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MINOO MIRSHAHVALAD

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- Peer Reviewed contents

## **How an Italian Amorphous Space Became a Twelver Shi'a Mosque**

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### **Abstract**

This paper aims to explore the sense of “mosque” for Italy’s Twelver Shi’as through the study of a Shi’a organisation based in Turin. Some comparative references to Shi’a centres in Padua and Milan will demonstrate different meanings of these spaces for their attendees. In the case of the Turin’s Shi’a centre two factors are deemed responsible in conferring mosque-ness to an a functional and abandoned place: gender relations and the nature of initiative shield within its headquarters.

**Keyword:** mosque, Twelver Shi’ism, Italy, communication channels, gender relations

### **Introduction**

The impossibility or difficulty of building Islamic worship places in Italy, due to the lack of agreement between Muslims and the Italian state, has been repeatedly underlined by jurists and sociologists (e.g. Ferrari 2000, Cilaro 2002, Aluffi B.P. 2004, pp. 139-140, Bettini 2008, pp. 71-74, Cardia and Dalla Torre 2015). The absence of such locals has made “mosque” a vague and controversial category. “The word mosque in Italy is used by the press, by politicians and by society itself to indicate any place where Muslims gather to pray” (Bombardieri, 2011, p. 54). To this statement we can add “also by scholars”, among whom “mosque” has become a macro-category or useful instrument for addressing any type of Islamic worship hall (Guolo, 1999, pp. 67-90, Guolo, 2003, Guolo, 2005, pp. 639-640, Blancat and di Friedberg, 2005, p. 1084, D’Agnolo Vallan, 2004, p. 64, Pacini, 2001, Negri and Scaranari Introvigne, 2009, Roggero, 2002, p. 135, Giudei, 2005, Lano, 2005). However, when it comes to a census of these locals, a

definition of “mosque” is inevitably required. In such surveys, Muslims’ places of congregation enjoy more specification and “mosque” is distinguished from other categories like Islamic association, centre, prayer hall and *mussallah* (Allam, Gritti, 2001, pp. 41-69, Allievi, 2003, pp. 27-32, 263-266, Allievi 2010, pp. 15-16). Bombardieri suggests that architectonic characteristics, capable of conferring visibility to Islamic worship halls, can be used as a criterion for being mosque (Bombardieri, 2011, p. 54, Bombardieri, 2014, pp. 53-54). Whereas other authors adopt functionalist approaches (Allievi, 2010, Caragiuli, 2013, pp. 76-77) for at least two reasons. They believe that some external features, such as minaret, are sometimes absent from mosques even in Islamic countries, while in Europe these features have only become a matter of identity-building and conflict (Allievi, 2010, p. 28, Rhazzali, 2013, p. 57), or because, in Islam the sacredness of space depends on human praxes instead of outward characteristics of worship places (Caragiuli, 2013, p. 80). Therefore, in Europe, Allievi declares that all places with three characteristics are eligible for this title: they should host “Muslims”, “to pray”, “on a regular basis” (Allievi, 2010, p.15). Notwithstanding his awareness of the inaccuracies in such a definition, according to him, in Europe the *function* of prayer and “its collective and public aspect” are what determine the essence of mosque. In his earlier book dedicated to the census of Islamic worship halls, he introduced an important criterion: they should welcome followers of all schools of Islamic thought (Allievi, 1993, p. 139). Interestingly, Allievi underscores the different meaning of a worship place for Shi’as without delving into it (Allievi, 1993, p. 140, Allievi, 2003, p. 61). In this way, the sense of worship place, like many other aspects of Twelver Shiism, has been studied only within general frame of Islam.

Aside from the opinions of outsiders, “mosque” carries different connotations among Twelver Shi’as as well. For followers of this faith who live in Italy, it is a place to share their religious solitude with those who bear similar set of values and experience this social context in almost a same manner. Mosque for a medieval Shi’a scholar is the place of *sujud* (prostration), thus any worship place or any Islamic worship place or even five points of the body that touch the earth during prostration can be called *masjid* (mosque) (Mirshahvalad, 2017,

p. 3). Mosque for an ayatollah, who is the leading expert of the modern jurisprudence of Twelvers, is a very specific place with clear characteristics that has nothing to do with immigrants' loneliness, scholars' labelling, literalist approaches of medieval scholars and Italians' politics. For ayatollahs, what distinguishes a mosque from other Shi'a structures, like *Husseiniyye*<sup>1</sup>, *takiyya*<sup>2</sup> and *mussallah*<sup>3</sup>, is neither minaret, nor dome, nor even the mere functions of gathering and prayer. Mosque, for an ayatollah, is a place built or donated specifically for Islamic prayer, which has received consecration through the process of *waqf*<sup>4</sup>. It can by no means change its function or be sold even if its site is destroyed; non-Muslims cannot enter it even to visit it as a historical monument and even if their presence does not entail any act of sacrilege. The access of children and mentally ill people, for some ayatollahs is *makruh* (detestable), for others is *haram* (prohibited) and if they enter, they should be controlled lest they disturb congregants during religious ceremonies. Moreover, women who have obtained the authorisation of their husbands to attend mosque, should have a specific place, distant from non-Mahrams'<sup>5</sup> gaze, to pray and practise ablution. Other initiatives like the projection of a film, playing sport, the creation of a library and

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<sup>1</sup>*Husseiniyye* is the name of congregational halls in Iran, Iraq and Lebanon where the martyrdom of the third Imam is mourned by Shi'as. The name comes from Hussein ibn Ali, the third Imam of Shi'a Muslims. (Ja'fariyan, 2004, p. 317). No specific ordinances have been envisaged for *Husseiniyyes*. (AsqariyyanJeddi, 1393/2014, pp. 46-47).

<sup>2</sup> Like *husseiniyye*, *takiyye* is a rather new Shi'a structure. Whenever there are not enough funds for the construction of *husseiniyye*, basements, warehouses and public passages can become *takiyye*. Sometimes benefactors make their homes available during mourning periods of Muharram for the ceremonies of this month (Asqariyyan Jeddi, 1393/2014, p. 47).

<sup>3</sup> Lit., the place of prayer. Traditionally, *mussallas* were built on the outskirts of the urban sphere for the celebration of the important Islamic festivals. They were plain and roofless buildings made of clay that could not have prestigious pulpits (like mosques). In contemporary times, *mussallas* have lost some of their traditional characteristics as they have become a combination of mosque and worship hall (HamzeNejad, Sa'adatJu, Ramezani, 1394/2015, pp. 41-57).

<sup>4</sup> According to the prevalent ideas of ayatollahs, a building can become mosque when the owner pronounces a declaration called *siqat al-waqf* testifying that he/she has ceded the place to public domain. Afterwards a Muslim may pray there and the place becomes a mosque. For an English definition (Kozlowski, 2004, pp. 730-732).

<sup>5</sup> The term Mahram corresponds to women's unmarriageable kin, e.g. father, brothers, grandfathers, uncles, sons, sons-in-law, etc. Given that sexual relationship is forever forbidden with these relatives, women are not bound to wear the veil in front of them.

the celebration of festivals should be approached with caution in order not to reprioritise prayer. Bearing in mind all these different definitions of mosque, we may ask: which type of mosque are Italian-based Shi'a worship places, and how, why and when do they gain the status of mosque?

In this paper, focused only on the biggest branch of Shi'ism, I aim to demonstrate that, as far as Twelver Shi'a worship places in Italy are concerned, there are factors that work as regulators of what I call "mosque-ness"; meaning that they decrease, increase and change the intensity of what creates mosque where such a structure is physically non-existent. Some European scholars cast doubt on the existence of specific, circumscribed and sacred space within the Islamic tradition, at least as it is perceived by Christians (Frishman, 1994, pp. 30-33, Allievi, 2003, p. 27, Vercellin, 1996, p. 113). However, in the context of migration the exigency of heterogenising the space (as Eliade would have said) is felt more, thus mosques are greatly desired by Muslims.

Twelver Shi'a organisations in Italy belong to one creed but they sharply vary in terms of national and linguistic composition of their attendees, and from an important aspect: the nature of their headquarters. I believe that, mosque-ness among Italy's Shi'as is not so much as a by-product of the function of prayer, but more the outcome of a synergy between two factors: Shi'as' attitudes towards their places of worship and Italians' perception of these spaces. These two factors are regulators of the level of mosque-ness of Shi'a worship places in Italy. The first one, which I consider their internal characteristic, promotes a certain type of human relations inside the worship places that is affected by the probable bonds of these organisations with the Iran's political representatives in Italy. The second one, deemed an external strand to this phenomenon, is the fruit of what the Italian context imparts to them.

To explain these dynamics, I will appeal to a Twelver Shi'a local based in Turin with some comparative references to other Shi'a organisations in Rome, Milan and Padua. After a general presentation of the Turin's Shi'a centre, we will see how two catalysts moulded an abandoned local, hardly definable and unusable, into a Shi'a mosque. The first one is accessory and gives a panorama of relations of two national groups in Turin, which follow



the same religion, yet have two different understandings of it. It will show how a division of power purified this institution from non-Shi'a interests. The second catalyst, instead, is crucial for it establishes the boundaries of the sacred space.

In order to undertake this study, besides ethnographic notes and semi-structured interviews conducted both with the executive committee and congregants of the Turin's Shi'a centre – registered in December 2009 under the name Centro Culturale Tohid (CT) – I carried out an analysis of the CT's communication channels that allowed me to reconstruct the history of the centre. This review is necessary as otherwise the process of change to which this centre was subject cannot be illustrated. Twenty people of the CT, aged from 20 to 62 were interviewed. They had different occupations and interests, but almost all of them had university degrees and prestigious jobs. During normal periods at the CT, this number represents the entire population of congregants, but throughout Muharram and the Nights of Qadr<sup>6</sup> the CT's population is five times more than the number of my interviewees. My study was not limited only to the CT's attendees. A female refugee who did not attend the CT because of her political concerns, but was a practicing Twelver Shi'a, was also taken into consideration. She was a Lebanese student from the University of Turin who knew the CT very well.

I chose ethnography and semi-structured interview as methods of data collection because the lack of sociological studies on Twelvers in Italy had left this field completely unknown, therefore, the formation of theories could occur only during the fieldwork. I chose my interviewees based on some of their specific characteristics such as, their attitudes towards the worship hall, their position in the community, and their social profile. I started visiting the CT from 10 November 2016 and continued attending it on Thursday evenings and for the whole month of Ramadan, apart from specific events like the commemoration of the martyrdom and birth of Imams and the Prophet. On the 9th of November 2017, I visited the CT for the last time when the commemoration of Arbain was supposed to be held. My Iranian nationality offered me the possibility of being easily inserted in the CT's context facilitating my contacts with Iranians,

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<sup>6</sup> Last ten odd nights of Ramadan

whereas with other nationalities extra effort was needed in order to gain their trust<sup>7</sup>. Being Iranian exonerated me from justifying my presence in this hall, therefore, for some months, I conducted a covered ethnography and only at the end of the itinerary I revealed the idea of this study to those whom I wanted to interview.

## 1. An overview

The appearance of the first Shi'a organisations in Italy can be traced back to the early 1990s in Trieste, Rome and Naples (Vanzan, 2004, p. 2, Bombardieri, 2011, pp. 199-201). However, the number of these centres continues to change in that some of them vanish because of their organisers' emigration to other Italian cities or abroad and some others commence their activities in response to Shi'a citizens' exigencies. Therefore, the information related to these organisations has to be constantly updated.

At the moment, Italy's Twelver Shi'as are mainly of Pakistani, Iranian, Afghan and Lebanese origin, however, a limited number (roughly 10%) of them come from countries like Iraq, Tunisia and Morocco. There are also a few male and female converts to Shi'ism who take part in activities and associations with the Shi'a immigrants. It is not possible to provide an exact estimate of the number of Shi'a Muslims in Italy, but it seems that around 1.5% of all Muslims in this country are Shi'a ("Sciiti in Italia", 2012, p. 17).

Since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Turin has been attracting immigrants from different parts of the world for its occupational opportunity. Currently almost 9.7% of the population of the Metropolitan city of Turin is composed of foreign immigrants<sup>8</sup>. It hosts more than 100 different religious communities (Pennacini, Díez, 2006, p. 5) that make it a good laboratory of multicultural cohabitation (ivi, p. 28). The city is a fertile land for cultural

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<sup>7</sup> While I was conducting this research, I discovered the importance of national belonging in trust building. Using Italian and English as lingua franca was helpful but could not compensate for the absence of national and linguistic bonds with other nationalities.

<sup>8</sup> See Rapporto 2015 dell'Osservatorio Interistituzionale sugli stranieri, [http://www.prefettura.it/torino/contenuti/Osservatorio\\_interistituzionale\\_sugli\\_stranieri-3842.htm](http://www.prefettura.it/torino/contenuti/Osservatorio_interistituzionale_sugli_stranieri-3842.htm), visited 11/06/2017.

associations. Apart from the CT, Iranians have another four cultural associations in Turin with differing levels of vitality. The Association of Islamic Students, the Association of Students of the Polytechnic, the Association of Iranians and the Associations of Iran-Italy. Whereas the Lebanese (the other main national component of the CT) do not have any organisation in this city. The reason maybe their smaller population size in Turin<sup>9</sup> or that they are less homogeneous in terms of religious affiliation.

In this northern Italian city, there is not any relationship of cause and effect between the presence of Shi'as and the emergence of the CT, since this organisation was formed many years after the presence of Iranian and Lebanese students and workers in Turin. This city has witnessed the presence of Shi'a citizens since 1990s; however, the birth of its first and only existing Shi'a worship hall was no more than seven years ago. Therefore, we cannot attribute the birth of the CT only to the growth of number of Shi'a citizens. As one of the senior members of the executive committee told me, for more than one decade they would gather in each other's apartments for congregational prayers. Later they were accommodated on the second floor of a school near Porta Palazzo, where the Asai Association had offered them a hall for their religious practices. In this school, they would gather with Afghan and Pakistani refugees, but the need for an independent worship place eventually propelled them to establish a self-governing headquarters.

Nowadays, the local of this organisation is a plain hall, almost 150 square metres, situated beside the inner courtyard of a building. It has one entrance for both sexes and, like many other Islamic worship halls, is deprived of security conditions envisaged by the Italian law for public spaces. The walls are embellished with the green, red and black flags of Imam Hussein, Abu al-Fadl and Imam Mahdi. Inside the hall, there is not any division between the sexes. There is a kitchen and a bathroom used by both men and women.

The CT was initially designed to welcome both Sunnis and non-Muslims who could join it to celebrate Christmas or conduct lectures

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<sup>9</sup> According to the Osservatorio Interistituzionale sugli stranieri in provincia di Torino, in 2015 there were 10.304 Iranians in this province while Lebanese were not more than 3.691 individuals. See [http://www.prefettura.it/torino/contenuti/Rapporto\\_2015-5350874.htm](http://www.prefettura.it/torino/contenuti/Rapporto_2015-5350874.htm)

on topics, such as the benefits of fasting in Ramadan. Currently its executive committee is composed of five members: two Lebanese and two Iranian men, and one Italian woman converted to Shi'ism. The committee is elected every five years by those members who pay an annual fee of 50 euro for their membership. The CT's regular meetings are held on Thursday evenings when a well-known Shi'a prayer, called *du'aKumeil* (lit. the supplication of Kumeil), is offered, however, the most important reasons for gathering are Qadrnights and the first ten days of Muharam when hundreds of Shi'as come to the CT.

Finding this centre was not easy. Initially, I did not even know that there was a Shi'a worship hall in Turin, but even my later awareness of its existence was not of any help. Firstly, because I did not know its name; secondly, even if I have known it, I would not have found it because on the Internet, you cannot find a website, email address or phone number for the CT, either in Italian, Persian or Arabic<sup>10</sup>. When I heard about it from a university professor, my search, by chance, ended up in an encounter with a Palestinian girl, who then put me in contact with a young Lebanese man who would attend the CT often. The hall is situated in Corso Emilia, but from the outside you cannot find any sign of a worship hall. The only indicator for an outsider is Ass. Culturale Tohid written on the doorbell.

During my visits, people in this centre were mainly of Iranian and Lebanese origin, but there was also a limited number of Shi'as from Tunisia, Morocco, Pakistan and Afghanistan, as well as a handful of converted Italians. They were from different age groups and professions. Some Iranians and Lebanese had already acquired Italian citizenship, some had a residence permit for work reasons, but a considerable number of them were students at the Polytechnic, which is Turin's main attractive quality for Iranian students.

### *1.1. Fromi dea to practice*

In the following two paragraphs, I will explain why Iranians founded this centre and what motivated them to abandon it. Most of

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<sup>10</sup> One of these lists belongs to the Associazione Islamica delle Alpi, which governs two principle "mosques" of Turin (Taiba and Rayan). This association on its website, presented as "portale dell'islam torinese" (portal of Islam in Turin), has published the names and addresses of fifteen "mosques" of Turin, but the name of Tohid Centre is not mentioned.

what I found out in this regard was the fruit of an analysis of the CT's means of communication, and some informal conversations made with the CT's initial founders.

Many Italian garages, basements and warehouses have changed their function to become Muslims' worship halls. The CT's headquarters, though, in 2009 was void of any function and utility. I heard different narratives about its original nature. Some of its first promoters talked about an abandoned carpenter workshop, some others remembered a ruined garage or a small factory, an Iranian physician, who was one of its first financiers, described its former status as a destroyed and dilapidated structure to which hardly one could attribute any function. It was then rented by some Iranian and Lebanese students and families who looked for an independent place for their religious practices as they had sometimes been targeted by Sunni Muslims because of the use of *mohr* (Ar., *turbah*) or the position of their hands. The space was then reconstructed, furnished and equipped with soundproofing materials while windows became completely blocked lest they disturb neighbours. Initially it was devoid of any flag and the completely white walls (as one can see in their old photos available on their Instagram and Telegram profiles) made it seem bigger and brighter. Nowadays, the disharmonic carpets and flags that cover the floor and walls – brought here from Karbala and Qom – have made it look smaller and feel suffocating. A current member of the executive committee, and also one of the participants, told me that this association was initially founded as a means to help Iranian students in different areas, such as applications for residence permits, finding jobs and accommodation. Nevertheless, the coincidence of the CT's birth with the aftermath of the Iran's presidential elections of 2009 had important consequences for its relations with Iranians. The years 2009 and 2010 had specific meaning for Iranians who lived abroad. Like other countries, Iranians in different cities of Italy organised manifestations in solidarity with the victims of the Iran's unrest. The CT, which was devised to be a reference point for Iranians, felt the effects of those upheavals. Some people, especially women who were initially interested in the foundation of such a centre – as one of its initiators told me – abandoned it as it was presumed to be in contact with Iran's political representatives; a reality that later transpired to not entirely be devoid

of truth. The consequence was that the CT remained without its initial Iranian supporters who had a different understanding of Shi'ism or had looked for a cultural association rather than a religious centre. As a result, the presence of Iranians decreased in such a way that during my final visits there was only three Iranian males, and not even one Iranian woman, despite the fact that in Turin, they are twice as many Iranians as there are Lebanese.

Nowadays, the association does not have to pay any rent, but it was impossible to identify the owner of its headquarters. Its current Lebanese director, during a formal interview, declined to clarify this question. The Iranian sources claim that it has been bought thanks to the funds of the World Forum for Proximity of Islamic Schools of Thought<sup>11</sup> established at the Ayatollah Khamenei's behest. An Iranian ex-member of the executive committee, about whom we will talk later, claims that the hall belongs to Iranians.

### *1.2. Communication channels and intra-religious tensions*

Although the CT, different from the Milan and Rome Shi'a centres, does not have a website, initially it used two forms of online communication: Telegram and Instagram applications. When I had not yet earned the trust of the CT's directors, these channels offered me priceless information about the internal relations of its members. The distance of the centre from the Iranian consulate and embassy causes a specific type of inter-national relations among its members, which is difficult to grasp at first glance. Obviously, dynamics of rivalry and internal conflicts, deemed as threats to the cohesion of a community, have to remain unmentioned. This fragility of social solidarity is higher in the case of «a minority within a minority» (Sachedina, 1994, pp. 3-13), namely Shi'as in the West. Nonetheless, I started to understand certain internal tensions of the CT through a comparison between its digital showcase and its realities.

The CT's Telegram channel was created on the 7<sup>th</sup> of November 2015 by one of the ex-members of its executive committee who, during his presence, had a crucial role in the CT's relations with the

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<sup>11</sup> See the blog of Hujat al-Islam Khoshkhu, who visited the CT in November 2014 and has written about it. He maintains that the location of the centre has been bought partly by the World Forum for Proximity of Islamic Schools of Thought. <http://khoshkhu.blog.ir/>. Visited 10/06/2017.

Iran's diplomatic representatives. I had the chance to experience two periods of presence and absence of this specific member of the executive committee whom I call Sadiq. This middle-aged Iranian man, unwilling to be interviewed, was always present in the hall and highly active in the organisation of events. He had developed close ties with the Iranian consulate of Milan, as well as the Iran-based religious and political authorities.

The first message posted on the CT's Telegram channel, dated the 13<sup>th</sup> of February 2016, was written in three languages: Italian, Arabic and Persian. In Italian, he declared, «the official channel of the Tohid Cultural Centre of Turin is created to give information about this centre presenting its religious and cultural activities». In Arabic he presented the centre as Markaz Tohid Turin Italy, whilst, in Persian it is called the Islamic Cultural Centre of Tohid. The adjective "Islami" cannot be anything but the invention of Sadiq as it does not appear in the Italian name of this association. As I heard from one of its first Iranian founders, they did not want the CT to have any hint of Islam or Shi'ism in its Italian title in order to prevent concerns over their activities. Even the name Tohid (oneness [of God]) was a precaution against being marked with Shi'a affiliation<sup>12</sup>, especially because, different from the Imam Ali Centre of Milan, they do not enjoy the protection of a robust political machine like the Iranian consulate. Sadiq may have added "islami" to the Persian name of the CT to capture the attention of the Iranian media or to attract Iran's subsidies. It is noteworthy that the adjective "islami" was interpreted in a particular manner by its creator. In different conversations, I tried to find out what Sadiq meant by this adjective. Surprisingly, "islami" in his discourse was associated with non-religious initiatives and interpreted as something irrelevant to religion (at least in the way he tried to explain it to me).

At the time, all messages, written in three languages, were signed in Persian as Public Relations of the Islamic Cultural Centre of Tohid. Sadiq published messages of completely different natures. From greetings, to videos and audios of sermons, recitation of the Koran, pdf files of religious books, events related to the Persian

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<sup>12</sup> Compare it to the names of Imam Mahdi Centre of Rome, Imam Ali Centre of Milan and Muhebbin-e Ahl al-Bayt of Padua.

calendar, issues regarding different Iranian elections, the reaction of Italians to the Fajr Film Festival, problems in Italy and Europe, Islamophobia, links to the Telegram channels of ayatollahs, Arabic and Italian lessons and so forth.

The variety of messages during the Sadiq's presence reflected the heterogeneity of the CT's activities. As interviews with some attendees testify, during the first years, the CT's programs were not limited to religious practices or to Shi'a festivals. Nowruz<sup>13</sup>, *Sizdah Be-dar*<sup>14</sup>, *Yalda* Night<sup>15</sup> and Christmas were celebrated inside and outside the centre. As I was told during an interview with an Iranian housewife, Sadiq for a brief period had held Persian lessons for Iranian children. Given Sadiq's useful contacts, Iranian envoys and the representatives of the Iran's Supreme Leader sometimes payed visits to the CT. In December 2016, I was contacted by Sadiq to participate in a meeting with the Iranian consul who had come from Milan. On that day, Iranian students had gathered to ask their questions and submit their requests. During the event, I noticed the Iranian flag on the wall, which soon after the gathering was removed. Afterwards I was in Florence for a few months, though I did not cease monitoring the CT's Telegram channel.

The 24<sup>th</sup> of April 2017, the anniversary of the birth of Imam Hussein, Abul Fadl, Imam Zeyn al-Abedin, was the last time that Sadiq published something relevant to the events of the CT. Since then their Telegram channel has exclusively published koranic verses, the affirmations of the Iran's Supreme Leader, *du'as* and sometimes messages on psychological issues and videos of the Iranian correspondent Hamid Masumi Nejad. In this period, apart from the Koran's pages, other messages were written only in Persian. You cannot find any notifications of upcoming events, any schedules, any reportage or photos of what has happened inside the hall. The most significant change was that all references to Ayatollah Khamenei started to be embellished with the title "Imam". In June, I

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<sup>13</sup> Lit., new-day, *Nowruz*, celebrated in eleven countries, is the name of the new year holiday that comes at the vernal equinox.

<sup>14</sup> Known as nature's day, *Sizdah Be-dar* is an Iranian festival held on the thirteenth day of Farvardin (the first month of the Iranian calendar).

<sup>15</sup> Lit., birth, in Iran *Yalda* is celebrated on the longest night of the year, which in the Northern Hemisphere corresponds to the winter solstice.



returned to Turin to visit the centre. I could not find Sadiq anymore. People told me that he was ill and could not come. Once I met his wife and enquired about the absence of Sadiq. She shook her head «people did not understand the value of his efforts and contributions to this centre», she said with a hint of displeasure in her voice. The truth, I discovered later, was that on May the 13<sup>th</sup> of 2017 Sadiq had not been elected for the new executive committee and from then on had ceased to attend the CT.

The Telegram and Instagram channels that Sadiq had created were in fact agencies that would guarantee the CT's visibility to the Iranian media and when he stopped attending the CT, Iranian media could no longer cover the CT's news. Indeed, all the Persian coverage of the CT's news date back to before the 13<sup>th</sup> of May. The other consequence of Sadiq's absence was that the Iranian political and religious authorities did not come to the CT anymore. The result was that the CT became less political, less Iranian and less multifunctional.

Currently, in contrast to Milan's centre, on the CT's walls you cannot find any photos of Iran's two Supreme Leaders. The sermons, usually conducted by its Lebanese director, are in Italian, during which there are not any references made to Ayatollah Khamenei, and no one must praise the figure of the Iran's Supreme Leader with *salawat*. All my Lebanese interviewees, except for one, who was a follower of Ali Sistani, were followers of Ayatollah Fadlallah. During a formal conversation, the Lebanese director of the CT was careful enough to remind me that «here everyone has his/her *marja*». It was an obvious declaration of ideological independence to his Iranian interviewer that the CT's Lebanese attendees should not be mistaken for Hezbollah members. The politicized nature of the CT during the presence of Sadiq had made it undesirable for followers of Ayatollah Fadlallah. The clashes of fat was of Fadlallah with those of Khamenei were noticeable in the case of the declaration of events like the end of Ramadan. This important event marks Id al-Fitr, which can also determine the date of Id al-Adha and the rest of the religious calendar. The disagreement on these dates always caused debates among Iranians and Lebanese.

My observations confirmed that in the virtual world we had a Telegram and Instagram channel, written in the Persian language and

allegedly belonging to the CT's Public Relations team, which were filled with the name "Imam" Khamenei, and only contained news that would benefit Iranians. Then we also had a physically existing CT that had become a place attended by people with different languages and nationalities who were connected exclusively through religious passion and had different *marjas*. In contrast, the Imam Ali Centre of Milan, wherein the Friday's political prayeris offered, seems to be the chapel of the Iranian consulate or a *farhang-sara* (house of culture, as a middle-aged Iranian woman termed it). Religious gatherings are only a small part of what Milan's centre offers to its attendees. From time to time, the Imam Ali Centre becomes a kindergarten, a Persian and Italian language school, a conference hall to debate Iranian cultural and political issues, a cinema, a saloon for watching Iran's football games, a place to celebrate Iran's national festivities and even a gym for women. The Imam Ali Centre organises tours for its attendees to other Italian cities for a diversion or to support the Iran's sports teams whenever games are held in Italy. Such activities are unimaginable in the CT. After a year, when I was already on more familiar terms with the Iranian founders of the CT, who had stopped visiting it, my impressions about its internal conflicts were confirmed. The most cited reason for their absence – as they termed it – was their displeasure of the mono-functionality of the Turin's centre and their incapability of changing its situation.

The split in power pushed the CT towards a more religious and less political nature. The CT's geographical distance from the Iranian consulate and embassy has brought about ideological independence but also poverty. The CT is void of heating system. It is extremely hot during summer, especially because of closed windows, and unbearably cold during winter. It does not have enough facilities to host prestigious meetings with the outside world (academic and/or non-Muslim scholars), as occurs in the Imam Ali centre. Its current directors are too busy to pay enough attention to it or consider it as a top priority, whereas Milan's Imam Ali Centre has its clerical figure and personnel hired by the Iranian consulate for different services. Therefore, the CT has remained unknown to the Turin's local authorities who promote politics of inter-culturality. During Ramadan 2017, the City of Turin, in collaboration with those Islamic

associations that had signed the *Patto di condivisione* (Pact for Peaceful Coexistence) in February 2016<sup>16</sup>, organised a special initiative called “Mosques Open Day” to introduce these organisations to citizens. Although the CT was one of the signatories of this agreement, the catalogue published for the occasion – a document that offered visibility and prestige to these organisations – did not include its name. After consulting those officers of the City of Turin who had orchestrated the event, I discovered that the CT’s directors had not participated in the preparative meetings envisaged by the City of Turin, which had been designed to prepare them for the important initiative. When I asked the Lebanese director of the CT for an explanation of their absence, among various reasons, he spoke about the overwhelming burden of his commitments that had not left him any time to dedicate to such events. This centre was unknown even to the Turin’s Centro Interculturale that arranges educational visits to the Islamic centres for students. This issue may have been caused also by the low willingness of the current Lebanese authorities of this centre to be seen. In different occasions, I tried to convince them to allow me create a website for them or upload some of their videos on YouTube but they refused my offers. Nowadays oncoming initiatives are diffused only by word of mouth. The consequence is that this centre has gained the aspects of an underground circle with no casual visitor. As a result, people in the CT has become an extended and heterogeneous family with only one feature in common: a religious passion labelled Twelver Shi’ism.

## **2. The question of *hormat***

In this paragraph, I will discuss the second and most important catalyst for the development of mosque-ness in the CT that is strictly related to women and gender relations. Women in this centre belong to varying age groups. Not all of them are introduced or accompanied by their male relatives. Most of them have academic

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<sup>16</sup> See “Torino è la nostra città. Firmato un patto di condivisione a Palazzo Civico”, published on 09/02/2016, [www.torinoclick.it/?p=41186](http://www.torinoclick.it/?p=41186). Visited 07/01/2018.

degrees or are university students. Some of them work as physicians, architects, interpreters and cultural mediators.

Interaction between the sexes in the CT is regulated through the specific division of space and the women's attitude towards it. In the CT, the spaces of sacred and profane are gender-labelled. The kitchen and the only existing bathroom used by both sexes are not carpeted, while the hall, where a specific gender segregation governs the relations of the sexes, is carpeted. In the hall there is not any material division between men and women, but a curtain roughly one meter in length provides women with a specific place for breastfeeding, the change of a chador, or a "refuge" for those who do not want to participate in congregational prayers. Despite the absence of material division<sup>17</sup>, a certain sense of prudery helps maintain the distance between sexes; a sensation that only a few meters away from the centre or even in the courtyard vanishes. If a woman wanted to have access to bookshelves situated in the men's section, she had to breakthrough this invisible barrier between the sexes facing the uncomfortable sense of being observed by men. In the kitchen, though, this uncomfortable sense was absent where men and women cook, talk and laugh with each other, while the hall, carpeted and decorated with flags, was the place of segregation and seriousness<sup>18</sup>. My own experience clarifies the relationship between sexes in this space. I had developed a friendly relationship with a Lebanese boy. He was a 26-year-old computer-engineering student. We spent time together without a hint of misgiving, but inside the hall, he preferred to ignore me or call me in the courtyard to have a chat. I asked him the reason of his behaviour and he termed it as a vague and unexplainable awkwardness that he felt at talking with women inside the hall. Although the politics of gender apartheid governed all people's minds inside the CT, the question of the veil was not approached in the same manner by everybody. Some of the CT's attendees, including those women who did not wear the veil outside of the CT, were against the presence of unveiled women

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<sup>17</sup> The absence of material division between the sexes in some Shi'a worship halls was observed also by Angela Lano (2005), who in November 1998 paid a visit to the Shi'a centre of Milan (pp. 139-142).

<sup>18</sup> According to Walter Burkert "Religion is serious; hence it is vulnerable to laughter and derision" (Burkert, 1998, p. 7).

inside it. Whenever I asked them the reason for their intolerance towards the presence of unveiled women, the Persian word with Arabic root, *hormat* became the leitmotiv that ran through their answers. The word pronounced as *hurmain* Arabic derives from the root *hrm* and corresponds to various connotations e.g. honour, modesty, respect and veneration. Words like haram, with a twofold meaning: both prohibited and sacred (Darwish, 2014, pp. 286-287, Ries, 2006 p. 67) and harem (Ar., *harim*, inviolable territory, domestic spaces for women in upper-class houses) stem from the same root (Anwar, 2004, pp. 291-292). Haram literary means «putting aside» (Ries, 1993, p. 351, Ries, 2006, p. 67) or what custom considers inaccessible either because of its impurity or sacredness. Thus, haram refers to both women and sacred places (Campo, 2009, pp. 290-293). The CT, for its people, is endowed with a sanctity that must be enshrined carefully. An unveiled woman is deemed a violation to its vulnerable atmosphere. Those interviewees who had a longer presence in Italy, hence, had built a greater awareness of its cultural peculiarities, were sharp enough to remind me that the question is the same also in the Catholic Church where people are asked to respect the sacredness of the space by observing specific dress code. A shining example of this kind was a 32-year-old Iranian student of architecture who would criticise the obligation of the veil in Iran but was unwilling to welcome unveiled women inside the CT.

I could see that the question of the veil had acquired more relevance to those who had a particular attachment to the centre. One evening during Ramadan, I went to the CT with a Puerto Rican girl who was extremely curious to visit. She came in without any head covering. Nobody exhibited any notable reaction, but an Italian woman converted to Shi'ism, brought a chador and asked her to cover her hair. When I asked the Italian woman as to why the Puerto Rican girl had to wear a chador she explained it was because young boys could see the girl without a covering and it was not good. Obviously, outside the CT, the hot weather of June could offer more Islamic scenery to those young boys! It is what I thought to myself. It was clear that her main concern was ultimately something else. She was always worried about maintaining the one-meter-length curtain among the sexes. This Italian woman, with her long black *jilbab*, seemed to be a guardian of the CT's sacredness. She was highly

active in the kitchen and preparing the hall for the CT's events. Every time I visited the CT, with the exception of when Iran's consul came and the sexes sat down beside each other, she was the first woman who arrived with or without her husband and would immediately start working in the kitchen. The CT was a very serious matter to her. The episode in June stuck in my mind and sent a significant message to me. The Puerto Rican girl had asked me if she had to cover her hair and I had said no. One of the times I visited the CT, I had consulted Sadiq about the issue. He had told me that non-Muslim women could visit the CT without the veil. Curiously enough, the Italian woman's attitude towards wearing a veil inside the worship place was held by another Italian woman converted to Shi'ism whom I encountered in the Milan's Imam Ali Centre<sup>19</sup>.

Not all women, however, had the same attitude towards the question. A 42-year-old Lebanese woman, who was a City of Turin officer and a devout follower of the Islamic dress code, expressed her disapproval of the "Iranian" style of veiling because in her view the CT was only the headquarters of a cultural association and not the "house of God", therefore this symbolic veiling, in her opinion, was absolute nonsense. According to her, veiling was a pious action that had to be done only for the sake of God and not to gain people's appreciation. Nowhere in the CT's statute does it state that the hall is considered inaccessible to unveiled women. Nevertheless, this unwritten pact among the CT's people, formed in collaboration with women themselves, puts Iranian women in such a situation that they must adopt the same attitudes towards the veil that they have in Iran; a state between veiling and unveiling; with the great difference that in the case of the CT, it occurs under a secular state and inside the headquarters of a cultural association. In this way, women bestow mosque-ness to the CT and the later, in turn, re-moulds their modernised identities to adapt them to the Shi'a paradigms of womanhood. In the CT, there is a cycle between gender relations and

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<sup>19</sup> Allievi (2006) underlined various functions of the veil for Italian women converted to Islam. It helps them through the process of conversion and access to the community. It facilitates their insertion and integration into the community. In addition, the veil marks the barriers of the sacred and the profane that are unclear and unstable frontiers in the western cultures (p. 145).

people's perception of mosque-ness: gender relations form people's perception and the other way around.

It is extremely important to consider that the process of mosque-building in such cases is more a question of an unconscious mental process rather than a rationally-made decision and formally-declared initiative. One episode that comes to mind that further reinforces this idea took place during an interview: I asked two officers of the Centro Interculturale of Turin – who arranged guided visits to Islamic locals for students – why they kept calling these institutes “mosque”. They answered, “Because Muslims themselves term them as such”. Some days later, in a conversation with the CT's Lebanese director, while explaining to me the reason for their absence from the aforementioned preparative meetings for the City of Turin, he said, “they asked us to participate in the Mosques Open Day, I answered that we are not a mosque, we are only a cultural association”. Aside from the fact that such statements are issued only when it suits (because they were unable or unwilling to participate), the answer of the CT's director demonstrates that the whole process of the mosque-building, where the construction of a real one is impossible, occurs only on an unconscious level or is valid only as far as the internal components of the organism are concerned. In other words, the CT was a mosque only as far as women and gender relations were concerned, but not from many other points of view.

### **Final remarks**

In this article, I examined two factors that in my view have contributed to the birth and growth of a Shi'a mosque from an abandoned place with a vague function. The most important one is regarding the way in which the relations between the sexes is treated inside it, and the secondary issue derives from the gradual abandonment of non-religious activities which were initially among the motivations for those who created the organisation. The synergy between these two dynamics formed people's perceptions of this place; perceptions that in its turn reproduce and perpetuate a certain type of gender relations inside it. The CT could well be the apartment of a Muslim citizen of Turin. Neither the removal of shoes at the

entrance, nor the colourful flags of Imams, nor the function of prayer and gathering are exclusive characteristics of mosques, but where the entrance of unveiled women is prohibited and the direct contact of the sexes is avoided, the atmosphere is inevitably filled with the sacredness typical of mosques. The CT has become a mosque, not only in the literal and medieval sense of the word, namely a place of prostration, but it has assumed the sacredness of mosques without being consecrated through the mechanism conceived by ayatollahs through the process of *waqf*. The access of non-Muslims to this place is more proof of the fact that it is not treated as a conventional mosque, even by its attendees; however, any transgression of the norms of gender relations continues to be considered a potential contamination of its sacredness.

This atmosphere then received further religiosity thanks to the absence of those who were more motivated by non-religious pursuits. All the Iranian students, whom I interviewed, outside of the CT, were attending other Iranian organisations as well. Therefore, when the CT gradually distanced itself from its initial nature, some Iranians preferred non-religious venues where national interests were promoted. Whereas, a Shi'a Lebanese who does not want to attend the CT cannot find other established locals for meeting his/her fellow citizens and/or coreligionists. Even the Lebanese Shi'a refugee girl, who did not visit the CT, had found her fellow citizens through it. Notwithstanding the importance of the CT for Lebanese, they did not pursue their national interests within this hall. Whereas Iranians, before the division in the executive committee, sometimes used the hall to celebrate Iranian festivals. Aside from national pursuits, a few Iranian students were also driven by social privileges that, in their return, they could presumably expect to receive from their theocratic state. The question of pursuing non-Shi'a interests in a venue like CT is what differentiates Iranians from Lebanese. It possibly derives from either Iran's long history or from its current Shi'a state that adds components to what generates motivation for the creation of a community.

The CT's sacredness would be compromised if some changes took place: women could enter without head covers, and the sexes could have free interaction inside the hall. In that case, it could retain its function as a place of worship – like the apartment where Iranian students of Padua gather to pray – but it would not be considered



sacred anymore. No one, neither outsiders nor the attendees of the Padua's circle, consider the apartment a mosque. Within the Paduan circle, unveiled Iranian girls participate in religious ceremonies and nobody is concerned about the guardianship of some form of sacredness.

The absence of the CT's initial promotors contributed greatly to its metamorphosis. After the early members left, their original desire to make the CT something similar to the Imam Ali Centre of Milan<sup>20</sup> was left unrealised, and the CT was gradually filled by different nationalities and different languages that were gathered exclusively for the sake of religious passion, and not out of a nationalistic type of belonging or for future opportunities. Different from Sunnis, who, thanks to their high rate of population, sometimes manage to form ethnic halls, the number of practicing Shi'as in Turin is so low that an ethnic division is not helpful for anyone; therefore, the uncomfortable mismatch of nations is somehow tolerated. In comparison to the Imam Ali Centre of Milan, the CT is more religious, more repetitious in its activities and much more multi-ethnic: a characteristic that is both a source of interest and tension for its congregants.

The criteria established by Allievi for labelling a place "mosque" are relevant but not nearly thorough enough. They are instruments useful for a census, but only close observation and comparative studies can reveal the different levels of mosque-ness of "mosques". Some places of worship welcome Shi'as on a regular basis for the function of prayer, and are de jure open to all Muslims, hence they meet all conditions set by Allievi to qualify as mosque. However, not all of these spaces are considered mosque by their attendees, for example, the headquarters of the Milan's Shi'a association of the Koranic studies called Acqua and the Paduan Shi'a organisation; or they are not considered as such by everyone, like the Imam Ali Centre. The issues that we mentioned have convinced the CT's attendees to call it mosque even though it does not comply with the juridical requirements of mosque-ness established by ayatollahs. In

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<sup>20</sup> The first day that I visited the Imam Ali Centre of Milan, I encountered three of the Iranian founders of the CT who preferred to travel almost 150 kilometres to come from Turin, instead of attending the CT.

Turin, the formless Italian space was detached from its surroundings and gained meaning to satisfy the exigency of the seekers of “special nonhomogeneity” (Eliade, 1959, p. 20). This way of approaching the space, in its turn, reproduces a certain system of moral principle inside it. These ethics will subsequently be communicated to children whom are always brought along to the CT by their parents and will be perpetuated by other generations of the Turin’s Shi’as to come.

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