

AMERICAN MUSLIM BAR ASSOCIATION

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# POLICY PAPER

# ELECTION 2020

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Recommendations based on the  
National Shia Community Political Survey



Attorneys Inspired by the Ahlul Bayt  
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## BACKGROUND ON THE AMERICAN SHIA MUSLIM COMMUNITY

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The earliest records of Shia Muslims settling in the United States date to 1899 in Ross, North Dakota and Michigan City, Indiana. The first Shia Muslim community in Michigan City, made up of primarily Syrian and Lebanese merchants, built one of the first mosques in America in 1924. Among this nascent community were 3 Shia Muslims who were on board the infamous Titanic. It was in the 1950's and 60's that the Shia community began to expand rapidly in the neighboring cities of Detroit and Dearborn in Michigan, with the continuous influx of

immigrants mostly from Lebanon, as well as India and Iran. The largest mosque in the US, the Islamic Center of America, is a Shia mosque in Dearborn that was built in 1963. In the decades after, the Shia Muslim population settled all over the country through continuing immigration, births, and conversion, and became active in the social and religious milieu of the country, basing their values on the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad and his family, the Ahlul Bayt ("People of the Household"), peace be upon them.<sup>1</sup>

**“Respect the rights of God and the rights of people, and likewise, persuade your companions and kin to do likewise. Otherwise, you will be committing injustice against yourself and injustice to humanity... Nothing deprives people of divine blessings or invites divine wrath against them more easily than cruelty. Verily, God listens to the voice of the oppressed and comes down on the oppressor.”**

— Excerpt from Ali Ibn Abi Talib's\* letter to his Governor in Egypt, Malik Al Ashtar, 658 AD

\*1st Shia Imam and 4th head of state of the early Muslim community

<sup>1</sup> Takim L. Shi'ism in America. New York University Press. New York: 2009.

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## THE NATIONAL SHIA **COMMUNITY** **POLITICAL SURVEY**

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The American Muslim Bar Association conducted a national political survey, only the second time in the history of the American Shia Muslim community,\* from September 4<sup>th</sup> through September 16<sup>th</sup>, 2020, with 532 respondents from states across the country (see breakdown below). Estimates are that there are now between 750K – 1 million Shia Muslims in America, which makes the survey statistically significant within a 5% margin of error. Our priorities and recommendations in this policy brief are largely based on the results of this survey.

According to the survey's **532 respondents** aged 18 – 65+:

**84%** of American Shia Muslims who are eligible plan to vote:

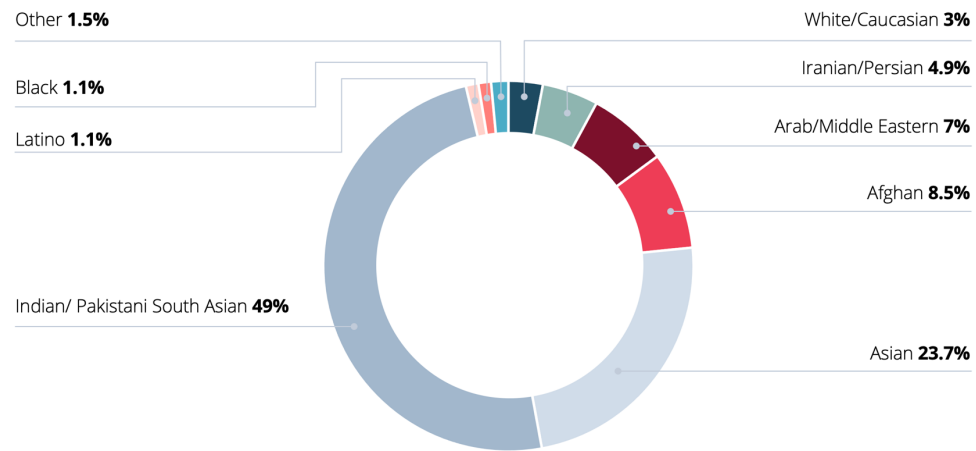
- **41%** plan to do so in person
- **59%** plan to do so by mail

Also pertinent is that **13%** of the community does not plan to vote in the 2020 presidential election because they do not like any candidate.

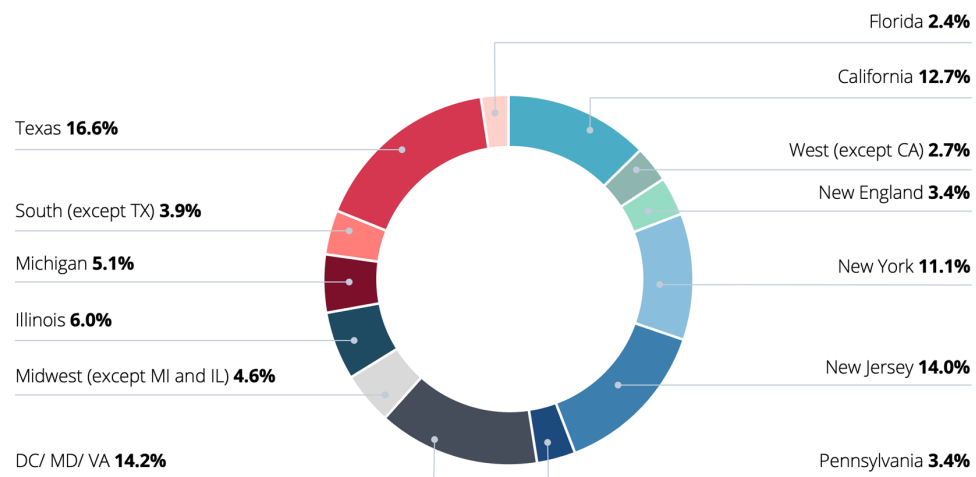
\*The first national political survey of the American Shia Muslim Community was conducted by the Qunoot Foundation, just before the 2004 presidential election.

Below is the demographic background of the American Shia Muslim community, based on the identifying questions posed in the national survey:

### Demographic Breakdown of Survey Respondents by Race



### Demographic Breakdown of Survey Respondents by Location



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## **PROPOSAL:** US policy towards Saudi Arabia must change to stop the war on Yemen, end arms sales, and preserve cultural heritage.

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This was the **#1 issue** of concern from among 20 questions in the National Shia Community Political Survey.

### **END ARMS SALES AND STOP THE WAR ON YEMEN**

The United States and Saudi Arabia engaged in arms sale agreements over \$76 billion from fiscal year 2009 to 2017. Since March 2015, the US has supported Saudi Arabia in its war on Yemen by supplying weapons made in the US, training, logistical assistance and military intelligence. Many members of Congress have grown critical of US policy toward Saudi Arabia and the kingdom's leadership in light of Saudi policy in Yemen. Bi-partisan legislation has been proposed and considered in the 116<sup>th</sup> Congress to direct the President to withdraw US forces from hostilities in Yemen or to limit or condition US-Saudi defense cooperation and US arms sales (e.g. S.J. Res. 7 which passed the House and Senate but was vetoed by President Trump, as well as S. 398, S.J. Res. 36, and H.R. 2500). However, President Trump in 2019 deployed

additional US troops and military equipment to Saudi Arabia.<sup>1</sup>

Despite Saudi Arabia's terrible record on human rights, oppression of women, crackdown on any form of protest, and the spread of their extremist *takfir*\* ideology around the world leading to the emergence of terrorist groups, the US sees Saudi Arabia as a resource-rich strategic ally and a counter to the influence of Iran in the region. This is a short-sighted view that does not take into consideration the complex history of the region and current sentiments of the majority of Muslims on the ground. The Saudi government, empowered by the US, is largely blamed by Muslims around the world for tensions in the region. Saudi Arabia is also largely credited with the funding and indoctrinating of extremist ideologies throughout the world.<sup>2,3</sup> As a result, the US embrace of Saudi Arabia, rather than countering adversaries, actually significantly reduces US credibility and soft power.

\* *Takfiri* refers to the extremist ideology that sanctions arbitrary declaration of apostasy on other Muslims, outside of strict Islamic legal process by trained scholars. *Takfiris* often condone acts of violence as legitimate methods of achieving religious or political goals, which has historically landed on Shia Muslim communities with devastating impact.

Furthermore, US dependence on Saudi oil is not a long-term strategy for energy assurance and could have very serious global security implications. Burning oil is one of the largest sources of greenhouse gas emissions and therefore a major driver of climate change. American consumption of oil from extremist regimes like Saudi Arabia released 640.7 million metric tons of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere alone, which is similar to having 122.5 million automobiles on the road. The gravest consequences of these phenomena could lead to destabilize governments, intensify terrorist actions, displace hundreds of millions of people due to increasingly frequent and severe natural disasters as well as rising sea levels, food and water shortages, and higher incidences of diseases such as malaria.<sup>4</sup>

Energy dependence also allows US competitors to take the lead in the energy technologies of the future at the detriment of future US competitiveness and interests. Rather, US investments must be diverted at a more rapid pace towards the research and development of an infrastructure for clean renewable energy, which would help to concurrently slow global

warming and ultimately preserve the natural environment and integrity of the Earth. In support of such a policy, **69% of the American Shia Muslim community felt it was vital for policymakers to address climate change and ensure a sustainable future for Americans and the planet as a whole.**

As tensions in the region continue to rise in the region due to the war on Yemen, it is clear that the current US policy towards Saudi Arabia is not working. Legal scholars including Oona Hathaway, Professor of International Law at Yale Law School, say top American officials could be charged with war crimes for approving bomb sales to Saudi Arabia and its partners.<sup>5</sup> In fact, international judges and prosecutors are increasingly embracing the idea of holding the US accountable for wartime actions in other parts of the world.<sup>6</sup> In order to ease tensions in the region and abate the humanitarian crisis, which has left over 127,000 civilians dead from direct attacks and famine,<sup>6</sup> it is necessary to find an alternative. [AMBA plans to hold former Vice President Biden to his promise, “We should also end our support for the Saudi-led war in Yemen.”<sup>7</sup>]

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Stop US arms sales to Saudi Arabia completely
2. Replace US purchases of Saudi oil with greater investment in clean, renewable energy
3. Pressure Saudi Arabia to put an end to the war in Yemen and address the humanitarian crisis the US helped to create
4. Condemn *takfirism* and pressure Saudi Arabia to stop the persecution of Shia Muslims and other religion minorities and protect their human rights and religious freedom

In our national survey, 93% of the American Shia community voted for policy #1, 96% voted for #3, and 68% voted for #4. Recommendation #2 is a proposal devised by AMBA with relevant support by 69% of survey respondents who voted to address climate change.

### REBUILD JANNAT UL BAQI CEMETERY

In the early 1800s, the future royal family of Saud embraced an extremist *takfiri* ideology, which condemned the building of tombs or mausoleums to honor the dead. Saudi Arabia's past, present and planned destruction of historic sites threatens to eradicate Islamic heritage that is meaningful to millions of Muslims around the world. The demolition has selectively targeted shrines, mausoleums and cemeteries of particular significance to Shia and Sunni Muslims who do not practice the

extremist *takfiri*, government-mandated form of Islam. Research estimates that more than 90 percent of Saudi Arabia's historical landmarks and archaeological heritage have already been demolished and that the rate of destruction has increased over the last few years.<sup>8</sup>

In particular, the demolition of the Jannat ul Baqi cemetery in city of Medina first in 1806 by extremist *takfiris* and then again on April 21, 1925 by the Saudi government inspired by the same ideology has been a source of ire for Shia Muslims around the world for decades. The



Baqi cemetery houses the graves of some of Islam's most sacred figures, including the daughter of Prophet Muhammad, Lady Fatima Zahra; the grandson of Prophet Muhammad, Imam Hasan Ibn Ali; as well as other family members and friends of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). Every year on the anniversary of the destruction, the 8<sup>th</sup> day of the Islamic lunar month of *Shawwal*, worldwide demonstrations take place demanding the rebuilding of Jannat ul Baqi.<sup>8</sup>

Cultures, civilizations, religions and societies recognize specific monuments, locations, places and territorial regions as bearing special significance to remind posterity of particular moments in history. These sites possess unique characteristics with historical, natural, archaeological, scientific, ethnic or cultural value that hold special sentimental value and are often considered sacred. The Jannat ul Baqi Cemetery fits into this definition of a cultural heritage site.<sup>8</sup>

Jannat ul Baqi cemetery is a site in a city known as the "City of the Prophet", which belongs to all Muslims, not just the people of Saudi Arabia. In

fact, Baqi is much like Vatican City, Hagia Sophia, and the Dome of the Rock that might be located in a certain country, but belongs to a global religious community beyond the borders of the country where it is physically located. The American Shia Muslim community, in particular, considers the destruction of Jannat ul Baqi and the continuous denial of access to pilgrims (beyond the Saudi government-imposed restrictions of 2 hours a day), an international violation of religious freedom. The global Shia Muslim community's religious rights continue to be violated by Saudi Arabia due to the appalling condition of this holy site, which should bring peace to pilgrims rather than dismay. And as American Muslims, we believe the American government is complicit in this violation of our religious freedom through its lack of movement on this issue despite a geopolitical relationship with Saudi Arabia, which can be leveraged to take appropriate and principled action. A strong US policy highlighting the need to rebuild Jannat ul Baqi with genuine follow up to bring this goal to fruition would create tremendous good will among Muslims from Turkey to India, as well as Shia Muslims in the US.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Pressure Saudi Arabia with the help of UNESCO to demand the rebuilding of Jannat-ul-Baqi cemetery and declare it as a World Heritage Site
2. Offer and implement American Shia Muslim architect Zuhair Hussaini's stunning model of Jannat ul Baqi as an appropriate proposal for the rebuilding of the iconic cemetery. See here: <https://www.zuhairh.com/the-baqi-project><sup>9</sup>

74% voted for #1 in our national survey of the American Shia Muslim community. #2 is a proposal suggested by AMBA.

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**PROPOSAL:** The federal response to COVID-19 has failed at containing the virus and must be replaced with a robust national plan.

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This was the **#2 issue** of concern from among 20 questions in the National Shia Community Political Survey.

### BACKGROUND

The US has reported more COVID-19 cases and deaths than any other country since the start of the pandemic, with more than 9 million cases and 229,141 deaths as of October 25, 2020, according to the Johns Hopkins COVID-19 Dashboard.<sup>1</sup>

The death rate in the US is more than double that in Canada, almost 50 times that in Japan, and almost 2,000 times that in developing countries, such as Vietnam.<sup>1</sup>

In April of this year, the current administration made a radical policy change that has shaped the US response to the pandemic ever since. The President announced that individual states would bear the primary responsibility for halting the spread of the virus, with the federal government playing a “back-up” role. This was an unprecedented move.<sup>2</sup>

It is the first time a sitting US president has sought to decentralize authority and responsibility during a national crisis by delegating primary responsibility to individual states. Although under normal circumstances a state role in public health is typical, in a crisis a national plan would still allow for customization to reflect regional and state needs and circumstances, and not ignore that states are porous.<sup>2</sup>

The US has 3141 counties with differing demographics. Some are as large as states and have strong health departments with the power to implement public health measures through a health director, such as mandatory mask-wearing or stay-at-home orders, while others are rural and have no such independent authority. Then there are three hundred cities in the US that have populations of 100,000 or more. There is further variation in these jurisdictions – some county and city authorities overlap with a county determining public health measures and a city delivering health services. A school system may operate without

interference from either. Virtually every possible combination exists across the US.<sup>2</sup>

In the absence of centralized, science-driven federal coordination, the currently fragmented policy has resulted in considerable variation in our national response to COVID-19 by individual states. As of mid-September, while 33 states had instituted mandatory mask orders, other states imposed more lenient orders or none at all.<sup>3</sup> This variability has had significant public health consequences. Some states opened up their economies earlier than others which, in general, led to larger outbreaks.<sup>4</sup> Generally this variability has been divided along political lines, which has ultimately led to the fracturing of the country rather than bringing Americans together during a national crisis.<sup>2</sup> According to the National Center for Disaster Preparedness at Columbia University, between 58% - 93% of deaths due to COVID-19 could have been

avoided with earlier interventions and more robust federal coordination and leadership.<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, the toll of the virus in the US has fallen disproportionately on more vulnerable people of lower socioeconomic status and communities of color that have long suffered discrimination. Black and Latino residents in the US have contracted the virus at roughly three times the rate of white residents.<sup>4</sup> In addition, in New York State alone, it's estimated that 325,000 children have been pushed into or near poverty as a result of the economic impacts of the pandemic.<sup>5</sup>

Finally, according to an analysis from the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation at the University of Washington, without clear guidance on social distancing and mask-wearing, a worst-case scenario for the US could eventually lead to a total of 620,029 American lives lost, on average.<sup>5</sup>

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

95% of American Shia Muslims responded with a rating of poor to less than favorable when asked how the current administration was handling the COVID-19 response, with the most number of respondents selecting the lowest rating. Our recommendation, based on the Shia community's sentiments and expert opinions expressed above, is to implement a science-based, thoughtful national plan that addresses the rapid growth of the COVID-19 pandemic and provides federal support for testing, contact tracing, PPE, phased school and business reopening, and other elements of a response targeted to state and local conditions coordinated by the federal government.

Furthermore, such a plan would be elevated by instituting a revamping of our healthcare system to include some form of universal healthcare to ensure that those who do get infected have reliable insurance coverage for optimal treatment and possible hospitalization. **97% of the American Shia community supported some form of universal healthcare in our national survey, i.e. public option, Medicare for All, or other.**

Universal healthcare coverage would also alleviate the risk and anxiety in America's most vulnerable minority communities. These communities must receive special attention from policymakers. They often serve as essential workers and have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic, which must be addressed with higher cash payouts for children and families who are at greatest risk.

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## **PROPOSAL:** US must shift its policy on Israel towards accountability for violations of international law and oppression of the Palestinian people.

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This was the **#3 issue** of concern from among 20 questions in the National Shia Community Political Survey.

### **BACKGROUND**

Since the end of World War II, the United States has provided more cumulative foreign aid to Israel than it has to any other country. In fiscal year 2020, more than half of all US foreign military aid (~\$4 billion) was headed to Israel, which uses most of it to purchase US arms.<sup>1</sup>

Israel has committed countless systemic violations of human rights law and international humanitarian law (IHL) over the past 50 years.<sup>2</sup> It is worth noting that Israel subjects Palestinians to a dual legal regime based on ethnic supremacy reminiscent of a “21st century apartheid”, according to dozens of UN experts.<sup>3,4</sup> The fact that it is being carried out with our American tax dollars and with the support of our government is reprehensible and a cause for serious concern to the American Shia Muslim community.

In addition, a Pulitzer Center supported investigation uncovered that, from 2009 to 2013 alone, over \$280 million dollars were funneled to Israeli settlements, including providing financial support to settler oppressors, in the West Bank through a network of US non-profits’ use of tax-exempt monies.<sup>5</sup> This means that the US government and American taxpayers are indirectly incentivizing settler oppression and violence and paying for the construction of Israeli settlements and associated infrastructure, made by forcing thousands of Palestinians off their land and destroying their homes and livelihoods to permanently house Israeli civilians, extract natural resources, and further entrench Israel’s military presence and apartheid system of governance.<sup>6</sup> Construction and maintenance of these settlements on occupied Palestinian land is a breach of Israel’s responsibilities as an occupying power and is classified as a war crime under the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court.<sup>7</sup>

The current US policy towards Israel is not working to bring peace to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or reduce tension in the region, so it is imperative to find an alternative strategy.

[In April 2019, the Pew Research Center released survey results indicating that “two-thirds (67%) of Democrats view Israel’s government unfavorably, while just 26% have a favorable opinion.”<sup>8</sup> It is imperative for a potential President Biden and his

administration to come in line with the views of Democratic Party members. For too long, the Party has been held hostage by special interest lobby groups, rather than the will of the people it purports to represent.]

Multiple United Nations resolutions emphasize that Israel’s annexation of occupied territories is illegal and a war crime, and demand Israel’s compliance with fundamental principles of international law.<sup>9</sup>

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## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Apply Section 620M of the Foreign Assistance Act (the “Leahy Law”) and Section 4 of the Arms Export Control Act of 1976 (the “AECA”), and all other relevant US legislation and regulations, and cease military-security funding, ban arms trade, and end cooperation with Israel and its defense forces for its gross violation of human rights.
2. If Israel continues to violate international law, suspend existing trade and cooperation agreements with Israel, including the Israel–United States Free Trade Agreement.
3. Apply all relevant US legislation and regulations, including but not limited to the Convention on Cultural Property Implementation Act (CCPIA), to prohibit the entry of goods that are the proceeds of the illegal Israeli settlement enterprise to US markets and that all business or other dealings with Israel's illegal settlement enterprise are terminated. Ensure that the US government or any of its agencies take no actions that recognize, implicitly or explicitly, Israeli sovereignty over the occupied Palestinian territory. Finally, ensure proper oversight and accountability for US organizations that contribute to the settlement enterprise.
4. Ensure that individuals and corporate actors responsible for war crimes and crimes against humanity under Israel's regime of illegal occupation and apartheid are brought to justice and cease attacks on all parties seeking to bring the aforementioned actors to justice through international forums, including the ICC.
5. Reject language that condemns the Boycott, Divest, Sanctions Movement and affirm all forms of legal protest against the State of Israel by Americans in the name of freedom of speech

Out of 532 respondents in the National Shia Community Political Survey, **84% voted for the US to dramatically reduce its aid to Israel (#1 and #2)**, **89% voted to pressure Israel to end the military occupation of Palestine and stop the expansion of settlements (#1 and #3)**, and **89% voted to hold Israel accountable for violations of international law and war crimes (#4)**. Recommendation #5 is a proposal devised by AMBA.



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## CONCLUSION

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Based on the National Shia Community Political Survey conducted in the Fall of 2020, the top 3 political priorities for the American Shia Muslim community are:

- 1. US policy towards Saudi Arabia must change to stop the war on Yemen, end arms sales, and preserve cultural heritage**
- 2. The federal response to COVID-19 has failed at containing the virus and must be replaced with a robust national plan**
- 3. US must shift its policy on Israel towards accountability for violations of international law and oppression of the Palestinian people**

As we enter into the 2020 election, it is important that all candidates understand these priorities and, if elected, implement the recommendations above to build a platform of governance, which is just and inclusive of the rights of all humanity.

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## ABOUT SHIA ISLAM

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Shia Muslims make up between 20-30% of the global Muslim population of 1.8 billion, and likely a similar percentage in the US. Shias believe that the legacy of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) was entrusted to his family, the Ahlul Bayt, in whom the Prophet had vested authority. The first member of the Prophet's family designated for leadership was Imam 'Ali, the husband of Fatima, his daughter and only surviving child. According to most Islamic sources, Imam 'Ali was the first male to support the message of Islam and champion the cause of Islam, even at the risk of his life. The Shi'a understanding of the right of Imam 'Ali and that of his descendants, through Lady Fatima, to the leadership of the Muslim community is rooted in the understanding of the Holy Qur'an and its concept of divinely inspired leadership, as reinforced by Prophetic traditions (*Hadith*). The most prominent of these traditions was the Prophet's sermon at Ghadir Khum, in which he designated Imam 'Ali as his successor. During this sermon, the Prophet stated the famous Hadith of *thaqalayn*, "two weighty things" he was leaving behind - the Holy Qur'an and his family - for the future guidance of his community.<sup>1</sup>

Shia Muslims affirm Imam 'Ali's key role in the history of the interpretation of the Qur'an, the cultivation of an inner life in communion with God, the importance of a personal search for knowledge, a commitment to the application of reason in matters of faith, and an emphasis on ethical conduct and social justice. In the context of his foundational role in inspiring Shi'a intellectual and spiritual traditions, the Imam has a pivotal role in Shi'a Islam, linking revelation to daily human life and giving expression to practical forms in society by which the ethical goals of Shi'ism can be realized. The ideal of social justice and its defense is promulgated by the Shi'a, with particular emphasis on the life of Imam Husayn, the grandson of the Prophet. For resisting the tyrannical rule of Caliph Yazid, Imam Husayn and his small band of followers were tragically massacred at Karbala, in present day Iraq. This principled stand is commemorated through poetry, elegies, and sermons during the first 10 days of the Islamic month of *Muharram* in Shia communities around the world - a practice established by Lady Zainab, the courageous sister of Imam Husayn who was also at Karbala - and has a central role in Shi'a spirituality.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The Institute of Ismaili Studies. What is Shia Islam? <https://www.iis.ac.uk/what-shia-islam>. Accessed October 30, 2020.

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## ABOUT THE **AMERICAN MUSLIM BAR ASSOCIATION**

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Founded in June 2020, the American Muslim Bar Association (AMBA) is a professional organization of American Muslim lawyers committed to the practice of law and the pursuit of justice in both the public and private spheres for all Americans. AMBA's work is motivated by principles of the Ahlul Bayt, the family of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon them), which include love, justice, mercy, and compassion. To date, our legal network has over 300 legal professionals and law students. Find out more about AMBA at [www.ambalegal.org](http://www.ambalegal.org).