

When Ideology Meets Local Reality: Qom Alumni and the Contemporary Indonesian Shia Dilemma

Anindya Ayu Pratiwi

¹ Master's Program of Interdisciplinary Islamic Studies, Sunan Kalijaga State Islamic University
Yogyakarta, anindyaayu109@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how the influence of Qom, Iran, has influenced the Indonesian Shia community through alumni networks established since the mid-20th century. Building on Keiko Sakurai's analytical framework of al-Mustafa International University (MIU), this paper argues that Qom's influence in Indonesia did not occur as a unidirectional ideological transfer, but rather as a multi-layered negotiation process between Iran's institutional framework and the local Indonesian context. Using a qualitative approach based on literature review, the analysis is conducted through three layers: a historical exploration of the Indonesia-Qom relationship, an institutional analysis of MIU's transformation, and a profile study of representative alumni figures. The results show that while MIU structurally promotes doctrinal standardization and what Sakurai calls "Persianization" Indonesian alumni have developed diverse negotiation strategies between the Qom legacy and the demands of the Indonesian socio-political context. These findings demonstrate that the globalization of Shia Islam through the Qom network has not resulted in ideological uniformity, but rather has given rise to new localities that cannot be fully controlled from the center.

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Corresponding Author:

Anindya Ayu Pratiwi

Sunan Kalijaga State Islamic University Yogyakarta, anindyaayu109@gmail.com

INTRODUCTION

The debate over theological differences within Islam, particularly between Sunni and Shia sects, has been a persistent part of religious discourse. In Sunni-majority Indonesia, the presence of the Shia community consistently attracts attention, both in academic and public policy contexts. However, beneath the often-surfaced sectarian tensions lies a far more complex dynamic: how individuals who studied in the world's leading center of Shia studies, the Iranian city of Qom, subsequently returned to their homeland and navigated their intellectual, institutional, and socio-political lives.

Qom, sometimes written as "Qum," is a city in Iran that has long been a global Shia spiritual and intellectual center. It is now known as one of the world's largest Islamic seminaries, with tens of thousands of scholars residing and teaching there (El-Razy et al., 2023). Relations between Indonesia and Qom accelerated dramatically after the 1979 Iranian revolution, in line with Iran's educational diplomacy strategy, one of which was realized through the establishment of Al-Mustafa International University (MIU) (Banikamal & Ra'ees, 2018). More than two hundred Qom alumni are active in Indonesia, and they go beyond teaching in Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) to leading foundations, writing books, preaching in public media, and some even entering the political sphere (Zulkifli, 2015).

This phenomenon aligns with a broader pattern in Indonesia, where Shia organizations and foundations have established community educational platforms ranging from family to formal educational institutions (Lubis & Rahmah, 2021). The presence of these Qom alumni raises interesting academic questions: to what extent are they extensions of Iranian ideology, and to what extent have they succeeded in formulating a version of Shiism appropriate to the Indonesian context?

Keiko Sakurai's study of al-Mustafa International University offers a compelling framework for understanding how Iran built a global Shia educational network. Sakurai's most compelling work focuses on the concept of "Persianization" a tendency whereby the spread of Shiism through al-Mustafa International University (MIU) indirectly led to the spread of Iranian culture and identity, as well as a structural monopoly on the position of mujtahid, ensuring that supreme religious authority remains locked in Iranian hands. However, Sakurai himself acknowledged that Indonesia was only briefly mentioned in his study, even though it is one of the largest Muslim countries in the world. This paper builds on this gap, taking Sakurai's work as a starting point and then examining it in the Indonesian context, which, as will be seen, yields a much more complex dynamic.

Definitively, Shia refers to the sect that believes that Ali ibn Abi Talib and his descendants were the legitimate leaders after the death of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) (Dewi, 2016). The fundamental difference with Sunni Islam lies in the concept of imamate (leadership), that an imam must be infallible (infallible from sin and error) and that his authority derives from divine decree, not the voice of the majority (Marjuni, 2020). This is where the Imamiyah, or Isna Ashariyah, which believes in twelve imams, developed.

Against this background, this paper argues that Qom's influence in Indonesia never functioned as a unidirectional and uniform ideological transfer. What occurred was a multi-layered negotiation process, between the Iranian institutional framework that dominated MIU classrooms and the local identities that persisted beyond them, between transnational legitimacy and the contextual demands that must be met to survive in Indonesian social space. The globalization of Shiism through the Qom network actually produced new localities that could not be fully controlled from their center.

METHODS

This paper uses a qualitative approach based on library research, which is research conducted through the collection, reading, and processing of literary sources without field research (Sugiyono, 2011). The sources used include books, scientific journals, and other secondary sources relevant to the theme of Qom alumni, the Indonesian Shia community, and the dynamics of transnational Islamic education. The analysis is conducted interpretively by combining three layers of study: first, a historical investigation to map the development of Indonesia-Qom relations from the pre-1979 period to the MIU era; second, an institutional analysis of the transformation of the education system from a traditional seminary to a modern university; and third, a profile study of three representative alumni, Umar Shahab, Ahmad Baragbah, and Jalaluddin Rakhmat, to see how Qom's influence was negotiated at the individual level. These three were chosen because they are documented in the existing academic literature and each represents a different path of negotiation. This profile study is not intended to be a statistical representation of all Qom alumni in Indonesia, but rather as an analytical window to observe the variety of possible negotiation patterns.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Early History: Indonesia-Qom Relations Before 1979

Before the 1979 Iranian Revolution, relations between Indonesian Shia and Qom were still in their infancy, small, and unorganized, largely a personal initiative. The Shia community in Indonesia was already present at that time, albeit on a very small scale and practiced within family circles, without any public presence (Dewi, 2016).

Indeed, there were initial efforts by a number of Indonesian Shia leaders, such as Muhammad Asad Shahab, to establish contact with Iranian Shia clerics as early as the 1950s. However, according to Zulkifli, Indonesian students only began to travel to Qom in real life a few years before the revolution. Ali Ridho al-Habsy was recorded as studying in Qom in 1974, followed by six graduates of the al-Khairat Islamic boarding school from Palu the following two years. Then, in September 1976, Umar Shahab arrived in Qom with seven other Indonesian students (Zulkifli, 2015). In Fischer's field notes from the mid-1970s, Indonesian students were even described as the smallest foreign group in Qom, ranked last after Pakistan, Afghanistan, India, Lebanon, Tanzania, Turkey, Nigeria, and Kashmir (Zulkifli, 2009).

Why Qom? The answer is inseparable from the city's reputation, which had been established long before the modern era. According to El-Razy et al. (2023), Qom's vital role as a center of Shia scholarship strengthened significantly after the Safavid Dynasty took over Persia in the 16th century and established Shiism as the official state school, with the Faiziyah Madrasah as its icon. It was during this period that Mulla Sadra (Sadr al-Din Shirazi) moved and settled in Qom for thirteen years, producing *Al-Hikmah Al-Muta'aliyah*, a monumental synthesis of Islamic philosophical traditions. His son-in-law, Abd al-Razzaq Lahiji, nicknamed Fayyaz, also resided and taught in Qom in the Peripatetic philosophical tradition. Qom's important role continued until the fall of the Safavid Dynasty in the 18th century, and was then continued by the Qajar Dynasty in the 19th century, which continued to prioritize the Faiziyah Madrasah.

However, in the early 20th century, with the weakening of the Qajar Dynasty, Qom's importance waned, losing ground to Najaf in Iraq as a center of Shia education. A new momentum for revival emerged when Ayatollah Abdul Karim Ha'iri Yazdi re-established the Qom Seminary in 1922, restoring its international reputation within the Shia world. Therefore, when Indonesian students first arrived in Qom in the mid-1970s, they entered an intellectual environment that inherited two distinct layers of history: the philosophical heyday of the Safavid-Qajar era and a half-century-old institutional revival (El-Razy et al., 2023).

Most of these early students came from Arab communities scattered throughout Indonesia, a fact that reflects the fact that the pathway to Qom at that time depended more on ethnic and family networks than on formal institutional structures. Local figures such as Husein al-Habsy, a prominent Shia cleric in Bangil, East Java, have been bridging the Indonesian Shia community with the world of Shia scholarship in Iran since before 1979. Thus, the pre-1979 period is better understood as a stage of very limited personal network formation, rather than structured expansion from above. It was precisely this small foundation that became the foundation for major developments after the Iranian revolution (Zulkifli, 2015).

B. Post-1979 Revolution: Ideological Export Meets Local Agency

The victory of the 1979 Iranian Islamic Revolution dramatically changed the nature of the relationship between Qom and the Indonesian Shia community. The revolution not only established a new political system in Iran but also spurred an active policy of spreading Shia Islam abroad. At the same time, in Indonesia, the revolution attracted the interest of a number of intellectuals and religious scholars to delve deeper into the movement's ideological foundation, namely Imami Shia theology (Sakurai, 2015).

One political doctrine that emerged from Imami Shia circles and became the ideological foundation of the Iranian revolution was the concept of vilayat-i faqih, formulated by Ayatollah Khomeini. This principle states that in the absence of an imam, a qualified faqih (Islamic jurist) has the right to lead the Muslim community. Khomeini himself was a direct product of the Qom Seminary and was later recognized as a marja' (El-Razy et al., 2023). This understanding is crucial because it explains why Qom became not only a center of scholarship but also a center for shaping the religious and political orientation of its students.

The year 1982 marked a pivotal point in the history of Qom-Indonesia relations. The Iranian government sent an official delegation to Indonesia with the primary objective of visiting the Islamic Boarding School Foundation (YAPI) in Bangil, East Java, and meeting with Husein al-Habsy. From this meeting, the Qom Seminary agreed to accept ten Indonesian students, handpicked by al-Habsy (Zulkifli, 2015). When Dar al-Tabligh, the institution that first accommodated Indonesian students in Qom, was dissolved in 1981-1982 due to internal conflict surrounding the vilayat-i faqih (Islamic jurists), Indonesian students switched to the hujjatiya madrasah, which adhered to the traditional hawza system. This demonstrates that the institutional access of Indonesian alumni was influenced from the outset by Iran's internal political

turmoil (Zulkifli, 2009). Until his death in 1994, al-Habsy served as gatekeeper, selecting prospective Indonesian students to Qom.

Nearly all of the students in that initial agreement were of Arab descent, and six of them were alumni of YAPI. Between 1985 and 1989, Husein al-Habsy sent ten more students to Qom, many of whom later founded or affiliated with prominent Shia foundations in Indonesia. In the early 1990s, this composition began to change, as graduates of the Mutahhari Foundation and the al-Hadi Islamic Boarding School began to be directed to Qom, along with the growing influence of Shia intellectuals such as Jalaluddin Rakhmat and Haidar Bagir (Zulkifli, 2015).

These developments demonstrate that the expansion of Qom-Indonesia relations was indeed driven by the dynamics of the Iranian revolution, but its growth depended heavily on pre-existing local networks. YAPI and Husein al-Habsy were not simply passive recipients; they were active actors shaping who gained access to Qom. Iran's "export of revolution" has always been mediated by local agencies that have their own calculations.

C. Institutional Transformation: From Seminary to Modern University

As the number of foreign students studying in Qom increased, the educational institution there underwent fundamental changes. The Qom Seminary traditionally operated through a halaqah system that emphasized mastery of fiqh, usul al-fiqh, tafsir, hadith and philosophy through direct relationships between teachers and students. This model had endured for centuries, but was not designed to manage thousands of international students (Sakurai, 2015).

This transformation occurred with the establishment of the International Center for Islamic Studies (ICIS) in 1986, replacing the Supervisory Board for Non-Iranian Seminary Students, which had been in place since 1979. Since 1994, ICIS has been directly under the authority of the office of the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran, a move that allowed for more centralized ideological control over foreign student affairs. This institution was designed to manage foreign students, adjust the curriculum to meet the needs of global Islamic knowledge, and ensure that their orientation aligns with the Islamic Republic's ideological framework. ICIS then evolved into Al-Mustafa International University (MIU) in 2008, offering formal educational pathways at the bachelor's, master's, and doctoral levels, a transformation from a traditional seminary to a modern, standardized university (Sakurai, 2015).

For Indonesian students, this change introduced a more organized admission process, selected through Islamic institutions in Indonesia such as the Jakarta Islamic Cultural Center and the Mutahhari Foundation in Bandung, with six months of Persian language training prior to formal study. As a result, the number of Indonesian students increased significantly from around fifty in 1990 to over two hundred and fifty active students in the following decade (Zulkifli, 2015).

This transformation had twofold consequences. On the one hand, standardization expanded access, not only to Shia institutions and Arab circles, but also to secular university graduates from various disciplines. On the other hand, standardization means more systematic ideological control. Graduates no longer only

bring diverse intellectual backgrounds but also institutional frameworks more tied to central authority (Sakurai, 2015; Zulkifli, 2015).

One dimension of standardization that is often overlooked is its cultural implications. Sakurai calls this process “Persianization” Although MIU claims to be a universal Islamic university, its entire educational process is conducted in Persian, with textbooks written by Iranian figures and teachers predominantly of Iranian origin (Sakurai, 2015). For Indonesian students arriving from a background in Islamic boarding schools in the archipelago and a completely different socio-political context, “Persianization” is never truly complete; what occurs is more like a negotiation between the Iranian framework that dominates the classroom and the local identities that persist outside the classroom.

These structural consequences are even programmed into the MIU system itself. Of the tens of thousands of non-Iranian graduates, only about ten to twenty are pursuing the path of mujtahid, the highest position in the hierarchy of Shia legal authority. Non-Iranian alumni, including Indonesians, are accepted as part of the global Shia network, but always in the position of muqallid (followers), not as independent decision-makers (Zulkifli, 2024).

This authority cannot be separated from broader strategic interests. Iran's educational diplomacy is not simply a scholarly project, but rather part of a deliberate soft power strategy, recruiting students from predominantly Sunni Muslim countries, educating them within the framework of Imami Shia doctrine, and then returning them as disseminators of the values of the Islamic revolution (Banikamal & Ra'ees, 2018). In Indonesia, this pattern also holds, but with a crucial difference: unlike Malaysia, where political space is more limited, MIU in Indonesia found local partners with a network of Islamic boarding schools and a relatively independent Shia intellectual ecosystem. Therefore, Iranian educational diplomacy had to engage in dialogue with pre-existing local institutions (Banikamal & Ra'ees, 2018).

The institutional dynamics outlined above must ultimately be understood through their operation at the individual level. Therefore, the following section examines three representative alumni as analytical windows into the various negotiation strategies that developed outside the MIU classroom.

D. Alumni Profiles: Negotiations Between Qom's Legacy and Indonesian Realities

To understand how Qom's influence operates at the individual level, this section examines three alumni with diverse backgrounds and social strategies. All three present distinctive patterns of negotiation between Qom's legacy and the Indonesian context.

a) Umar Shahab

Umar Shahab was among the earliest generation of Indonesian students in Qom, arriving in September 1976 with seven colleagues when the number of Indonesian students there was still small. He entered Qom at a time when the institution was still dominated by the traditions of fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence), hadith (traditional Islamic jurisprudence), and philosophy, oriented toward the works of classical Shia scholars such as Sheikh Saduq and Al-Kulaini from the 10th

century, as well as philosophers such as Mulla Sadra, whose works continue to be a primary reference in philosophy teaching in Qom (El-Razy et al., 2023).

Upon his return to Indonesia, Umar Shahab became one of the most prominent Shia ustadz (Islamic religious teachers) and was involved in the development of educational institutions, including leading the Sadra Islamic Philosophy College (STFI Sadra) in Jakarta. He leveraged his scholarly authority in Qom to establish legitimacy within the Indonesian Shia community, while also continuing his formal studies in Indonesia to the doctoral level. This combination of two sources of authority distinguished him from alumni who relied solely on one path (Zulkifli, 2015).

b) Ahmad Baragbah

While Umar Shahab embodies personal pragmatism, Ahmad Baragbah embodies an effort to translate Qom's influence into a deeply rooted institution. Originally from Pekalongan, Central Java, he founded the al-Hadi Islamic boarding school, which became a center of Shia education with a distinctly Indonesian character. Al-Hadi did not emerge as a direct branch of the Qom or MIU institutions, but rather as a local Islamic boarding school (*pesantren*) that combined the seminary model with the needs of local Islamic education (Zulkifli, 2015).

The al-Hadi *pesantren* aimed to develop a cadre of Shia teachers who could serve the local community and continue their studies in Qom if necessary. It employed a tiered curriculum that was more structured than the traditional *halaqah* system, a model Baragbah had adopted directly from Qom. Thus, when he founded the al-Hadi *pesantren*, he was not simply imitating the structure of traditional Indonesian *pesantren* but also continuing a pedagogical model with profound intellectual legitimacy from Qom, which he then packaged in an institutional form that was acceptable and sustainable in the Indonesian context (Zulkifli, 2015).

c) Jalaluddin Rakhmat

Jalaluddin Rakhmat represents the most complex of the three. He was already widely known as a prolific Islamic writer and thinker long before his approximately one-year stay in Qom. His stay there enriched his intellectual orientation through study groups and lectures by the Ayatollahs, but did not transform him into an institutional figure tied to a specific institution (Zulkifli, 2015). His intellectual engagement with Shi'ism began at an Islamic conference in Colombo in 1984, where his encounters with Shi'ite scholars prompted him to deepen his understanding of the school of thought through Arabic texts (Zulkifli, 2009).

The tradition of rational thought he absorbed in Qom was rooted in the legacy of Mulla Sadra and the institutional revival of Shi'ite philosophy in the 20th century (El-Razy et al., 2023). Rakhmat absorbed it not as a doctrine to be transmitted, but as a conceptual resource for developing a new synthesis between

Islamic philosophy and Indonesian modernity. As the founder and intellectual advisor of IJABI (the Association of Ahlul Bait Jama'ah Indonesia), he helped construct the narrative that Shi'ism could be compatible with democracy, pluralism, and interfaith dialogue in the Indonesian context.

These three profiles collectively demonstrate one crucial point: Qom's influence in Indonesia did not operate as a uniform ideological transfer. Umar Shahab leveraged Qom's authority to establish legitimacy but adapted it to the Indonesian context. Ahmad Baragbah absorbed Qom's methodology and transformed it into a highly localized pesantren (Islamic boarding school). Jalaluddin Rakhmat used Qom as a philosophical resource to formulate an independent intellectual vision. All three demonstrate diverse loyalties, conscious strategies of self-presentation, and creativity in transforming Qom's legacy into something acceptable in Indonesian social space.

E. Contemporary Dilemmas: Continuously Negotiated Tensions

Education in Qom does not produce a singular orientation for Indonesian Shia. Rather, what emerges from this process is a space of negotiation, between adherence to transnational orthodoxy and the demands of post-reform pluralism, between loyalty to the marja' in Iran and obligations as Indonesian citizens, between ideological commitments and evolving professional opportunities. These tensions are never truly resolved; each is continually negotiated according to the context in which they are encountered.

The most fundamental ambivalence is rooted in the Qom curriculum itself. On the one hand, MIU inherits a tradition of comparative studies and a narrative of the "unity of Islam" that theoretically could support an inclusive stance. On the other hand, the same institution asserts exclusive loyalty to the marja' and the doctrine of vilayat-i faqih, a framework in which religious authority does not rest within national borders but is instead tied to specific scholars at the global level (Sakurai, 2015). Suspicion of the loyalty of these Qom alumni is exacerbated by the concept of taqiya (concealment of faith), which anti-Shia groups use to argue that Shia affirmations of Pancasila and the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia (NKRI) are untrustworthy. According to a Wahid Foundation report from 2009 to 2018, Shia issues ranked highest in religious hate speech monitoring in Indonesia, with the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI), the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI), and the National Anti-Shia Alliance (ANNAS) as the main actors (Zulkifli, 2024). This pressure is organized through at least three narratives: first, accusations that Shia disrupt social order; second, claims that the Shia community undermines the Ahlusunnah wal Jama'ah creed; and third, calls for religious scholars from across organizations to unite against Shia (Zulkifli, 2024). These narratives were exacerbated by the sectarian conflict in Sampang, Madura, in 2011-2012, which led to the forced expulsion of the local Shia community.

Within the same context of pressure, the emergence of Shia intellectual movements, such as Rausyan Fikr in Yogyakarta, offered a different response. Founded in 1995 by Romy Fibri, Rausyan Fikr positioned itself outside the two

mainstream Indonesian Shia institutions: IJABI (Association of Ahlul Bait Indonesia) led by Jalaluddin Rakhmat and ABI (Ahlul Bait Indonesia) with its commander at the time, Umar Shahab (Arkanudin, 2021), claiming that philosophy is universal and not solely the preserve of one school of thought (Syauqii, 2024). The thoughts of Murtadha Mutahhari, Ali Shariati, and Baqir al-Sadr are not pursued as doctrines to be transmitted, but as liberating philosophies relevant to anyone seeking critical thinking (Robby & Shafia, 2025). However, this choice is not without risk. Rausyan Fikr faced persecution by radical groups in 2013, an incident analyzed by Makin (2017) as part of a broader movement to homogenize Indonesian Islam. This case demonstrates that even choosing to distance oneself from Qom orthodoxy does not guarantee security.

Similar tensions exist in the issue of national identity. Qom was designed from the outset as a transnational institution; its students are taught in Persian and Arabic, and the concept of *marja'* encourages personal loyalty to global scholars, rather than to one's country of residence (El-Razy et al., 2023; Sakurai, 2015). Meanwhile, Islam in Indonesia is expected to operate within the framework of Pancasila and *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* (Unity in Diversity). To bridge the gap, alumni developed diverse strategies. Some reinterpreted *vilayat-i faqih* as purely spiritual guidance, others separated Shia identity from national identity, and still others localized the entire *vilayat-i faqih* framework into principles of moral leadership compatible with the context of Indonesian civil society (Zulkifli, 2015). This tension was never resolved; it was simply managed.

The third dimension of this dilemma concerns career choices. Before 1998, space for the Shia community in Indonesia was very limited. After the reformation, opportunities expanded rapidly through universities, the media, parliament, and the business world. Abdurrahman Bima, for example, a Qom alumnus who later chose politics, serving as a member of parliament for the Democratic Party during the era of President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, demonstrated that a background in Qom can be a valuable asset for a national political career, not just a religious one (Zulkifli, 2015). This pattern gave birth to at least three types of alumni, those who remained concentrated on Shia *da'wah*, those who pursued hybrid careers and those who were more professionally oriented, where Shia identity was managed situationally (Zulkifli, 2015; Sakurai, 2015).

At the institutional level, a similar tension emerges in the form of a tug-of-war between dependence on Qom and the need for local autonomy. IJABI (Association of Ahlul Bait Jama'ah Indonesia), Islamic College Jakarta, and Pesantren al-Hadi each have different relationships with Qom, but all three share a common paradox: affiliation with Qom provides legitimacy and access to transnational networks, while simultaneously limiting mobility and making the institution vulnerable to Indonesia-Iran diplomatic tensions. Ultimately, the alumni relationship with Qom is never one of pure dependence or independence, but rather a strategic negotiation that constantly evolves according to needs (Sakurai, 2015; Zulkifli, 2015).

This structural dependency, as discussed in the institutional context of MIU previously, places non-Iranian alumni, including Indonesians, in a position of *muqallid*, rather than *mujtahid* who make independent decisions. Consequently,

supreme religious authority remains locked in the hands of Iranian clerics, while Indonesian alumni operate within a space that is structurally constrained within the educational system itself.

CONCLUSION

This paper demonstrates that Qom's influence on the Indonesian Shia community is far more complex than the mere narrative of "ideological export". The Indonesia-Qom relationship grew from a small personal network before 1979, then transformed into a more structured educational diplomacy through MIU. However, at each stage, local agencies were always present as mediators, determining how that influence was absorbed, translated, and even partially rejected.

The three alumni profiles examined together demonstrate this paper's central argument: that Qom's influence did not produce a single model of Indonesian Shia. Instead, what emerged was a spectrum of negotiations, from personal pragmatism to local institutionalization to intellectual independence. Organized anti-Shia pressures, tensions of transnational loyalties, and post-reform career diversification further deepened this complexity. Sakurai's concept of "Persianization" remains relevant as an analytical framework, but the Indonesian case confirms that Persianization is never complete; it always encounters vibrant and adaptive local identities. Ultimately, Qom alumni in Indonesia are not extensions of Iran, but rather figures who reshape that influence according to their own interests, contexts, and creativity.

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