to Shia Islam in Ukraine. Further, I proceed to the impact of the war in Ukraine (starting from 2014) on local Shia communities. The next section covers existing views on Shia religious authority and changes in the perceptions of Ukrainian Shia Muslims during the war. In the end, I connect the experiences of Shia Muslims of Ukraine with scholarly research on collective memory.

Shia Islam in Ukraine

The location of Ukraine between Europe and Asia, between “western” and “eastern” cultures contributed to the country's religious and cultural diversity and the formation of a community of ethnic Muslims with a 500-year history in it. That is, Muslims (Crimean Tatars) belong to the indigenous ethnic group and religion of Ukraine. In Ukraine, there are 40 ethnic groups that traditionally profess Islam, the largest of which are the Crimean Tatars (248,000), Volga-Ural Tatars (73,000), and Azerbaijanis (45,000) (Muratova 2011, 583). Muslims make up 1–2% of the country's population. According to some estimations, 600,000–1 million Muslims live in Ukraine, among whom Shi'ites are a minority (State Statistics Committee of Ukraine 2001). In Western Europe, Shia Muslims appeared mainly from Iran and Arab and South Asian countries as a result of labour migration (Shanneik, Heinhold, and Ali 2017, 146; Tahiev 2021, 15). In Ukraine, such phenomena manifested themselves mainly in labour migrations from other countries of the post-Soviet space, where Azerbaijan was the only country with a Shia majority. That is why ethnic (who have not been living in Ukraine for the first generation) Muslim Shi'ites are mainly Azerbaijanis (Tahiev 2021, 15).

Counting the exact number of Shi'ites and Muslims in Ukraine, in general, is complicated by a number of factors. The last official population census in Ukraine was conducted in 2001 and was differentiated only by ethnicity, meaning there was no official population census based on religion in Ukraine (State Statistics Committee of Ukraine 2001). It is not entirely correct to

assume that the number of representatives of the Azerbaijani and other diasporas will reflect the number of Shi'ites since many of them may be Sunnis or representatives of other religions/beliefs. Thus, for example, in Azerbaijan itself, according to the Administrative Department of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, the Muslim population consists of approximately 85% Shia and 15% Sunni (Religion in Azerbaijan, Presidential library), or 65% Shi'ites and 35% Sunnis, according to the State Committee on Religious Associations of the Republic of Azerbaijan (Dini demografiya). Also, calculations are complicated since some Azerbaijanis are not religious and are not practising/observant Muslims. For example, one of the former Sunni leaders of Ukraine Said Ismagilov stated that there are Shia communities in Kyiv and Kharkiv, mostly represented by Azerbaijanis, and most of them are “weakly religious” (*Islam w Ukraini* 2016).

The rest of the Shia groups in Ukraine are represented mainly by students from countries with a Shia population such as Lebanon, Iraq, Iran, India, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. There are also migrants from these countries. Many of these Shi'ites come to Ukraine for a limited time, often during their studies. The conversion of Ukrainians to Shi'ism in Ukraine is a rather rare phenomenon, although such cases are known (*Filosofiya i religieznavstvo* 2016). This is due to the fact that the Shi'ites of Ukraine are focused on their community in the sense that they are not engaged in active propaganda of Islam, in contrast to the Sunnis. The Shia population of Ukraine is represented mainly by Twelver Shi'ites.¹ Even if representatives of other denominations such as Ismailis² and Zaydis³ live in Ukraine, most often they join religious events of either other Shia or Sunni groups (Tahiev 2021, 16).

Some organisations and groups are not institutionalised, which means, they do not create “religious organizations” in accordance with the Ukrainian legislation, and so it is very difficult to document their activities. Based on the existing registry information, researchers can draw up an overall “picture” of the country’s religious diversity. As of January 1, 2022, about 100 Muslim organisations and 7 religious associations were registered in Ukraine, and only 9 were Shia among them (State Service of Ukraine for Ethnopolitics and Freedom of Conscience 2022). While most Sunni communities are institutionalised and operate as parts of clerical boards or spiritual administrations (*Dukhovne upravlinnia musulman Ukrainy*) (see Yarosh’s chapter in this volume), Shia communities don’t have such structure and usually exist as separated self-governed communities, mainly distributed in different regions of the country. In some cases, religious groups are officially registered as community organisations (*bromadska orhanizatsiia*). For example, the Shia organisation “Bait az-Zakhra” in Luhansk existed in this form for a long time.

The largest Shia communities in Ukraine are found in Kyiv, Kharkiv, and Odesa. Each city hosts several religious organisations, typically distinguished by linguistic criteria. Azerbaijani communities have their own dedicated places of worship, and Arabs from Lebanon and Iraq usually have their specific locations for religious activities and gatherings. Representatives of other ethnicities,

due to their smaller numbers, often join the gatherings of these two more numerous groups. Additionally, Shia Muslims from less numerous groups, represented mainly by temporarily staying students or workers in Ukraine, often hold their meetings only on special days, primarily during the first ten days of the month of Muharram, associated with memorial rites commemorating the tragic death of Imam Hussein in Karbala, Iraq. The biggest Ukrainian Shia mosque is the Imam Ali mosque in Kharkiv, which is often referred to as the “Azerbaijani mosque.” Usually, Shia Muslims gather only within their religious buildings and do not hold public events outside of them. Exceptions are Shia Muslims of Odessa, who every year organise public processions on the Day of Ashura to honour the memory of Imam Hussein and his companions (Religious Information Service of Ukraine 2021).

Ukrainian Shia communities during the war

It was mentioned above that the largest Shia communities were in the most populated cities of Ukraine. Such distribution of Ukrainian Shia population arose after the Russian attack on Ukraine in 2014, especially the start of the war in Donbas. Most Muslims, including Shi’ites, lived in the south and east of Ukraine. After the outbreak of hostilities in the region, many of them became internally displaced persons, and many religious centres were closed or moved. Until 2014, there were three Shia centres in Donetsk and Luhansk: one Arab centre in Luhansk, and two centres in Donetsk – Arab and Azerbaijani. Soon after they were closed, many religious items and books from local libraries were transferred to fellow believers and communities in other regions of Ukraine. There is also information that in Donetsk, among representatives of the Azerbaijani Shia community, there were attempts to re-open a religious centre, but they were unsuccessful.⁴

Since Ukrainian Shia communities exist as autonomous groups, there is no official body or person to represent them. Sunni clerical boards have representatives and heads, which are called Muftis who took different positions when in February of 2022 the full-scale Russian invasion started: most of them condemned this war, and some even joined the army as soldiers or chaplains and encouraged other Muslims to do the same (*Islam w Ukraini* 2022). Shia religious groups do not have such official representatives since they have very different traditional religious authorities, which will be discussed in detail in the next section of the chapter. Even though Shia groups are not institutionalised, they do cooperate in different fields. One of the most active in this field is the Centre of Islamic Culture in Ukraine and Eastern Europe “Ahli-beyt,” located in Kyiv and led by theologian Namik Babakhanov. The Centre runs the website ahlibeyt.org in Russian and Ukrainian, which contains information about the Islamic world, Muslim communities, Islamic culture, the foundations of Islam, Muslim philosophers, and offers the opportunity to get answers to religious questions. There is also a book and video library with materials about Shi’ism and Islam

in general. The main feature of this website is that it is one of the very few online medias about Shi'ism available in Ukrainian (Tahiev 2023c). On February 24, 2022, on the Facebook page of Namik Babakhanov and on the website of "Ahli-beyt," it was posted that Muslims condemn the attack of the Russian Federation on Ukraine:

We, Muslims, have always been against aggression and occupation of any country in the world. Unfortunately, military actions and wars eventually lead to this. Today, the military attack of the Russian Federation on Ukraine is assessed as a violation of the rights and sovereignty of an independent state. On behalf of our centre of Islamic culture in Ukraine and Eastern Europe "Ahli-beyt" and on behalf of the Muslims of Ukraine, we strongly condemn the large-scale military attack of the Russian Federation on Ukraine and demand from the Russian Federation an immediate cessation of hostilities, aggression, and occupation

(*Ahli-beyt* 2022b).⁵

Shia Muslims, like Sunni Muslims (see Yarosh's chapter in this volume) and many other Ukrainians, became very actively engaged in various kinds of patriotic activities: joining the Ukrainian army, volunteering in various spheres, and turning mosques or other religious buildings into humanitarian hubs for the distribution of necessary food products and medicine. During the war, Shia mosques in Ukraine did not receive direct damage, but the areas around them in Kyiv and Kharkiv suffered. For example, on the morning of February 27, 2022, the Russian army struck a residential area of Kyiv and in the Troyeshchina district; as a result of the shelling, residential buildings and the courtyard of the Fatimiya mosque were damaged (*Ahli-beyt* 2022a).

Changes happened in the cultural life of Ukrainian Shia Muslims too. There are initiatives at Ukrainisation of the religious life of Ukrainian Shi'ites. In 2021, a group of translators under the leadership of Namik Babakhanov published the first Shia translation of the Qur'an into Ukrainian entitled "Koran: Pereklad smysliv Ukrainskoyu movoyu" (*Ahli-beyt* 2021; Yakubovych 2023). If the preparation and publication of this translation mainly were not related to the war, then the situation with the next translation is different. It was prepared by the Ukrainian Shia convert Oleg Ali Balekhov from Kharkiv, who stressed the importance of the existence of Shia literature in the Ukrainian language and translated the Qur'an from Russian (the basis was the Shia translation of the Qur'an by Nazim Zeynalov) into Ukrainian. At the time of the writing this chapter, the translation is ready for publication, and the author is looking for suitable publishers. Despite all this, the main languages in the religious life of Shi'ites in Ukraine, including sermons in mosques, remain the native languages of ethnic groups, that is, predominantly Azerbaijani and Arabic.

Religious authorities in Shia communities

Almost all the clerics of Ukrainian Shia communities received religious education in Iran, less often in Iraq or Azerbaijan. It is closely related to the fact that Iran and Iraq are the world centres of Shia religious education and knowledge (Tahiev 2023b, 10). Most high-level Shia clerics live in these countries, therefore students at religious seminaries can receive knowledge from the best specialists. At the same time in many cases, they do not need to worry about financial problems since religious education is free and students are provided with stipends. All expenses are usually covered by the funds of those Shia clerics who have a lot of independence and are the main religious authorities for Twelver Shia Muslims. This independence is possible because of the existing concept of *marja' at-taqlid* (imitation/following in practical matters of religion), which allows for maintaining the religious hierarchy and at the same time makes Shia Islam flexible and adaptable to contemporary realities. *Marja' at-taqlid* (Grand Ayatollahs / *Ayatollahs al-Uzma*) constitute the highest category in the Shia clerical hierarchy and are empowered to issue *fatwas* (religious decrees) that will be binding on their followers. At the same time *fatwas* have binding power only from a religious perspective, which means that following them is a matter of choice for the believer and there is no state or any other coercion for following these decrees. Also, such following is possible only in practical matters of religion since the theoretical foundations are usually common to all Twelver Shi'ites (Tahiev 2023b).

Following *marja'* is manifested in various practical aspects of the religious life of believers. For example, the beginning of the month of Ramadan and other dates of Muslim holy days depend on the lunar calendar, and there are many ways to determine whether a new month has begun or not. Some religious scholars allow the use of modern technologies such as telescopes or certain systems to determine the full moon and other phenomena. Other scholars rely only on the direct “eye vision” of the full moon when determining the dates of the lunar calendar. Therefore, there were cases when the Sunnis of Ukraine began or ended fasting on one day, and the Shi'ites on another (Muratova 2023, 149). And there were even cases when this date differed among Shi'ites too, depending on who they followed: for example, on one day for the followers of Khamenei and on another for the followers of Sistani.⁶ The difference in following a certain *marja'* is also very clear in matters of paying religious taxes, where one of the most important for Shi'ites is *khums*,⁷ and according to some Shi'ites, part of this tax is paid to the *marja'* that they follow. Subsequently, these funds are spent on religious purposes such as the construction of mosques and cultural centres, running theological seminaries, and helping the poor and needy. After the Islamic Revolution in Iran, the *marja'* term also became political, since *maraji* (plural from *marja'*) may have different views on various issues, including political ones.

At the moment, there are around 60 *marja' at-taqlid* in the world and almost all of them live in Iran and Iraq. But they have followers in many

countries, and in order to maintain contact with the latter, the representative offices of the grand ayatollahs were created in different cities and countries around the world. Due to a small number of Shi'ites in Ukraine, there are no such representative offices in this country. By the way, none of the leading Shia religious scholars made official statements on the Russian-Ukrainian war. In general, it should be noted that they very rarely take any definite position on political issues, especially when it does not concern Muslim-majority countries. Before moving on to the study of the reaction of Shi'ites in Ukraine to the policies pursued by Iran, it is necessary to consider the main trends in modern Shia political thought and the differences in the views of the prominent *maraji*.

According to the Shia doctrine, all authority should belong to the infallible (sinless) descendants from the family of the Prophet Muhammad, who are called Imams, and there are 12 of them. The last Imam went into occultation in the 10th century, and people have had no direct access to him since then. All Twelver Shi'ites agree that it currently is the era of the Major Occultation of the 12th Imam Mahdi. In this regard, there are different views on how Shi'ites should behave in this era. There is an Akhbari school within Twelver Shi'ism, who believe that only the Qur'an and hadith (traditions) from the Prophet and Imams should be followed. Meanwhile, most Shi'ites are Usuli, who recognise the possibility of additional interpretations of sacred primary sources and, in connection with this, the need for the existence of religious scholars that would do this as envisaged. There are many differences within this line of thought which relate to how comprehensive the role of the religious jurist is. Most Shia scholars tend to believe that the main area of responsibility of religious jurists is only issues of the practical aspects of religion. These main functions include issuing legal opinions and adjudicating religious issues for the believers, and administering justice based on extrapolations from hadith (Mavani 2013, 213). The jurist has a limited right to govern and intervene in a certain area in order to preserve individual welfare, which means that scholars' authority cannot be extended to the social or public welfare of the country. Based on that, the real authority belongs only to the Prophet and the Imams, therefore religious scholars and jurists have competence only in two fields: adjudication or judgeship and issuing of legal opinions. This point of view is shared by the majority of Iraqi *marja'*, the most influential of which are Ayatollahs Khu'i and Sistani. The latter also recently added that if a jurist wants to possess authority in the state's administration, he must secure the people's general approval (Mavani 2013, 217). At the same time, Sistani, having a very large influence in Iraq, generally remains apolitical and rarely interferes in political affairs.

There are also scholars who believe that the authority of a religious jurist can extend to the political sphere. Ayatollah Khomeini was a pioneer in this area and the result of this is the current political system of the Islamic Republic of Iran. He presented a new view on the concept of *wilayat al-faqih*, where he expanded the jurists' scope and authority, although his own views changed

over the course of time. Khomeini first wrote that religious scholars should oversee the legislative and executive branches of the monarchy to ensure that all laws comply with Sharia law. Then he argued that the clergy's primary function is guiding the country. Finally, he began to claim for a jurist

a full-fledged and comprehensive authority that would permit the jurist-consult to override primary injunctions and suspend or void acts of worship or articles of the Constitution if he deemed such actions to be in the interest of the people and the state

(Mavani 2013, 215).

Thus, in the Islamic Republic of Iran, the position of *Rahbar* (Supreme Leader) was created, who essentially has a very large power, oversees all branches of government, and in many ways shapes the foreign and domestic policies of the country. This position is held for life and after the death of Khomeini, Ali Khamenei became the Supreme Leader, whose views are in many ways a continuation of the views of Khomeini, since he was a student of the latter.

The most popular *marja' al-taqlid* in Ukraine, similarly to other parts of the world, are the Grand Ayatollahs Ali Khamenei and Ali Sistani. Shi'ites choose the *marja'* they are willing to follow, and this *marja'* must be the most knowledgeable among other jurists. In addition to this, there are also several other criteria put forward for the *marja'*. According to Khamenei (2009), there are conditions that a *marja'* must meet: to be a man, an adult, capable, a Shia (recognizing 12 Imams), a *mujtahid* (reach the level of *ijtihad*)⁸, law born (that is, in an official marriage), righteous, and fair. In accordance with (mandatory) precaution, one must be alive and the most competent in matters of Islamic law. Also, considering the importance of this "position," based on mandatory precautions, it is required of him that he is not a "a slave to his passions" and does not have "excessive love for worldly things." According to Sistani's *fatwas* (1999), the *marja'* must be fair, alive, of age, male, and Shia (follower of the 12 Imams). In certain issues that are subject to differences in the views of *mujtahids*, it is necessary to follow a scholar who has higher morals and more knowledge than other *mujtahids*. So essentially it all comes down to two main criteria: knowledge and justice.

Here I move on to assess how Shi'ites in Ukraine have responded to current events and how differences in political views among prominent religious scholars influence traditional religious authorities in local communities. When asked about their attitude towards the political decisions of Khamenei and the alleged Iranian support of Russia, respondents gave different answers. The majority of them were critical stating that "for Iran, state policy is more important than Islam."⁹ One respondent mentioned that he started to question Iranian policies after the crash of the Boeing 737-8KV in 2020.¹⁰ The fact that Iranian authorities initially denied having any responsibility for the aircraft's destruction and only after the investigation revealed their fault, forced

the respondent to become more critical of Iranian policy, and then he even stopped doing *taqlid* Khamenei by becoming a follower of the more apolitical Ayatollah Sistani.

Another respondent viewed the war in Ukraine as part of a political game in which, as the US supports Ukraine, US-sanctioned Iran moves closer to Russia. It was interesting to find out that even people with such positions still concentrate on “positive parts” such as Iran’s recognition of Ukrainian territorial integrity, non-recognition of occupied lands as part of Russia, and not openly supporting aggressors. There were also respondents who took more neutral positions, indicating that “we do not know the intentions behind this (i.e. political situation), but violence and the killing of innocent people cannot be justified” and “religious leaders of such levels should keep humanity first.”¹¹

Relevant information can also be seen in respondents’ answers to questions about the known cases of *marja’* change due to the latter’s political views. As I mentioned earlier, Shi’ites are free to choose the *marja’* they follow and theoretically can change it depending on who is the most knowledgeable and fair jurist. It can be seen in the answer of one of the respondents that “Ayatollah Khamenei favouring Russia in this current war made a lot of people question their choices.”¹² Many respondents consider various aspects of Khamenei’s foreign policy to be wrong (in Syria, Yemen, or Azerbaijan). One of them mentioned also Iranian internal policy stating that it caused many people not just to change *marja’* but even to leave Islam completely. Since the majority of Shi’ites in Ukraine are (and respondents are too) Azerbaijanis, they most often referred to the Iranian policy regarding Azerbaijan. One of them for example said that “due to Iran’s policy against Azerbaijan, there were those who changed their *marja’* in Azerbaijan, and I think these numbers are not small.”¹³ This question is very closely related to the intersection of ethnic and national identities with religious ones, which will be discussed in the next section of the chapter.

Most of my interlocutors identified themselves as Sistani’s followers. Among them, there were also those who previously followed Khamenei and later changed their *marja’*. Also, some of them said that they know many cases when, during the Russo-Ukrainian war, Shi’ites in Ukraine stopped doing *taqlid* Khamenei. But it is very difficult to make assumptions about exact numbers because in many cases this is a personal matter for everyone and, moreover, there is no statistical data in this area anywhere.

Thus, one can see that the war in Ukraine and the political views and decisions of certain religious scholars greatly influenced the traditional religious authorities in local communities. Moreover, it is very interesting that this applies not only to the Shia communities in Ukraine but also in Azerbaijan and many other countries. These contexts, based on the example of Shia communities in different countries, are quite important and require separate studies.

Collective memory of Ukrainian Shi'ites

One of the pioneers in the field of collective memory, Maurice Halbwachs, wrote that collective memory is not the same as formal history and differs from history in at least two respects. First, it retains from the past only what still lives or is capable of living in the consciousness of the groups keeping the memory alive and by definition it does not exceed the boundaries of this group. Second, there are several collective memories, meanwhile history is unitary and it can be said there is only one history. It can be represented as the universal memory of the human species, but there is no universal memory and every collective memory requires the support of a group limited in space and time (Halbwachs 1980, 79–85). Meanwhile Jeffrey Olick defined collective memory as public discourses about the past as wholes or narratives and images of the past that speak in the name of collectivities. At the same time, he advocates to use collective memory as “a sensitizing term for a wide variety of mnemonic processes, practices, and outcomes, neurological, cognitive, personal, aggregated, and collective,” where a better term for such an approach would be “social memory studies” (Olick 1999, 345–346). Olick (1999, 337–341) also makes distinctions between “collective memory” and “collected memory,” where in the latter social frameworks shape what individuals remember and it is “only individuals who do the remembering.”

In this section, I use the theoretical developments of these scholars as well as other approaches to the concept of collective memory. This concept refers to complex social processes in which a society or social group constructs and reproduces its relation to the past, and it mainly refers to cultural practices and social knowledge about the past which influences emergence, transformation, and extinction of social identities (Ijabs 2014, 991). It is a shared recollection and mental representation of past events that are common to members of a social group. It serves a range of functions, such as establishing and maintaining relationships, teaching or entertaining others, and supporting group identity (APA Dictionary of Psychology n.d.). In the context of the war in Ukraine, the latter function is the most relevant because here we see the intersection of different types of identities and attempts of communities to preserve their unique ethno-religious identity both in normal times and during a crisis/trauma.

We need to look at whether research has been done on Shia communities in such moments of crisis or trauma and if there are connections or similarities within the Ukrainian context. There are various studies devoted to Shia communities during wars, conflicts, and other crisis/trauma situations, but most of them concern Shi'ites during the civil wars in Lebanon or Syria, the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s, and in Iraq after the fall of Saddam's regime (Abukhalil 1990; Mumtaz 2003). All these contexts are not relevant for the Shi'ites of Ukraine since the local communities are not so numerous and influential. For comparison, we could take the case of Shi'ites in the US where they also form a small minority. One of the crisis/trauma moments for the American

Shi'ites was the well-known events of September 11, 2001. Liyakat Takim (2009, 211–212) writes that like other Muslims, American Shi'ites have been held responsible for terrorist attacks, even though none of the terrorists were Shi'ites. They had to apologise for actions they did not commit and condemn actions they never condoned. In public discourse, Shi'ites were associated with terrorist groups who, ironically, would destroy them too since Shia Muslims are one of the biggest victims of Islamist terrorist organisations. They started to publicly show their patriotism, which was manifested in public condemnation of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, hanging American flags, holding food drives to help the homeless and poor, changing the tone of sermons in many mosques, where instead of denouncing American society and values, they have focused on devotional, ethical, and historical topics (Takim 2009, 211–212).

Some of these types of behaviour, especially regarding volunteer activities and helping those in need, are relevant for the Shi'ites of Ukraine, but here it is worth noting a slightly different context of the situation and the reasons for this behaviour. Even though Iran's stance on the war could affect Ukrainians' attitudes towards Shia Muslims, in Ukraine neither Shi'ites nor Muslims in general are considered the source or side of this conflict, so there is no need for local Muslims to justify themselves in any way; their civic activism has a completely different nature than in the US case described above.

The collective memory of Ukrainian Shi'ites can be viewed in several contexts. Primarily from a purely religious perspective when we consider how Shi'ites appeal to the sacred Shia Islamic history and project the events of the past onto the events of the present. One of my interlocutors indicated that every Muslim must treat everything that happens fairly and justly. Therefore, he thinks that it is wrong for Iran to act in support of Russia in the war with Ukraine since Russia is the aggressor, who took by force the land of its neighbour. He believes such things cannot be justified, and religion shows us that we must be on the side of the oppressed. The last point is very interesting from a theological point of view. This is because the Shi'ites, as I mentioned earlier, are a minority not only in Ukraine but throughout the world, and almost the entire history of Shi'ism is that they were persecuted and were an oppressed group. This continues to this day and can be seen in the persecutions of Shi'ites in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Syria, and some other countries (Hawley 2017). There are also many narrations in Shia hadith collections that say Allah is on the side of the oppressed, that the prayer of the oppressed very quickly reaches Him, that it is prohibited to oppress and to help oppressors, and there are severe punishments for the oppressors (Shirazi 2001).

We can also discuss the intersection of national and ethnic identities with religious identity, as we need to consider the specifics of local Muslim communities in Ukraine, where ethnicity is highly significant and closely intertwined with religious identity. This is especially visible in the cases when local Shia communities are represented, not by ethnic Ukrainians, but by representatives of different diasporas. In the second section of the chapter, I pointed out that the Shia communities of Ukraine are divided along ethnic and linguistic lines.

Speaking about the specifics of local religious groups, one should note their close ties with their kin-states. The basis of each religious community was not only the language (for example in the Arab centres preaching is in Arabic, in Azerbaijan – in Azerbaijanian) but also local ethnic and cultural characteristics and certain connections with the historical homeland. For example, if we consider the Azerbaijani Shia centres, in addition to the commemorative dates of the Muslim calendar common to all Shi'ites, they gather on important dates related to the history of Azerbaijan: meetings are held on February 26 (the date of the Khojaly genocide/Xocalı soyqırımı, which was the largest massacre in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict)¹⁴, on January 20 (Bloody January/Qanlı Yanvar or Black January/Qara Yanvar when units of the Soviet Army suppressed political opposition in Baku, killing more than a hundred civilians)¹⁵ and others. These events are associated with memorable days from Azerbaijani history, during which they remember those who died, read prayers for them, and hold memorial dinners. When non-Azerbaijani Shi'ites visited the mosque on these days, they would not understand the specifics of these memorable dates, which are important primarily for Azerbaijanis as an ethnic group but are reflected in their religious life as well.

Anar Valiyev (2014) stated that for the Azerbaijani public, the situation around Ukraine already from 2014 was highly reminiscent of the Karabakh conflict: Russian occupation of Crimea and the rise of separatist-led fighting in the Donbas appeared to closely parallel Russia's actions in support of Armenia's occupation of Karabakh during the 1990s; the shooting down of Malaysian Airlines Flight 17 over a separatist-controlled area of eastern Ukraine is reminiscent of the shooting down by Karabakh separatists of an Iranian airliner in 1993. So, many Azerbaijanis, especially in Ukraine, make parallels with the Karabakh war viewing Armenia and Russia as aggressors and Ukraine and Azerbaijan as victims defending their territorial integrity. In the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, although Iran insisted on the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan, at the same time fearing the increasing influence of Turkey and Israel on Azerbaijan, it often supported Armenia. In this regard, many Azerbaijanis had dissonance, given that most Iranians and Azerbaijanis are Shi'ites (and therefore "brothers in religion"), but at the same time, Iran did not support Azerbaijan to the same extent as some other countries. All of this became more complicated due to the political situation within Azerbaijan where the Iranian system was viewed as a threat to the local secular regime. In different ways, it led to the loss of popularity of Khamenei due to Iranian policy and local Azerbaijani agenda. We could see confirmations of it in the examples of some of my respondents who drew parallels between Russia and Armenia as aggressors and Ukraine and Azerbaijan as countries defending their territorial integrity¹⁶ and criticised different aspects of Iranian international policy. One can see a reflection of the issue in the statement of one of my interlocutors that there were big numbers of those who changed their *marja'* in Azerbaijan "due to Iran's policy against Azerbaijan."

Conclusion

Thus, we can see the influence of the Russian-Ukrainian war on various processes occurring in the Shia communities of Ukraine. On the one hand, it is the impact on the religious and ordinary life of people associated with forced relocation, closure, or destruction of cultural and religious centres, and the like. One can see how mosques and religious buildings transformed into humanitarian aid centres; some local Shi'ites became actively involved in volunteer activities or joined the Ukrainian army. On the other hand, war affects traditional religious authorities in local groups which could be traced on the *marja' at-taqlid* system. Iran's alleged support for Russia and its domestic and foreign policies, as well as some statements by Grand Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, have raised doubts among some Shi'ites and prompted some of them to choose the more apolitical Ayatollah Ali Sistani or other *marja'* as religious authorities.

We can also see various analogies with events of the past and present, associated with different types of identities of local Shi'ites. First, there is the collective memory of Shi'ites of Ukraine as well as Shi'ites around the world, where they put in the first place the struggle for justice, the fight against tyranny, injustice, and oppression, as what their religion encourages them to do – especially considering the importance in the Shia Islam of Imam Hussein's uprising against Yazid's tyranny, oppression, and injustice. Second, we are talking about the characteristics of local Ukrainian Shi'ites, especially related to their ethno-cultural identity. Most of all, this was reflected on the example of the collective memory of the Azerbaijani Shi'ites of Ukraine, who, even in pre-war times, held events in the mosques related to the history of their homeland, and now project their experiences as Azerbaijanis onto the events that they are now experiencing as Ukrainians. This is manifested in the fact that they regularly commemorate historical events related to the past of their people in their religious centres and consider it as part of their religious life. It was also interesting to find out how some of them project the events taking place in their historical homeland with the events that they are experiencing now in Ukraine, for example, projecting the events around the Karabakh war onto the current Russian-Ukrainian war.

Acknowledgements

The research was carried out within the framework of a project supported by the Philipp Schwartz Fellowship (Alexander von Humboldt Foundation). Open Access is provided by the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity.

Notes

- 1 Twelver (also Ithnaashari, Imami or Jafari) Shi'ites is the most widespread denomination in Shia Islam, comprising about 85% of all Shia Muslims. They recognise

- 12 infallible Imams who are divinely ordained religious and spiritual leaders of Muslims after Prophet Muhammad. The First Imam was Ali ibn Abu Talib and all other Imams are descendants of his marriage with Muhammad's daughter Fatima. Nowadays Twelver Shia Muslims are the majority in Iran, Iraq, Azerbaijan, and Bahrain, and significant minorities in India, Pakistan, Lebanon, Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, and other countries.
- 2 Ismaili is a denomination in Shia Islam, who accept Ismail ibn Jafar (721–755) as Imam after Jafar al-Sadiq (702–765), who is recognised as the sixth Imam by Twelver and Ismaili Shi'ites both. Therefore, from that time they accepted other Imams as religious authority and were also divided into many different groups such as Nizaris, Dawoodi Bohras, and many others.
 - 3 Zaydi is a denomination of Shia Islam that arose after the rebellion of Zayd ibn Ali (694–740) against the Umayyad Caliphate. This formed the basis of their theological ideas, according to which a person can become an Imam if he is a descendant of Prophet Muhammad and makes an armed call to fight injustice. Nowadays Zaydi Shia Muslims are a significant minority in Yemen.
 - 4 From interviews with representatives of Ukrainian Shia communities.
 - 5 This is my translation of the statement from Russian into English.
 - 6 From interviews with representatives of Ukrainian Shia communities.
 - 7 Khums is a religious tax where Muslims pay one-fifth of their acquired wealth (sometimes from certain sources such as owned grain, cattle, gold, etc.). It is distributed between orphans, needy, travellers, and the descendants of the Prophet Muhammad, where the latter in Shia Islam is considered as a share of Imam and there are different opinions about where the Imam's share should be paid in the age of the Imam's Major Occultation. See more: Tahiev, Akif. 2024. "Khums in the Shia religious tradition." *Religiovedenie* 1: 59–66. https://doi.org/10.22250/20728662_2024_1_59.
 - 8 *Mujtabid* is a religious scholar eligible to do *ijtihad* i.e. independently interpret the Qur'an and Sunna and derive religious decrees from them. Reaching this level requires many years of special religious education.
 - 9 Excerpt from an interview with an Ukrainian Shia Muslim of Azerbaijani origin (45 y.o.) on March 30, 2023.
 - 10 It was an international civilian passenger flight from Tehran to Kyiv, operated by Ukraine International Airlines, which on January 8, 2020, was shot down by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps shortly after takeoff, killing all 9 members of the crew and 167 passengers aboard. The situation happened amidst heightened tensions between Iran and the US, which occurred as a result of the assassination of Iranian general Qasem Soleimani carried out by the US.
 - 11 Excerpt from an interview with an Ukrainian Shia Muslim of Indian origin (28 y.o.) on April 5, 2023.
 - 12 Ibid.
 - 13 Excerpt from an interview with an Ukrainian Shia Muslim of Azerbaijani origin (42 y.o.) on May 1, 2023.
 - 14 The Khojaly massacre was the mass killing of a few hundred Azerbaijani civilians by Armenian forces and the 366th Guards Motor Rifle Regiment of the dissolving Soviet Ground Forces in the town of Khojaly on February 26, 1992.
 - 15 Bloody January was a violent crackdown on Azerbaijani nationalism and anti-Soviet sentiment in Baku on January 19–20, 1990, as part of a state of emergency during the dissolution of the Soviet Union, which led to at least 147 killed and 800 injured civilians.
 - 16 Excerpt from an interview with an Ukrainian Shia Muslim of Azerbaijani origin (48 y.o.) on April 30, 2023.

References

- Abukhalil, Asad. 1990. "Syria and the Shiites: Al-Asad's Policy in Lebanon." *Third World Quarterly* 12 (2): 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436599008420231>.
- Ahli-beyt*. 2021. "A New Complete Translation of the Qur'an into Ukrainian Was Published in Kyiv." Accessed December 10, 2023. <https://ahlibeyt.org/news/tpost/zne8237fd1-u-kiv-vidano-novii-povnii-pereklad-koran>.
- Ahli-beyt*. 2022a. "In Kyiv, in Troyeshchyna, a Russian Shell Hit the Courtyard Where the Fatimiyya Muslim Mosque is Located." March 1, 2022. Accessed December 10, 2023. <https://ahlibeyt.org/tpost/yyo90b8631-v-kieve-na-troeschine-rossiiskii-snaryad>.
- Ahli-beyt*. 2022b. "Ukrainian Muslims Strongly Condemn Russia's Large-scale Military Attack on Ukraine." March 1, 2022. Accessed December 10, 2023. <https://ahlibeyt.org/tpost/3ir0c71t1l-ukrainskie-musulmane-reshitelno-osuzhday>.
- APA Dictionary of Psychology. n.d. "Collective Memory." Accessed December 10, 2023. <https://dictionary.apa.org/collective-memory>.
- "Dini demografiya." [Religious demography]. Accessed December 10, 2023. <https://2009-2017.state.gov/documents/organization/134425.pdf>.
- Filosofiya i religieznavstvo*. 2016. "Interview with Oleg Balekhov on the Topic: The Path from an Orthodox Priest to a Muslim Shiite, as Well as Shiism in Ukraine." March 14, 2016. <https://tureligious.com.ua/yntervyu-s-olehom-balehovym-na-temu-put-ot-pravoslavnoho-svyaschennyka-k-musulmanyinu-shyytu-a-takzhe-shyyzm-v-ukrayne/>.
- Halbwachs, Maurice. 1980. *The Collective Memory*. Translated by Francis J. Ditter and Vida Yazdi Ditter. New York: Harper & Row.
- Hawley, Emily. 2017. "ISIS Crimes Against the Shia: The Islamic State's Genocide Against Shia Muslims." *Genocide Studies International* 11 (2): 160–181. <https://doi.org/10.3138/gsi.11.2.02>.
- Ijabs, Ivars. 2014. "Collective Memory." In *Encyclopedia of Quality of Life and Well-Being Research*, edited by Alex Michalos, 991–993. Dordrecht: Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-0753-5_436.
- Islam w Ukraini*. 2016. "In Ukraine Muslims Feel Freedom – Interview with Sheikh Said Ismagilov." July 19, 2016. Accessed December 10, 2023. <https://islam.in.ua/ru/intervyu/v-ukraine-musulmane-chuvstvuyut-svobodu-sheyh-said-ismagilov>.
- Islam w Ukraini*. 2022. "Muslims Are Fighting for Ukraine, Defending Europe and the Whole World." April 1, 2022. Accessed December 10, 2023. <https://islam.in.ua/ua/novyny-u-krayini/musulmany-voyuyut-za-ukrayinu-boronyachy-i-yevropu-i-cilyi-svit>.
- Khamenei, Sayyid Ali Hosseini. 2009. *Islamic law*. Translated by Nazim Zeynalov. Moscow: Istok.
- Krushynskiy, Vadim, and Kostyantyn Semchynsky. 2010. "Religious and Ideological Determinants and Social and Economic Context of Transformational Processes in Modern Iran." *Modern Ukrainian Politics. Politicians and Political Scientists About It* 20: 410–425.
- Mason, Jeff, and Steve Holland. 2023. "Russia Received Hundreds of Iranian Drones to Attack Ukraine, US Says." *Reuters*, June 10, 2023. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russia-has-received-hundreds-iranian-drones-attack-ukraine-white-house-2023-06-09/#:~:text=Iran%20has%20acknowledged%20sending%20drones,drones%20to%20Russia%20since%20August>.

- Mavani, Hamid. 2013. "Khomeini's Concept of Governance of the Jurisconsult '(Wilayat al-Faqih)' Revisited: The Aftermath of Iran's 2009 Presidential Election." *Middle East Journal* 67 (2): 207–228. <https://doi.org/10.3751/67.2.13>.
- Mumtaz, Kashif. 2003. "Iraqi Shias after Saddam Hussein: A Study in Political Behaviour." *Strategic Studies* 23 (4): 78–92.
- Muratova, Elmira. 2011. "Ukraine." *Yearbook of Muslims in Europe* 3: 583–593. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004207554_047.
- Muratova, Elmira. 2023. "‘Any Abu Can Post Anything on the Internet’: Religious Authorities of the Crimean Tatars in the Digital Age." In: *Virtual Islam in the Post-Soviet Space: Cyber Environment and Religious Authorities*, edited by Elmira Muratova and Zilya Khabibullina, 131–154. Baku: Idrak.
- Olick, Jeffrey K. 1999. "Collective Memory: The Two Cultures." *Sociological Theory* 17 (3): 333–348. <https://doi.org/10.1111/0735-2751.00083>.
- "Religion in Azerbaijan." Administrative Department of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Presidential library. Accessed December 10, 2023. https://files.preslib.az/projects/remz/pdf_en/atr_din.pdf.
- Religious Information Service of Ukraine. 2021. "Odessa Shia Muslims Held a Procession to Honour the Memory of Imam Hussein." Accessed December 10, 2023. https://risu.ua/ru/odesskie-musulmane-shiity-shestviem-pochtili-pamyat-imama-husejna_n121069.
- Shanneik, Yafa, Chris Heinhold, and Zahra Ali. 2017. "Mapping Shia Muslim Communities in Europe: Local and Transnational Dimensions." *Journal of Muslims in Europe* 6 (2): 145–157. <https://doi.org/10.1163/22117954-12341345>.
- Shirazi, Sayyid Abdul Husayn Dastghaib. 2001. *Greater Sins*. Vol. 2. Translated by Sayyid Athar Husayn S.H. Rizvi. Mumbai: Islamic Study Circle.
- Sistani, Sayyid Ali Hussein. 1999. *Practical Precepts of Islam*. Translated by Nazim Zeynalov. Imam Ali organisation.
- State Service of Ukraine for Ethnopolitics and Freedom of Conscience. 2022. "Report on the Provision of Churches and Religious Organizations of Ukraine with Religious Buildings and Premises Adapted for Prayer Rooms as of January 1, 2022." Accessed December 10, 2023. <https://dess.gov.ua/statistics-rel/>.
- State Statistics Committee of Ukraine. 2001. "The Composition of the Population of Ukraine According to the Results of the All-Ukrainian Population Census." Accessed December 10, 2023. <http://2001.ukrcensus.gov.ua/rus/results/general/nationality/>.
- Tahiev, Akif. 2021. "Minority within a Minority: Shia Community in Ukraine." *International Journal of Islamic Thought* 19 (June): 14–20. <https://doi.org/10.24035/ijit.19.2021.191>.
- Tahiev, Akif. 2023a. "Imam Hussain through the Eyes of Ukrainian Orientalists." Materials of International Conference "Imam Hussain and Orientalism," held by the Warith al-Anbiya Institute in Karbala, Iraq, May 12–13, 2023.
- Tahiev, Akif. 2023b. "Prospects for Higher Shia Religious Education in Post-Soviet Countries." *Religions* 14 (7): 822. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14070822>.
- Tahiev, Akif. 2023c. "Shi'ism in the Post-Soviet Space: The Influence of New Media." In: *Virtual Islam in the Post-Soviet Space: Cyber Environment and Religious Authorities*, edited by Elmira Muratova and Zilya Khabibullina, 80–108. Baku: Idrak.
- Tahiev, Akif. 2024. "Khums in the Shia Religious Tradition." *Religiovedenie* 1: 59–66. https://doi.org/10.22250/20728662_2024_1_59.

- Takim, Liyakat Nathani. 2009. *Shi'ism in America*. New York University Press.
- The Iran Primer*. 2022. "Putin Visits Tehran for Strategic Talks." July 20, 2022. <https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2022/jul/20/putin-visits-tehran-strategic-talks>
- Valiyev, Anar. 2014. "Azerbaijan's Balancing Act in the Ukraine Crisis." *PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo* 352. Accessed December 10, 2023. https://www.ponarseurasia.org/wp-content/uploads/attachments/Pepm352_Valiyev_Sept2014-6.pdf.
- Yakubovych, Mykhaylo. 2023. "Qur'an Translation of the Week #153: A Shii Qur'an Translation into Ukrainian." Accessed December 10, 2023. <https://gloqur.de/quran-translation-of-the-week-153-a-shii-quran-translation-into-ukrainian/>.