

The Hawza Al-'Ilmiyya and Its Role in Preserving the Shia Identity through Jurisprudence

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Abstract : The Hawza Al-'Ilmiyya is a network of religious seminaries in the Shia branch of Islam. This research mainly focuses on the oldest school located in Najaf, Iraq, because its core curriculum and main characteristics have been unchanged since the fourth century of Islam. Relying on a thorough literature review of Arabic and English publications, and interviews with current and previous students of the seminary, the current research outlines the factors proving how this seminary was crucial in keeping the Shia religious identity intact despite sometimes gruesome attempts of interference and persecution. There are several factors that helped the seminary to preserve its central importance. First, rooted in their theology, Shia Muslims believe that the Hawza Al-'Ilmiyya and its graduates carry a sacred authority. Secondly, the financial independence of the Seminary helped to keep it intact from any governmental or political meddling. Third, its unique teaching method, its matchless openness for new students, and its flexible curriculum made it attractive for many students who were interested in learning more about Shia theology and jurisprudence. The Hawza Al-'Ilmiyya has the exclusive right to train clerics who hold the religious authority of Shia Islamic jurisprudence, and the seminary's success in staying independent throughout history kept Shia Islamic theology independent, as well.

Keywords : Hawza Al'Ilmiyya, religious seminary, Shia Muslim education, Islamic jurisprudence

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