

INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF JA'FARISM AS A MODERN IDENTITY IN TURKEY*

Caferiliğin Türkiye'de Modern Bir Kimlik Olarak Kurumsallaşması

Abdülkadir YELER**

Abstract

In this study, the creation of identity and institutionalization processes of the Ja'faris living in Turkey are discussed in the context of social change in Turkey. Firstly, the historical process of Jafarism and its position in the Turkish society were examined. The effects of urbanization on the institutionalization and identity building of Jafarism were investigated. Because social transformations and changes taking place in Turkey with urbanization and modernization in the last century have led to the emergence of new religious, ethnic and political identities in the country and to the process of institutionalization.

In this study, qualitative research techniques such as documentation, interview and direct observation techniques were used. The migration processes of Ja'faris living in Turkey were examined utilizing the Ottoman archive documents. To assess the situation of Ja'faris, living in Turkey today, is made of interviews with leaders and members of the Ja'farism. In addition, observations were made in places of worship and research was conducted by participating in their some rituals.

When the obtained data were evaluated, in the process of internal migration, that experienced in Turkey, it is seen that the Ja'faris began to settle in large cities. Because of, has been seen that, Ja'farism in Turkey has been institutionalized in parallel to the urbanization and modernization processes in the Turkish society. This institutionalization was the determining factor in shaping the identity of Ja'farism. However, it has been observed that the identity of the Ja'farism in Turkey is not homogeneous but it has diversity. In addition, it was determined that the mosque played a central role in the institutionalization of Ja'farism and the ashura ceremonies that performed in Muharram constitute an example of institutionalization in the modern sense. The problems and demands of Ja'faris living in Turkey, are also included in the study.

Keywords: Social transformation, modernization, institutionalization, identity, Ja'farism.

Öz

Bu çalışmada, Türkiye'de yaşayan Caferilerin kimlik oluşturma ve kurumsallaşma süreçleri, Türkiye'deki sosyal değişimler ekseninde ele alınmıştır. Öncelikle Caferiliğin tarihsel süreci ve Türk toplumu içerisindeki konumları incelenmiştir. Kentleşmenin Caferiliğin kurumsallaşmasında ve kimlik edinmelerindeki etkileri araştırılmıştır. Zira Türkiye'de son yüzyılda kentleşme ve modernleşme ile birlikte yaşanan sosyal dönüşüm ve değişimler, ülkede yeni dini, etnik ve siyasi kimliklerin ortaya çıkmasına ve kurumsallaşma sürecine girmelerine yol açmıştır.

Çalışmada nitel araştırma tekniklerinden, dokümantasyon, görüşme ve doğrudan gözlem teknikleri kullanılmıştır. Osmanlı arşiv belgelerinden yararlanılarak, Caferilerin Türkiye'ye göç süreçleri incelenmiştir. Caferilerin günümüz Türkiye'sindeki görünümelerini değerlendirebilmek için ise Caferi liderleri ve mensupları ile mülakatlar yapılmıştır. Bunun yanı sıra ibadet mekanlarında gözlemler yapılmış ve bazı ritüellere iştirak edilerek araştırma gerçekleştirilmiştir.

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** Dr. Öğretim Üyesi, İstanbul Medeniyet Üniversitesi, Sağlık Bilimleri Fakültesi, İstanbul/Türkiye, abdul-kadir.yeler@medeniyet.edu.tr, ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4791-6118>

Elde edilen veriler değerlendirildiğinde, Türkiye’de yaşanan kentlere içgöç sürecinde Caferilerin de büyük kentlere yerleşmeye başladıkları görülmüştür. Dolayısıyla Türkiye’de Caferiliğin, Türk toplumunda yaşanan kentleşme ve modernleşme süreçlerine paralel bir şekilde kurumsallaştığı belirlenmiştir. Bu kurumsallaşmanın Caferi kimliğinin şekillenmesinde belirleyici etken olduğu sonucuna varılmıştır. Bununla birlikte Türkiye Caferiliğinin homojen olmadığı ve kimlik bakımından çeşitlilik sergiledikleri gözlenmiştir. Ayrıca Caferi kurumsallaşmasında caminin merkezi bir rol oynadığı ve Muharrem ayında gerçekleştirilen aşure törenlerinin de modern anlamda kurumsallaşmanın bir örneğini teşkil ettiği belirlenmiştir. Çalışmada Türkiye Caferilerinin dile getirdikleri sorunlarına ve taleplerine de yer verilmiştir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Sosyal dönüşüm, modernleşme, kurumsallaşma, kimlik, Caferilik.

1. Introduction

Migration from rural to urban areas caused by industrialization gave rise to new sociological phenomena in Turkey as well as all over the world. The new social environments in the cities resulted in social transformation, modernization, and creating new social structures and caused the emergence of new religious, ethnic, and political identities among immigrants. In a sense, Turkish cities became the centre of new social structures created by the people with different traditions and from different parts of Anatolia. As time passed, the new social structures experienced institutionalization in different ways; some dissolved after a while, and some became empowered and eventually constructed their own institutions. Ja’farism as the main branch of Shi’ism reflects a specific example of urban institutionalization in which a traditions were relocated and identity was preserved, but the community was re-created via new and modern institutions. This article aims to summarize the institutionalization process of Ja’farism in Turkey and to highlight some current problems they face.

Ja’faris today are the dominant branch of Shi’ism (Fıçlalı, 2001: 133).¹ In Turkey, there are also Alevis and Nusayris. Alevism and Nusayrism are commonly described as subbranches of Shi’ism because Hadrat Ali has a pivotal role in their beliefs. Moreover, researchers sometimes refer to Ja’faris in Turkey as ‘Alevis’.² After the Iranian Islamic Revolution that took place in 1979, Ja’faris and Alevis interacted in some different regions of Turkey. This interaction may have been effective in this perception. During that period some Ja’fari scholars educated in Iran approached the Alevis claiming true Alevism was the Shi’ism of the twelve Imams. Book were written on the subject. Ja’faris constructed mosques in Alevi areas, and attempted to propagate their Shi’ism among the Alevis (Üzüm, 2000a : 111-132). For example Alevis from Adana, Kahramanmaraş and Çorum who had converted to Ja’farism and had studied in Iranian seminaries returned to Turkey charged with the responsibility of converting Alevis to Ja’faris. Publications such as *Ashura* and *Ondört Masum* were founded (Massicard, 2007 : 139; Taşğın, 2004 : 146), and in 1991 a Ja’fari mosque called the Ehl-i Beyt Camii was built in an Alevi area of Çorum (Üzüm, 2000b : 122-125; Taşğın, 2004 : 146).

While these groups share the commonality of being non-Sunni, there are significant differences among them in their beliefs, lifestyles, rituals, places of

worship, and ideological and sociocultural structures. Each of these groups sees itself as a self-contained religious tradition rather than a branch of one another, and they have their own scriptural sources in which they self-identify themselves. Furthermore, members of each religious group prefer not to describe themselves as the members of another one. For this reason, it seems more appropriate to recognise them as self-contained religious traditions and discuss the differences, rather than the similarities among them.³

The main Ja'fari areas in Turkey are Igdir, Kars, Ardahan, and some areas in Agri which are all within Eastern Anatolia. Although many Ja'faris in this region are local inhabitants that have lived there since the early Ottoman period (Can, 1986: 45), some came from Armenia during the 1918-1925 population exchange (Andrews, 1992: 98), some came during the 1878 Ottoman-Russian war, and many migrated, settling in Eastern Anatolia during the 1920's to escape the Bolshevik Revolution and the Russian invasion in Northern Azerbaijan (Üzüm, 1993: 25).

The migration in Turkey from rural to urban began during the 1950s and continued until the 1990s. During this process, Ja'faris also began to migrate from their homeland to the larger industrial cities in western Turkey. At the present time, Ankara (Keçiören), Izmir, Yalova, Bursa, Kocaeli (Darica), Kırklareli (Luleburgaz), Manisa (Turgutlu) and Aydın are the cities where Ja'faris live, and Istanbul is the main place of settlement of them.

The size of the Ja'fari population in Turkey is uncertain, in part because individuals are not questioned regarding their faith or religious denomination in census questions. Ja'faris hold that there are about 3 million Ja'faris in Turkey. However, some recent research states that there are less than 1 million Ja'faris in Turkey;⁴ in any case, these figures are just estimates.

2. The Aim and Methods

Ja'farism reflects a specific example in terms of the transformation of religious movements to the modern identities on the modernization process of Turkey. The differences between Ja'farism and the Sunni movements in terms of belief, worships and historical background make the modernization process and identity unique. For this reason; it seems important to discuss the transformation process of Ja'farism from traditional structure to the modern religious identity so that we can understand the Dynamics that affect the modernization of a sectarian religious minority in Turkey.

This study aims to summarize the transformation of traditional Ja'farism and institutionalization process as a modern religious identity in Turkey.

In this study, qualitative research techniques such as documentation, interview and direct observation techniques were used. In the later period of the Ottoman Iranian Ja'faris had been living in Istanbul and they had some religious institutions such as mosque, graveyards, and gasilhane (facilities for preparing the deceased for

burial). In addition they had been organizing Ashura ceremonies in Muharram. Those institutions played an important role on the institutionalization of Turkey's Ja'faris that migrated from the eastern regions of Turkey to the industrialized cities in the west. From this point, during the examination of the documents, the documents of the Ottoman Archives and recent written sources were used. In order to understand some of the issues that not found in the written sources, interviews were conducted with the leading names of the Ja'faris and experts in the field. The data obtained from the documents and interviews were supported through observations.

3. The Dynamics of Urban Institutionalization

Immigration and urbanization are often viewed negatively as resulting in the importation of rural traditions to city centres, squatting in city centres, creating of subcultures, an increase in crime rate, social disintegration, social stratification, and class conflicts. When the context of immigration is considered with the religion, multi-dimensional and complicated sociological processes stand out. The institutionalization of Ja'farism in Turkey is a social phenomenon beginning with immigration directly from rural areas to city centres and affected by these sociological processes. Therefore, it is necessary to understand the social environment which Ja'faris encounter in city life after immigration, as well as the social change in Turkey from 1960-1990, which included significant migration from rural to urban areas. In this period, global identity movements affected Turkey and as a natural result, various new identity movements emerged and multi-dimensional class conflicts were experienced. The parties involved in these conflicts were the masses coming from rural areas through immigration. In this period, when modernization was intensely experienced as well, previously separate populations from different regions of Anatolia integrated under the banner of mutual values and created new social movements. Modern religious communities emerged in this period, while some religious structures whose traditions could not survive in the city life disintegrated and were re-integrated into various ideological movements.

In a period when there is an intense immigration from villages to cities in Turkey; Ja'faris living in a few different cities in Eastern Anatolia began to migrate to the larger industrial cities in western Turkey in part due to inadequacy in the educational and health systems, but mainly due to unemployment (Kılıç, 1998: 14). Firstly, heads of families came to big cities in order to work; they engaged in seasonal work and found permanent jobs in time. After a while, they took their families with them and they migrated as a family (Üzüm, 1993: 114).

Ja'faris lived homogenously prior to immigration, and preferred to live together in cities when they migrated. As a natural consequence of differences between Shi'i and Sunni belief and ritual practice, Ja'faris have preferred to pray in their own mosques. For this reason Ja'faris prioritized establishing their own mosques upon migration. Thus, Ja'faris who migrated to Istanbul had an advantage over others who migrated to the other cities. Iranian Ja'faris had been living in Istanbul since 18th

century although the small number and they had some institutions such as mosques, graveyards, and *gasilhanes* (facilities for preparing the deceased for burial).

Historically, peace between the Ottomans and Iran provided an opportunity for Iranians to carry out various activities, especially trade, in Ottoman regions. Istanbul, the link between Asia and Europe, was a point of interest of Iranian traders by the 1700s and, as a result, many Iranian traders settled in Istanbul by the 1800s.⁵ Some of the traders carried out their commercial activities in buildings located in Üsküdar while a substantial part of them traded in buildings located in and around Beyazıt. Valide Han, located in Mahmutpaşa, one of the most important trade centres today, became an important centre where Iranian traders marketed their products which they brought from Iran to Europe.

When the number of Iranian traders increased, small mosques, *gasilhanes*, and graveyards were allocated for them by the Ottomans. Among the most important institutions belonging to Iranians were a small mosque, known as the “Iranians’ mosque”, in Valide Han; the Iranians’ graveyard in the Karacaahmet Graveyard in Üsküdar; and the Small Mosque of Seyyit Ahmet Deresi in that graveyard. Ja’faris immigrating to Istanbul after the 1960s settled in regions such as Karagümruk, Balat, and Kasimpaşa in order to stay close to the Small Mosque in Valide Han, and would attend Friday prayers at to the Small Mosque in Valide Han.⁶ Those who immigrated to other cities did not have their own mosques until the 1990s, and carried out Muharram and Ashura commemorations (including the recitation of elegies or *mersiye*) under difficult circumstances in their own houses.

The 1980s saw the dawn of a new era for Ja’faris. The first Ja’fari mosque, the Zeynebiyye Mosque, was opened in Halkalı in 1981. Mosques were begun to be constructed in both Istanbul and other industrial cities where Ja’faris live in the following years. Accordingly, immigrants to cities settled around the mosques. This period also accelerated the institutionalization of Ja’faris in city centres. Possibly, the Iranian Revolution in 1979 as well as changing identity policies in Turkey in the 1980s had an effect since, in the 1980s, identity movements began to grow. Turkey moved to a liberal economic system and aimed to fully integrate itself in the global economic system. This economic policy directly affected the identity policies of the government as well (Ayata, 1998: 77). In addition, the Islamic Revolution created enormous excitement among non-Shi’a Islamic groups in Turkey, and Ja’faris caught the attention of these Islamic groups. For example, the mosque in Valide Han which was an ordinary Shi’a mosque until that time began to be regarded after the Revolution as the Revolution’s platform in Istanbul (Yeler, 2006: 32-33). These developments gave Ja’faris the opportunity to move much more freely, increased public visibility and prepared a background for the other parts of the society to recognize them.

After the construction of Zeynebiyye Mosque in Halkalı, Ja’faris living in various parts of Istanbul as well as other industrial cities began constructing their

own mosques. Ja'faris emigrating from Eastern Anatolia afterwards began to settle in regions where their mosques were located. In the 2000s, a substantially institutionalized Ja'fari society emerged in city centres around mosques with public visibility. In other words, there was institutionalization based on a mosque.

Concordant with the Ja'faris' increased public visibility of Ja'faris, academic studies on Ja'farism began. These studies were generally post-graduate theses and dissertations, and, in these studies, religious attitudes and the socio-cultural status of Ja'faris living in different regions of Turkey were analysed.

In addition to the importation of their religious traditions into the city, important factors in the institutionalization of Ja'faris have included the natural tendency to accept the leadership of religious scholars, settling in geographical proximity with one another, and building family and neighbourly bonds. Additionally, the mosque and Ashura commemorations have played a central role. Rather than solely being houses of worship, Ja'fari mosques have responded to the social needs of the community to enable them to overcome a period of social disintegration and identity crisis and protect their community life. From the 1990s onward, Ashura commemorations also contributed to the Ja'faris' public visibility. Ashura commemorations were very effective as a modern institution in gathering Ja'faris from each region of Turkey under the same banner, expressing the problems and demands of Ja'faris, and strengthening identity consciousness among in Ja'faris.

4. The Mosques as the Centre of Institutionalization

Mosques played an important role in institutionalization of Ja'faris in city centres and overcoming identity crises due to modernization. As a result of rural to urban migration, new settlements at the outskirts of cities formed, and new mosques to meet the needs of occupants of those newly formed ghettos were constructed. Ja'faris who migrated to industrial regions also settled in such ghettos due to economic conditions.

The first Ja'faris to arrive in Istanbul settled near the mosque in Valide Han, Mahmutpaşa. However, they started to move to outskirts of the city because of living conditions and high costs. After the Zeynebiyye Mosque was opened Halkalı in 1981, most of Ja'faris in different regions of the city as well as the new comers settled near the mosque. Ja'faris in other regions of Istanbul and in other industrial cities began to construct their own mosques after the 1990s.

Today Halkalı is the region in Istanbul with the densest Ja'fari population, and the Zeynebiyye Mosque is one of their most important centres. There are around 300 Ja'fari mosques in all of Turkey, and 35-40 of those are in Istanbul. The Imam Ali Mosque in Bağcılar, Merkez Mehdiyye Mosque in Bahçelievler, Ebu Talip Mosque in İkitelli, and Imam Hüseyin Mosque in Kadıköy (Kayışdağı) are the biggest Ja'fari mosques, and their vicinities have most dense Ja'fari populations in Istanbul. Additionally, there are Ja'fari mosques in regions with significant Ja'fari populations.

Mosques are not mere temples for Ja' faris. They constitute multi-purpose spaces that meet many of social, cultural, religious, and other needs of their congregations. On lower floors or adjacent to bigger mosques, there are establishments as gyms, cafés, conference halls, and wedding halls. Mosques are constructed with the idea of meeting social and cultural needs of the community. Hence, it is even more meaningful for Ja' faris to settle near those mosques. Social activities including Muharram activities, religious courses, and weddings are frequently conducted within those mosques.

As a natural consequence of mosque-centered institutionalization, imams of mosques – referred to as *ahunt* or *molla* – are natural community leaders. Furthermore, civil society organizations founded by Ja' faris such as foundations, unions, and sports clubs are typically located near mosques. For example, CAFERİDER (The Association for Ja' fari Publicity, Research and Education), CABİR (The World Union of Ja' fari Scholars), the Ehl-i Beyt Scholars Association, and the Mother Zehra Association are some of the most prominent Ja' fari civil institutions, and they were all founded near the Zeynebiyye Mosque.

Mosques in Turkey are normally governed by the Presidency of Religious Affairs, and imams serving in mosques are public officers and are paid by the state. However, Ja' fari mosques are not governed by the state, and imams are paid by the congregation. A law issued in 1999 decreed that Ja' fari mosques must be governed by Presidency of Religious Affairs; the Ja' fari community opposed this law. In the end the law was not put into practice (Yeler, 2006: 49). In 2004, a Ja' fari mosque in Çorum was appointed an imam by the Presidency of Religious Affairs which led to Ja' fari opposition and their opening a case in European Court of Human Rights. Mikail Kayla, the imam in charge of the Imam Ali Mosque in Bağcılar at that time, stated: “We do not wish to be connected to the Presidency of Religious Affairs. We think the administration serves only the Sunni population and is trying to assimilate us. We met Mesut Yılmaz during his term as prime minister in Ankara and asked him not to connect us to the Presidency of Religious Affairs but to Ministry of Interior for overseeing. He responded positively to our request, and we are directly connected to the Ministry of Interior” (M. Kayla, personel interview, 2006).

While it is natural that, due to differences in religious practices, Shi'is and Sunnis would have separate mosques, Muslims having separate places of worship has had negative effects on social integration and has sharpened differences.

5. Ashura as a Modern Institution

The most important Ja' fari commemoration in Turkey is Ashura. Ashura has been a key factor leading to recognition and visibility of Ja' faris in Turkey. Ashura commemorations organized in the 1990s in Halkalı, Istanbul have drawn worldwide attention, although Ashura commemorations in Istanbul date back much further.

Ottoman archives reveal that Iranian Ja' faris living in Istanbul held Ashura organizations during the first ten nights of Muharram in the later period of the Ottoman

Empire. During those ceremonies, “marsiyahs” (*mersiye*) were recited, and on the tenth night of the month, about 150-200 Ja‘faris wearing white shirts struck themselves on the head with swords until they bled. Local residents attended the ceremonies with interest. Ceremonies were quite noisy and occasionally required security measures (BOA, İ. DH 82523). Ceremonies starting in inns of Beyazit region, which was commercial centre of Iranian Ja‘faris, did not remain confined to the region. On the tenth night of Muharram, Ja‘faris starting the ceremony at Validehan in Mahmutpaşa used to ride row-boats from Eminönü to Üsküdar and complete their ceremony in Seyyit Ahmet Deresi (BOA, Y. PRK. ZB 5-108 (1308 M 10)).

Under the Turkish Republic, it was not possible to conduct Ashura ceremonies in Istanbul’s changing social and political atmosphere. Azeri Ja‘faris who migrated to Halkalı, Istanbul started to organize Ashura ceremonies during 1990’s as the social and political atmosphere became more relaxed, although few people attended in the first years.

In the 2000s, Ashura ceremonies started to draw attention from several segments of the society. Ja‘faris, who remained unknown to the greater part of the population, started to make the news with their ceremonies in Halkalı. Ashura ceremonies started to appear in the media with their women in black and men in chains with blood all over their faces. The majority of people in Turkey were previously not aware of Ja‘faris or such practices. The term ‘Ja‘fari’ became associated with people chaining and beating themselves to mourn for Imam Husayn, which became a source of criticism from those who did not know Ja‘faris well. Such criticisms had negative effects on Ja‘faris, who began to complain about being referred to as “the fifth madhhab, madhhab-less, qizilbash” (*Aksam*, 03/04/2004).

As more time passed, different segments of the society started to know Ja‘faris better. Ja‘faris from different regions of Turkey, civil society organizations, leaders and representatives of political parties, and people from all walks of life started to participate in Ashura ceremonies. Heeding the criticism, Ja‘faris abandoned traditions such as drawing blood in order to internalize Imam Husayn’s pain and started to donate blood to the Turkish Red Crescent instead. Such steps led to more sympathy within society and were replicated in Ashura ceremonies in other cities of Turkey; at the same time, Shi‘a in other countries also started to donate blood instead of cutting themselves too.

Ashura ceremonies organized in Halkalı a few years ago were recognized by UNESCO as best reflecting the spirit of Ashura. The programme included a theatrical play depicting the martyrdom of Imam Husayn, which was a candidate for the Guinness Book of World Records due to the size of the cast and the audience. Ali Özgündüz, a Ja‘fari congressman from the Republican People’s Party submitted a legislative proposal in the parliament to make Ashura an official holiday.⁷

6. Identity and Ideological Diversity

In parallel with the increased public visibility of Ja'faris, their sense of identity, ideological structure and political attitudes became a matter of public debate. In general terms, the Ja'fari community is one that has been able to integrate its religious tradition into urban life without an identity crisis and recreate traditional social structures via modern means. On the other hand, there are Ja'faris who pursued higher education and entered different professions while distancing themselves from their religious heritage. Hence while discussing identity and ideological diversity in the Ja'fari community, groups that maintained their religious tradition and community life are primarily being considered.

Almost all of Ja'faris in Turkey have Azeri roots. Therefore there is an issue of Azeri as well as Ja'fari identity. Other segments of the society sometimes refer to Ja'faris as Azeri or Azeri-Ja'fari. In some parts of Istanbul, Ja'fari mosques are regarded as "Azeri mosques". Field research conducted in Istanbul showed that 73% of the participants regarded being a Turk and 76% regarded being Ja'fari as important to them (Yeler, 2006: 59). As these figures reveal, there is a multi-dimensional identity among Turkish Ja'faris involving an ethnic element as well as a religious one.

It is hard to comment on the political attitudes of Ja'faris since Ja'faris living in different regions develop different attitudes in accordance with their specific conditions. In a study conducted in Istanbul, Ja'faris were asked which aspect of political parties they consider most when they vote, and 39% responded with policies regarding religion, whereas 41% said secularity and 61% said nationalism are important to them (Yeler, 2006: 78). The results of the 2011 general elections seemed to confirm those findings. Ali Özgündüz, a close relative of Zeynebiyye mosque's imam Selahattin Özgündüz, was elected to the parliament from the Republican People's Party (CHP). On the other hand, the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) won 34% of votes in Iğdır, making it the most popular party in the province.⁸

Selahattin Özgündüz states that Ja'faris' political attitudes vary according to regional conditions: "For instance, in the centre of Iğdır, nationalism is prevalent. On the other hand, Tuzluca, another district in Iğdır with a high Ja'fari population, once became a symbol for leftist movements. The fact that followers of the same madhhab living in the same region are capable of dividing between right and the left suggests that people in the country have leftist tendencies due to poverty while people in the city centre tend to the political right due to living with Kurds in the same region" (S. Özgündüz, personel interview, 2011).

A distinguishing feature among Ja'faris is institutionalized religious authority. Any Ja'fari who is not a *mujtahid* is supposed to follow a *marja'*. There are no *marja'*s in Turkey and hence Ja'faris are forced to follow *mujtahids* from other countries. Imams of the mosques are natural leaders of Ja'fari people. Therefore Ja'faris' loyalty

to Turkey has been debated, sometimes Turkish Ja'faris differ due to following different *mujtahids*. However such differences seem to be more important to mosque imams and their close circles rather than the general public.

Today, the centre of Turkish Ja'faris is the Halkalı district in Istanbul. The Zeynebiyye mosque is the most important centre for most Turkish Ja'faris. Selahattin Özgündüz, the imam of the mosque, is regarded as the leader of the community by the vast majority of Turkish Ja'faris and is presented as such in various platforms. However, there are groups who do not regard Zeynebiyye as their centre or Özgündüz as their leader. Some studies suggest that Ja'faris are divided into the Zeynebiyye group and Kevser group (Albayrak, 2008: 114). However, we can say that differences among Ja'faris are complex, and there are no clearly sharp divisions among Ja'faris. For example most Ja'faris living in Ankara do not recognize any imam of the mosque as the natural leader of all Ja'faris, believing there is not a worthy candidate within Turkey to assume leadership. They posit that a leader must possess certain political, social, and religious characteristics that are not yet found (Albayrak, 2008:114). Furthermore, the congregation of the Merkez Mehdiyye mosque congregation in Bahçelievler, Istanbul and the Lüleburgaz and Yalova Ja'fari communities who act together with them do not regard Zeynebiyye as the centre. In the said differentiation, the major role is played by the fact that the said groups follow different *marja's* who have different views concerning religious and political matters. However, such divisions remain largely among mosque imams and civil organizations and do not cause a serious division among the Ja'fari public as supported by the fact that ceremonies in Halkalı attract Ja'faris from every region of Turkey each year.

7. Current Problems

The last 50 years witnessed a multi-dimensional social transformation in Turkey in which Turkish Ja'faris achieved institutionalization through a dynamic social transformation. They experienced an influential identity movement and were capable of setting their agenda in social, political, and religious matters. Increased public visibility on the Ja'faris side gave them opportunities to voice certain demands as well as opened the door for discussion of matters that concern Ja'faris.

Ja'faris have certain demands that they frequently voice on various platforms, including recognition of the tenth of Muharram as an official holiday, opportunity to broadcast on state television, inclusion of the Ja'fari faith in schoolbooks, a share from the state budget for religious services, and the recognition of Ja'fari identity by the state. A workshop among Ja'fari imams repeated the same claims.⁹ Those demands are voiced in the recent years after Ja'faris gained public visibility and an influential identity. On the other hand, important problems including the status of Ja'fari imams and mosques and religious education have been discussed for many years.

Ja'fari mosques in Turkey are independent and are not subject to supervision. All imams serving in Sunni mosques receive their wages from the state budget

whereas Ja'fari imams are paid by their congregations. Currently there are about 500 Ja'fari imams in Turkey. Since there are no institutions in Turkey providing training in Ja'fari *fiqh*, Ja'fari imams are educated in foreign Shia *madrasahs*. Ja'fari imams initially went to Najaf, Iraq for their education which became impossible during the era of Saddam. Therefore they switched to Qum, Iran, instead. Turkish Ja'faris who wish to pursue their religious education go to Qum today as well. The fact that their community leaders received a lengthy education in foreign countries has caused several social and political problems and frequently become a matter of debate.

Since Ja'faris are a religious group, their demands and problems are handled by the Religious Affairs Administration. When we look at it chronologically during Ali Bardakoğlu's term as the Administration Head, he stated: "There are about 300 Ja'fari mosques in Turkey. We must train imams for the Ja'fari community. Ja'fari imams receive their wages from their congregations. They influence people claiming it is not acceptable to follow an imam who is a government employee. We need to lead Ja'faris according to their own *madhhab*" (*Sabah*, 12/25/2005).

The current head of the administration, Mehmet Görmez, said: "I regard the fact that Ja'faris are forced to send their children to Iran as a flaw on my behalf. I believe important steps will be taken on the issue."

Although Ja'faris speak of negative aspects of having to send their children abroad for religious training, they have been refusing other suggestions. They argue that the Presidency of Religious Affairs only serves the Sunnis and they lack these services. From time to time, that the administration appoints imams trained in accordance with Ja'fari *fiqh* to Ja'fari mosques as contracted personnel. However, Ja'faris oppose to the idea saying it is not acceptable to pray behind an imam who is a government employee. They even go to the length of claiming that the state is trying to assimilate them by making such a suggestion. In our opinion, the key element in such disagreements is the difference in religious traditions. Sabri Sayan, the imam of the Bahçelievler Merkez Mehdiyye mosque, says: "The state appoints graduates of Imam-Khatib high schools, or faculties of theology as imams to Sunni mosques and the congregation is forced to accept a person unknown to them as their imam without a problem. Ja'farites are not like that. They require assurance of the imam's scholarly proficiency and personal *taqwa*. So, even if the state appoints imams trained according to Ja'fari *fiqh* to our mosques, the congregations would not accept them" (S. Sayan, personel interview, 2007).

Abdülkadir Sezgin, a retired chief inspector from the Presidency of Religious Affairs, says he proposed a project in 1999 that was not carried out in order to solve the Ja'faris' current problems: "I proposed a project to the General Secretariat of the National Security Council. I proposed founding a Ja'fari department under Ankara University's Faculty of Theology which *ayatollahs* who serve as scholars in Shia *madrasahs* would be invited to join, and in which Ja'fari religious scholars would be

trained. I felt that many problems of the Ja'fari community would be solved by this. The secretariat saw the project as important and asked opinions of both the Religious Affairs Administration and from faculties of theology. Unfortunately those institutions responded negatively, and the project never saw the light of day" (A. Sezgin, personel interview: 2015).

Such proposals are met with caution from Ja'fari religious leaders, and they claim that the state is trying to assimilate them. On the other hand, most Ja'faris voice demands as to the founding of Ja'fari religious schools to provide religious training for their children as well as for their future imams (Yeler, 2006: 67).

Religious services in Turkey are provided by the Presidency of Religious Affairs, founded in 1924. Religious education is also provided in Qur'anic courses, Imam-Khatib high schools, and faculties of theology, which are all modern state institutions. Apart from that, primary and secondary education institutions provide religious, cultural, and moral education for all students. The fact that religious services and education are completely under state control is related to the philosophy of the foundation of the Republic of Turkey, a policy that sustains secularity and specified by the constitution. The Ja'faris' attitude and expectations on mosques' independence and imams' training contradict the state's fundamental philosophy. Hence, unless major changes in the constitution are made, such demands from Ja'faris are not likely to be met.

8. Conclusion

Ja'farism is a kind of institutionalized identity in Turkey at the present time although it has some different ideological and political dimensions. Movement of religious tradition into city life, religious leaders' being the natural leaders of the society, cohabitation in places to which they immigrate, neighbourhood and relative relations are important factors in this institutionalization. In addition to this, mosque based lifestyle and Ashura commemorations which are unique to Ja'faris have bigger and more important roles. Although Ja'faris have some demands that discussed the main problems are about the status of mosques and the religious education of the imams.

Endnotes

- 1 Although Shi'ism historically had many factions, it is the Ja'fari which have come to be dominant. Outside of Turkey, Ja'faris are also known as 'Imamis' – because of their belief in a line of successors to the Prophet Muhammad – or 'Twelvers' (Ithna 'Asharis) – because of their belief that the successors are twelve in number. Inside Turkey it is the term 'Ja'fari' which has currency given the pivotal role played by Ja'far al-Sadiq in the formation of the jurisprudence of this sect.
- 2 For example see; Martin Van Bruinessen, "Kurds, Turks and the Alevi Revival in Turkey", Middle East Report 200 (1996), pp.7-10, and Moojen Momen, "An Introduction to Shi'i Islam The History and Doctrines of Twelver Shi'ism", Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1985, pp.269-270.
- 3 See for the comparison of those religious groups in Turkey; Abdulkadir yeler, "Shi'ism in Turkey: A Comparison of Alevis and Ja'faris", *Journal of Shi'a Islamic Studies*, V.3, N.3, London 2010, and Abdülkadir Yeler, "Aleviler Suriye'nin Neresinde?"

http://www.tasam.org/Files/Icerik/File/aleviler_suriyenin_neresinde_5e0bbbed-a34d-4deb-b938-58e891af7f71.pdf

- 4 For example; Büyükkara asserts that population of Ja'faris maybe slightly more than half a million. (Mehmet Ali Büyükkara, "İslam Kaynaklı Mezheplerin Ortadoğu'daki Coğrafi Dağılımı ve Tahmini Nüfusları", e-Makalat Mezhep Araştırmaları, VI/2, Güz 2013, p. 332). In addition, according to "Research on Religious Life in Turkey" by Presidency of Religious Affairs; %99 of the population in Turkey is Muslim and %1 of Muslims are Ja'faris. It means Ja'fari population in Turkey is about 760.000. (Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı, Türkiye'de Dini Hayat Araştırması, Ankara, 2014, p. 8).
- 5 In a survey carried out in 1851, 243 Iranian traders living in different parts of İstanbul were determined. See. Ottoman Archives of Prime Ministry Office (BOA), İrade Hariciye (İHR), 74/3603.
- 6 Ayşen Baylak notes that the first generation that migrated to İstanbul in the 1960s was unhappy about not being able to find any place or group to commemorate Ashura. Sema told me that "When my father learned about the mosque in Valide Han (known as mosque of Iranians for centuries) he was as happy as a kid...He used to ask himself how I can live in such a city where the mourning for Ehli Beyt is unseen." (Ayşen Baylak, *Visibility Through Ritual: Caferi/Shiite Community in Turkey*, Bogazici University, Atatürk Institute for Modern Turkish History, unpublished master thesis, İstanbul, 2009, p. 68.)
- 7 <http://www2.tbmm.gov.tr/d24/2/2-0172.pdf> (03/24/2015)
- 8 <http://www.ysk.gov.tr/ysk/docs/2011MilletvekiliSecimi/KesinSonuclar/igdir.pdf>
- 9 [http://www.zeynebiye.com/caferi-calistayi-taleplerini-acikladi-\(foto\)_d74627.html](http://www.zeynebiye.com/caferi-calistayi-taleplerini-acikladi-(foto)_d74627.html) (11/28/2013)

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