Lessons from Occupy Diraz

The Role of *Velayati* Twelver Activism in the Bahraini Occupy Space Movement

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A social movement exists in space. The relation between a social movement and space offers unique perspective into that social movement itself. Several dimensions of that relation can be observed in Occupy Diraz. It occupied a space that symbolised the movement's grievances; by occupying a space continuously, day and night, it shaded the light to a chasm that separated Shiite and Sunni members of society and offered a pole of attraction to those who identified with grievances and interests of the Shiites in Bahrain; it provided a territory in which occupiers had a choice between remaining within the matrix of the religious-sectarian hierarchy or attempting to construct a community based on principle of horizontality (complete openness of participation and no formal leadership); and it engaged in confrontation over the occupation of space with the agents of the state. The paper shows how the Occupy Diraz movement founded on the ideals of radical Islam leads to the prefiguration of a radical Islamic protostate in a space it possesses and controls. The paper provides a rationale for criticism of Occupy Diraz for emphasising the possession of space and doctrinal aspect of ideology espoused by occupiers over an opportunity to expand on the principles of horizontality, embracing reform and principles of democracy.

Introduction

On 20 June 2016, the Government of Bahrain revoked the citizenship of Sheikh Issa Qassim, one of Bahrain's most prominent *Shia* clerics and the spiritual leader of the largest *Shiite* rejectionist-opposition group *AlWefaq*.[1] Within an hour of Qassim's citizenship revocation announcement, thousands of Bahrainis occupied the streets of Diraz surrounding Sheikh Issa's compound, the symbolic heart of *Shiite* resistance to Sunni AlKhalifa rule in Bahrain.

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In Diraz, the international observers of organised struggle for justice experienced what on the surface appeared as a spontaneously organised, diffused, and decentralised leaderless movement that sprang out of perceived injustice inflicted by the government upon the spiritual leader of *AlWefaq* in Bahrain and, by extension, upon the *Shiite* community at large. However, close examination of this social movement reveals remanence of the *AlWefaq* Islamic Society harnessing its organisational structure and legitimacy in directing its coercive powers to generate and direct anger and frustration into the mobilisation of human resources and space surrounding Qassim's compound. In this contested space, *Velayati* twelvers openly and directly challenged the state functions of the government of Bahrain with far greater hostility than in previous randomly-formed groups of *Velayati* protest marches, *Barbagi*-site prayers, and episodic violent confrontations of *Shi'a* youth with PSF [Public Safety Forces].[2]

The initial intention of the protestors was tantamount to resisting any attempts by agents of the state that would try to deport Sheikh Qassim or even serve him court documents. Soon the action began to take the shape of the occupy-space movement by drawing on nationalistic identity and the perceived grievances of the community. The occupation inspired a nationwide movement, with the number of people who gathered in the streets reaching levels that had not been seen since the 2011 Pearl Revolution.[3] The Diraz occupation, the first and largest occupation of its kind since February 14, 2011, became the apex of the movement, attracting people from all over the Archipelago. It challenged the Bahraini political system which, according to Bahraini Human Rights Activists, exercised undue powers of persecution over *Shiite* rights activists, and skewed the economy and national politics in the service of the ruling classes.

On June 21, 2016, only a day after crowds converged on the Sheikh Qassim compound, the head of the dissolved *Ulama* Islamic Council Sayed Majeed Al-Mashaal announced turning the rally held in Diraz into a permanent one, denouncing the revocation of *Shiite* leader Ayatollah Sheikh Issa Qassim's citizenship. 'We will not leave this place... If the PSF want to reach Sheikh Issa's home, they have to cross over our bodies', said Al-Mashaal in the presence of thousands of protestors assembling near Sheikh Qassim's home in Diraz.[4]On June 22, 2016 *Ayatollah* Isa Qassim received a direct phone call from the head of the *Shia* seminary (*Hawza'Ilmiyya*) in Iraq's Najaf Grand Ayatollah Sayyed Ali Al-Sistani.[5,6] Grand *Ayatollah* Al-Sistani stressed that 'such abuse does not harm the status of Ayatollah Qassim', in essence reaffirming the legitimacy [as well as the edicts and fatwas] of the highest-ranking cleric in Bahrain.[7]

In accordance with *Shiite* practices, no political activity should be allowed during the age of *Al-Gheebah* [until return of the *Mahdi*]. They demand deliberation and guidance on issues of collective action from community's supreme religious authority, namely Ayatollah Issa Qassim.[8] His interpretation of the *Qu'ran* and the *Sunna* in concert with current socio-political conditions and colloquy by *al-Majlis e-Ulama* yields the rationale and perhaps final decision on the direction *Shiite* collective action will undertake. The aforementioned view underlines the substantial difference between occupy movements informed on new-liberal values and ideological precepts and Occupy Diraz, exhibiting innate duality as being both a political and religious movement.

Apart from the history of *Shiite* insurgence in Bahrain, the occupation was inspired by a massive wave of protests sweeping the world. It all began with Iran's abortive Green Movement protesting electoral fraud in 2009; then the Arab Spring that spread from Tunisia in 2010 to Egypt, Libya, Syria and elsewhere in 2011; the occupation of Zucotty Park in Manhattan giving birth to the Occupy Wall Street movement; the Occupy *Abay* movement in Russia; and the *Indignados* in Spain. In all those protests, demonstrators defied authorities by occupying outdoor public spaces while determined to remain day and night until their demands were satisfied. The occupiers of Diraz had a similar agenda except that they initially refrained from verbalising any demands. From the onset, the purpose of the Diraz occupiers was tantamount to denying agents of state access to Sheikh Issa's compound. Though occupations other than Diraz had a storied history in facto-

ries, farmland, and protest encampments outside of city centres, the size, persistence, and loci of these occupations were something new and garnered them worldwide attention. Hence, it was reasonable to expect a similar level of attention granted to the Diraz occupation.

Occupations of the past two decades did not have the exact same objectives. Those of Occupy Wall Street and its offshoots around the United States and Europe were directed at the financial system and economic inequality; those in Europe protested austerity; the Arab Spring occupies, including the Bahrain's Pearl Revolution, sought to bring down the government. But on the surface, there were significant similarities beyond that of convergence space. In each case young people, facing uncertain economic prospects, took prominent roles; the Internet and social networking were used to mobilise and operationalise the movement; occupying a common space for several days or weeks, the occupants developed at least incipient organisational structures that were non-hierarchical and promoted an egalitarian, non-alienated form of interaction. However, the substantial difference in the case of Occupy Diraz was, that from the very onset, the movement was bereft of horizontality. Participation in Occupy Diraz was sanctioned by *Shiite* religious oligarchs who hijacked the leadership of the movement at its inception.

The level of participation and the spill-over effect across geography fascinated observers of all those occupations. Since the beginning of the 21st century we have come to recognise the convergence space as an organic element of the contemporary political repertoire. Each occupation broadcasts intimate characteristics of occupiers, including their collective interests and tactics of attainment. Hence, the occupation epitomises the importance of this element in civic movement analysis. Henri Lefebvre argues that space must be interpreted as more than a neutral container of activity.[9] Space is actively produced, not only in its physical disposition but also in its social meaning, by the activities that go on in it, or that go on in some spaces but not others. Some have argued that Lefebvre overemphasises the production of space by capital as a means of social control: 'Rather than locating struggle at the centre of the analysis, it is capital as a producer of abstract space that is placed centre-stage'.[10] But this contrast between abstract and concrete or "lived" space brings contestation over space to the fore: as rulers attempt to turn space into abstract space, devoid of particular properties and amenable to social control, subordinates

construct counter-spaces in which they strive to maintain their attachment to particular localities and assert their right to determine the activities that go on in particular spaces.[11,12] A relationship between territories subject to the control of different groups is 'not just a matter of lines on a map; it is a cartography of power'.[13] Through a subordinate group's challenge to a ruling group's claim, space is socially produced: Contestation in and over space changes the space itself; cf.[14,15]

In this context, the importance of space for social movements becomes visible. All social movements are organised in space, but some movements are about space: who possesses the particular space as well as who is entitled to be present in, control, and perform what kind of activities in those spaces.[16,17,18] The occupation is also different from most social movements by its concentration in a particular location. As Peter Marcuse explains, 'When space is occupied by the movement it gives it a physical presence, a locational identity, a place that can be identified with the movement that visitors can come to, and where adherents can meet'.[19] For some decades now, access to some *Shiite* villages in Bahrain has been intermittently restricted or regulated by sect activists within. This phenomenon came to the fore in June of 2016, when in Diraz only *Velayati* twelve youth, families, and elders almost exclusively were allowed to transit through the village; order among occupants was maintained by unarmed sect activists subordinate to religious clergy; *Velayati* leaders were put in charge of organisation and mobilisation; *Velayati* twelve clerics assumed responsibility for decision-making on what activities would be allowed to take place in the subordinate terrarium. In Lefebvre's terms, the space is concrete, experienced by its inhabitants as lived and uniquely identified with the activities that take place in it.[20] Marcuse further elaborates: '[an occupied space] also has a second function: it is an opportunity to try out different forms of self-governance, the management of a space and, particularly if the physical occupation is overnight and continuous, of living together'.[21] An observer informed on the influence of *Velayat-e Faqih* in Bahrain would fully expect the *Velayati* form of governance to play out in Occupy Diraz.

Two more aspects of being in a specific location are useful to stress. First, what Charles Tilly calls symbolic geography: the choice of location symbolises something about the movement; it is not usually chosen at random. Locations carry meanings, and those meanings can telegraph the message that the movement wishes to convey.[22]

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Second, since the onset, the Diraz occupation exhibited pronounced signs of confrontation, expectancy, and preparedness for a virulent showdown between occupants and agents of the state overwhelmingly belonging to a different sect. Occupation by a social movement, as a rule, aims to liberate space to allow a population to act in defiance of the authorities' attempts to subdue and exclude them. The space of the *Velayati* village in Bahrain was always occupied by members of the twelver-sect. Thus, the connotation of confrontation remained, and was raised to the forefront. Here, the occupation enforced the exclusive right to determine the use of a space which on the basis of the concept of public space was designated as accessible to all the public irrespective of the sectarian or religious belonging. The occupation of Diraz is in inverse relation to all other occupations that are an exercise of the freedom of speech and public communication, a practice of democracy with the implicit or explicit claim that the public authorities violate democratic principles by preventing occupiers from exercising their rights. The occupations of Diraz involved confrontation with agents of the state charged with containing any threats to democracy and public order and were licensed to use force to do so. To advance understanding of the significance of space for this movement and the political dynamic associated with it, the artricle proceeds as follows:

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Part 2 will examine the symbolic significance of Diraz, and show how this unique location creates a binding energy that makes participation possible, mobilises and perpetuates occupation.

Part 3 addresses the importance, independent of the location's symbolism, of occupying a defined space, identified as a counter-space and a concrete space in opposition to the surrounding abstract space of authorities.

Part 4 depicts prolonged possession of space by an organised group as a dynamic event that channels the energy of space into creativity and experimentation. Here we also show how Occupy Diraz improves on tactics of beleaguerment and proselytisation, application of the Internet-based social media networks, and manipulation of mass media networks in accruement of power.

Part 5 posits that since its inception, the Occupy Diraz movement exhibited elements of '*Velayati* twelver's Islamic protostate' with direct ties to religious oligarchs outside Bahrain's national borders. This phenomenon not only precipitated confrontation between occupants

and authorities but also inhibited the ability of the movement to attain tangible political benefits on behalf of the Shiite community in Bahrain.

Part 6 will introduce the inherent dichotomy of *Velayati* twelver's Occupy movement of being both the political and religious movement, as well as structural limitation and constraints such dichotomy imposes. It addresses the prospect of the loss of space with the eviction of the occupation and suggests the avoidance of some of the negative consequences of the practice of occupation and its identification with a particular location.

This study draws on the experience of visiting *Shiite* villages, direct interaction with occupiers, and qualitative interviews with prominent members of the *Velayati* community, as well as the *Velayati* foot soldiers. The interviews were primarily about the topic of political participation and sectarian conflict mitigation, and the role of social networking on the Internet in opposition mobilisation; but in all of them respondents were asked about their general political orientations and their participation in the occupation. To authenticate this research, the article has also used documentary evidence harvested mostly from Internet-based open sources, in the text, photographic evidence and videos produced by activists, international human rights defenders, and other observers.

This article argues for the centrality of the possession over space, and control over space, to the evolution of a social movement. It aims to use the experience of Occupy Diraz to highlight sharp structural differences between occupy movements inspired by new-liberal progressive ideas and occupy movements based on *Velayati* twelver ideology, as well as implications of subjugation of political pursuits to sectarian-religious precepts. The paper stresses that occupy movements inspired by *Velayati* twelver radical Islamic ideology inescapably creates a community bereft of horizontality, and in its prefiguration it strive to achieve a protostate in the image of the *Velayati* Islamic republic subjugated to religious oligarchs outside Bahrain's national borders. Such a movement, when under control by religious oligarchy and radical sectarian actors, is unable to reject radical religious and sectarian dogmas in favour of democratic political pursuits and will inevitably fail to achieve tangible policy changes that advance group's interests.

Diraz as symbolic geography

Symbolic geography for Charles Tilly (2000) includes the 'use of emblematic monuments, locales, or buildings in dramatisation of demands, [and a] struggle for control of crucial public spaces in validation of claims to political power'.[23] The symbolism of the preceding 'The Pearl Square' [GCC-roundabout] occupation of the February 2011 was rooted in edicts by *Shiite* religious oligarchs referring to it as "*dawaar al lulu'a*".[24] The symbolism of OccupyDiraz, on the other hand, inescapably represented the *Shiite* village, the site where the most senior *Shiite* cleric, *Ayatollah* Issa Qassim, dwelt and preached.

There is a subtle symbolic significance in the *Shiite* enclave as a cradle of the *Velayati* movement. It can be inferred that the claim for territorial integrity and independence extends to any domain where a *Shiite*-organized group has clear and continuous priority viz., member's household, *Shiite* village, tribal enclave, or any other manifestation of the vertical hierarchical node from last-born daughter of the poorest member to a sheikh or a spiritual leader. Such a claim is further supported by sect members' ethno-anthropological congruence, their tendency to coalesce into societal vertical nodes, the quintessential communal isolation mechanism supporting quasi-autonomous enclaves, and is compounded by theological provisions for governance and judicial practices. The *Velayati* twelver ordinances belabour on coercive actions on behalf of the community, of which the vertical hierarchy is the essential feature and where the segmentation between vertical nodes in the society is maintained by prohibition of horizontal formation connections with other sectarian, ethno-religious groups, and enforced by intimidation, elimination, or neutralisation of perceived threats inside and outside the group's domain.[25]

The 'activist' Twelver Shiism implies presence, within the *Shiite* enclave, of the centralised authoritarian structure combined with a judicial framework, both inherent elements of *Velayat-e Faqeeh* and incongruent with the concept of horizontality.[26] The *Shiite* Islamic movement, representing the collective interests of *Velayat-e Faqeeh* members in Bahrain, draws its legitimacy and energy from the sociocultural edifice that is the *Shiite* enclave. Here, the *Shiite* Islamic movement bridges the gap between the spiritual domain ever-present inside the *Shiite* enclave and surrounding world, as well as acts as a conduit through which *Shiite* community projects collective interests outwardly. It is the vehicle through which the *Shiite* community forms coalitions of aspirants for

polity in pursuit of an opportunity to fulfil exigency to extend the governance compatible with *Velayat-e Faqeeh* ideology in Bahrain.

Apart from the symbolism represented by the *Shiite* enclave, there is a symbolism of grievance. Occupation of the *Shiite* village, home to Bahrain's most senior cleric, brought forth the unresolved contention in interaction between the followers of Sheikh Qassim and all those who ardently support the ruling clan. The occupation emblazoned the perception that sectarian power and sectarian greed were a major force in the concentration of wealth and income in the hands of a Sunni minority at the top of the societal pyramid, whose share of benefits had increased in the past decades. The occupation propagated the notion that the inequality between these sects has reached record levels.

Indeed, in Diraz occupants challenged the government practice of naturalisation and citizenship revocations that disproportionately targeted members of the *Velayati* sect. At the same time, *Shiite* activists denounced the naturalisation of the foreign skilled workforce claiming that citizenship is being conferred for largely illegitimate 'political' motives, calling it 'citizenship for vote'. Unemployment among *Velayati* youth was another issue brought to the fore by the occupation. There are widespread allegations that *Shiites*, competing for government jobs, have been systematically excluded at least since the Iranian revolution. 'The events 1979, the Khomeini threat, raised the loyalty issue for us' — a prominent government official confided to us.[27],[28] Grievances expressed by occupiers and associated to discrimination in the sphere of education have been closely correlated to freedom of speech and have to do with occupiers demands for unrestricted teaching of *Shiite* religious, tribal and sectarian philosophical precepts and practices emphasising primacy of *Shiite* collective sectarian interests. Similarly, grievances related to freedom of speech have been focused on the inability to effectively mobilise mass media, TV stations (*ALWEFAQ* TV) and local newspapers, in an attempt to connect with grassroots, particularly the youth.[29] Occupiers used strong terms to condemn state interference with Diraz 'Friday Cerements' in the vicinity of *Sheikh* Qassim's compound. The occupiers lamented to dozens of mosques throughout the island damaged or demolished by the state.[30]

Interaction in a counter-space

The occupants chose Diraz as a specific location for public protest. But the importance of space went beyond the location's symbolism. In oc-

cupations described in the previous chapter, some of the effects of occupying a fixed location in physical space, with the intention to remain day and night for an indefinite time, would have arisen even if it had been elsewhere, albeit not the case of Diraz. The symbolism of the occupation in the case of *Velayati* twelver activism reaches beyond grievances of the community, and into a province of consecration of the *Shiite* enclave itself. *Velayati* twelver doctrine encourages the physical confrontation with the authorities in defence of the spiritual leadership of the movement. The tactic of indefinite occupation in this case asserts the occupiers' presence against the power that claims not only to dominate the space in question and to produce the impenetrable physical barrier that separates the leader of the *Velayati* twelver movement and those who will attempt his removal from the space presently occupied, but also produces a counter-space in which occupiers can communicate regardless fear of reprisal.

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Occupiers remained in Diraz day and night in a view of the international community. They organised activities that sustained the occupation physically and intellectually, and they confronted conflicts among themselves and with the surrounding neighbourhood. The similarity between Diraz occupation and those in the Middle East, North Africa, and Europe, is that it became an occasion for communication and organisation considerably more intense than what we came to expect from more ephemeral protest movements. As a counter-space, it 'insert[ed] itself into spatial reality . . . against power and the arrogance of power'.[31] Diraz occupation became a nucleus identifiable with *Velayati* protostate in Bahrain.[32]

As in the case with most occupy movements, permanent physical presence in Occupy Diraz stimulated ongoing interaction and created a site for ideological indoctrination. Why is it important? Not all *Shiites* are members of the twelver sect, and not all twelvers are members of the *Velayati* rejectionist opposition movement in Bahrain. Here, full-time occupiers and others who came in out of curiosity or feeling of sectarian unity had an opportunity to immerse into ideology sermonised by Ayatollah Issa Qassim and his disciples. The site itself, the setting of the street became a stage, and occupiers and visitors became actor galvanised with vibrant energy of the ongoing drama of space-capture. The site became a reservoir where entire families and entire clans converged. In the course of the day, they formed groups to complete their designated tasks on behalf of the community. They

are almost spontaneously coagulated into working groups designed to perpetuate the occupation, promote collective interests and strengthen the organisational structure.

The occupation was structured as a top-down hierarchy. The religious leadership held regular meetings making decisions on behalf of the collective; information, edicts from meeting flew downwards throughout the organisation. This aspect of the Diraz organisational architecture alerts to the absence of horizontality to which we are accustomed to seeing in most known examples of occupations of the time. However, the concept of egalitarian structure of the lower strata was clearly present among members of the movements, as it reflects the ordinance of *Velayati* ideology. 'Imam and the clergy have the duty to use the political apparatus to apply the laws of Allah and to bring about a system of equality for the benefit of the people', writes Imam Khomeini expanding on the mission of Imams and the clergy with respect to followers of the *Velayati* twelver movement.[33]

The occupation permeated a sense of internal transparency. Actions or inactions of every individual was seen or heard by all. These interactions conveyed the sense of egalitarianism and everyone participated in designated activity and shared experiences. The boundary delineated by the epidermis of occupation established the terrarium [no-go zone] now under control of the *Velayati* protostate. Diraz confirms the thesis that the replication of occupations in places small and large, with or without symbolic targets, has the importance of having a permanent location in an identifiable space, wherever that space might be.

Many political and religious activists have grown dependent on communication via the Internet-based social networks, e-mails, YouTube videos or blogosphere; the occupation of Diraz re-focused interaction on face-to-face communication in real time and real space. Mediation by computer or television screens makes communication abstract and removes it from the substance of interpersonal relations, and over-reliance on the Internet has been criticised as 'slacktivism' in political science literature.[34]

However, there is little doubt about the Diraz movement (at least initially) being heavily dependent on Internet-based social networking for mobilisation and operationalisation. Yet, on a number of occasions and for extended periods of time the Internet and cellular communication in Diraz became intermittent. This phenomenon prompted the Occupy leadership to pivot to direct participation.

Foreign-based media, such as *LuaLua*TV, and international support accounts on Facebook and Twitter had a role in bridging geographies of participation and connecting the international support mechanism to active participation in the movement's activities. Social media offered to international activists an opportunity to virtually join the movement, to interact with occupiers and share their stories. This 'virtual surrogate' to the spill-over effect of Diraz occupation assisted distant participation in the creation of digital convergence spaces and imaginaries based on the Diraz occupation.

Lefebvre (1974/1991) argues that urban space — especially the space dominated by finance capital —is depersonalised and abstract. Diraz is a unique experience since it was not depersonalised by finance capital, but produced by the *Shiite Velayati* oligarchy choosing this very site to become their home, base of operations, a space from which the message of *Velayati* ideology permeates the island and goes beyond. The face-to-face interaction only enforced this notion. Counter-spaces, Lefebvre implies, are necessary spaces of concrete personal relations, because they are in part a protest against the abstraction imposed by authorities as part of their arsenal of social control. For decades now, the *Shiite* enclave was actively produced by *Velayat-e Faqih* ideology and religious oligarchs as means of their own social control over subordinate populations. At the same time, the rulers of Bahrain employ capital and coercion to transform *Shiite* enclaves into a more abstract space, devoid of direct *Velayati* twelver influences. In fact, it is care provided by agents of state and manifested in financial and judicial benefits, housing, education, medicine that constituted in this case an 'arsenal of government's social control'. Hence, Diraz counter-space begets a connotation of a space of concrete relations of those militant towards a governance and action by an opposing religious sect.

In Diraz every adult has a voice, but the decision in collective action has rested with elected or designated elites among *Velayati* clergy. Facilitators from the public have been trained to ensure a consensus, though no consensus vote among participants in sit-in was ever taken. Occupy Diraz was governed in accordance with the *Velayat-e Faqih* paradigm — the decision-making by consensus among religious authorities or an ordinance by the *primus inter pares* of religious authorities. According to our interviews of occupiers, clerics in the leadership were accessible and attentive to the opinions of the masses. On the ground level people communicated rather fiercely. Gathered in small

groups they discussed issues associated with their predicament, their goals and aspiration. Designated activists commuted between groups spreading the message. This activity alone engenders a unique sense of empowerment, especially when one realises that the message has been heard and repeated by thousands of occupiers.

Maintaining overnight and continuous occupation is a big task. A number of activists had been tasked with responsibilities that ranged from keeping the place clean to providing medical care or intragroup communication, receiving and distribution of donated supplies. *Hezbollah al-Hijas* members were responsible for maintaining order and discipline among occupiers, protection of woman and children and interactions with outsiders and agents of state.[35] A group of activists with propensities for writing, arts, the media, and the Internet-based information technology became responsible for getting the message to the outside world, and assisted in continuous mobilisation of the movement.

Diraz occupation remained proactive in sending and receiving envoys to and from other *Shiite* villages and even overseas. Diraz activists and clerics maintained close ties with political exiles in the UK and EU. This undeniably set the pattern, organisationally and ideologically.

A space for experimentation

The *Velayati* visions of social change do not simply exist *a priori*; they are actively produced in speech, praxis and locus. When *Velayati Shiites* filled the streets adjacent to Issa Qassim's compound and refused to leave, their actions became spatial in that *Shiites* protested in a particular space, and this space transformed into a site of contested social and power relations, spatially facilitating an extensive political action.

While in sit-in, occupiers shared a general rejection of the materialism and alienation they found in contemporary Bahraini culture and strove to reinforce principles of *Velayat-e Faqih* in the entirety of the *Shiite* movement itself. An occupation fosters a unique internal process that encourages experimentation. In the case of Occupy Diraz , it deepened into an aspiration to create a living quasi-egalitarian community in the image of Iran's Islamic Republic.

An occupation site provides especially fruitful ground because it has a location that becomes the home of the occupiers twenty-four hours a day for an indefinite time.[36] The boundaries are only partially permeable — they act as if they were sealed off from the rest of the

world and reinforce *Velayati* principles of their own structures and norms. As protesters stay at a site around the clock for days or weeks, the occupation becomes more than a protest site; it becomes a space for living. In Diraz occupiers created a living community; in it occupiers sought to establish a society of Islamic equality in which every member of the *Shiite* sect had an equal share.

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The Diraz occupation of 2016 only marginally drew on prior models developed by movements that rejected the top-down leadership of traditional, secular new-liberal, progressive movements. In the West, the aspiration of prefiguration was first expressed by late nineteenth-century anarchists.[37] It was revived by some US leftists in the 1970s and embraced by the US women's movement, the anti-nuclear movements in the US and Europe in the 1970s, movements in solidarity with the *Zapatista* uprising in Mexico, and the anti-globalisation movement of the 1990s and the early years of the twenty-first century. From these movements, it spread to the occupations of 2011.[38,39,40,41]However, in sharp contrast with Western liberal progressive values, Occupy Diraz embraced top-down organisational architecture, moreover, from the very onset of the movement, paradigm and praxis of prefiguration were an intrinsic component of the *Shiite* twelver sect.

When the constituency of a social movement grows up to be a living community, community ties strengthen the movement. The community created in an occupation can be compared to what has been called 'free spaces', 'small-scale settings within a community or movement that are removed from the direct control of dominant groups, are voluntarily participated in, and generate the cultural challenge that precedes or accompanies political mobilisation'.[42] The occupation of Diraz was different, however, in two important respects: firstly, the free space described continued in perpetuity; secondly, it provided not only a site of calm and refuge but most importantly a nucleus, an apex of the *Velayati* protostate in Bahrain. The occupation of 2016 was the site where confrontations were planned and organised continuously. It resembled free spaces, however, by giving people the freedom and warrant to enact relationships that are different from those characterising mainstream society, testing and demonstrating the alternative possibility — the *Shiite* Islamic Republic.

Some of the functions were transferred to an occupation's organisation, from the processes for informing the occupiers to the provision of food, medical care, and security. The leadership, however, appeared

uninterested in the provision of well-defined spaces such as working groups that would establish and maintain fidelity to the principle of horizontality — defining principles in the cases of traditional western new-liberal movements. The principle of prefiguration, on the other hand, had unmistakable presence in Diraz occupation. Those principles accepted by the *Velayati* hierarchy have inspired many specific practices. For example, occupiers practiced pedagogy of proselytising and ideological indoctrination of the young and new to the movement, based on the conviction that everyone should take an active part and develop new experiences reflective of the sectarian ideology. Proselytisation and exigency of subjugation to *Shiite* collective sectarian interests or practices are built into the mobilisation process and interactions *Shiite* Islamic organised groups undertake with the outside world.

As already discussed, many occupiers had highly developed Internet-based social media communication skills. They shared their skills with novices. They regarded themselves as 'citizen journalists' and believed that every *Velayati* was entitled to a voice regardless of prior training or experience in social networking. For such tasks as consensus facilitation and media production, domestic and foreign based platforms manned by *Velayati* sympathisers were systematically utilised. The information, such as training manuals, and carefully crafted photo and video feeds, would be immediately disseminated via the Internet.

The anti-hierarchical and prefigurative ideals of occupations so familiar to Western observers are just that — ideals. In practice, of course, they do not work perfectly, especially in MENA. Participation was not open to all comers. Those inside the sit-in designated area were constantly observed and many who wanted to participate in the movement without a place of loyalty were simply turned away. Some were suspected of being infiltrators. Further, even in the small space of Diraz, there was a physically demarcated stratification. Areas closest to the Qassim compound had been designated for religious patriarchs, community elders, and *Hezbollah al Hajaz* militants, further away from the compound one could see less significant, however valued, members of the sect. Some who regarded themselves as serious political activists viewed this gradient as one of ideological hierarchical commitment.

It was argued, moreover, that there is tension between the prefigurative ideal and intervention on national political issues. At a minimum, attention to interaction processes with a view to the distant future

may distract attention from immediate goals.[43,44] Hammond writes that the '[aforementioned] two sets of activities may be best served by entirely different models of organisation; pushing for political change in the society may require a more bureaucratic, top-down form of organisation'.[45] Polletta, in a sharp contrast, asserts that bureaucratic organisation is more likely to deflect attention from pursuing the goals, and that participatory, horizontal movement organisations are best designed to retain the mobilised commitment of their adherents.[46] It must be noted that for decades now, *Velayati* twelver's strife for dominance was exercised in strict adherence to *Velayat-e Faqih* top-down organisational architecture, yet the movement had failed to achieve any tangible political goals, and entered a phase of demobilisation and dislodgment. Occupy Diraz broadcast a consistent political message of opposition to the Sunni sectarian power of Al Khalifa clan and the resulting economic inequality, but by refusing to make concrete political and economic demands and attempting, instead, to create an internal process based on *Velayat-e Faqih* doctrine, it emphasised prefiguring the Islamic State over the immediate achievement of more partial political reform.

Generally, communities committed to political values suffer from reluctance to compromise when it comes to solutions. Everyone is committed to the same values, but people interpret them differently and propose different ways of implementing them. Because participation and community are based on values rather than any material or traditional incentives, each person may be determined to persuade others of the correctness of his or her interpretation. This makes them reluctant to compromise despite their commitment to consensus.

Interviews conducted on the ground indicate that most participants in Occupy Diraz were deeply committed to creating a new form of social interaction, with a view toward a new society. Many of those questioned concluded that the experience was truly liberating despite conflict and frustration, and offered a model on which they could build in future socio-political experiments. Occupation seems to have succeeded in substantially expanding the loyalty dimension of the movement.

Space of confrontation

Occupation implies ongoing competition between a party attempting to retain its collective control over the terrarium it occupies and its population, and forces striving to regain collective control of the ter-

rarium and repel the occupier. Protest occupations, on the other hand, designed to present a claim in public space, defend claim in confrontations with authority, and promote a specific agenda.

Since its onset, the Diraz occupation mounted a challenge to authorities to open confrontation in a space that was *Velayat i*twelver's enclave for decades. While we came to expect that authorities would regulate the time and manner of use of public spaces, we, however, believe that in democracy the authorities are not expected to pick and choose which non-violent organised groups with legal right to free speech are eligible to exercise their right in a designated public space. But what about the use of public space where an organised group known for its violent tendencies chooses to mount a challenge to authorities by converting the space into a nucleus for the protostate complete with boundaries controlled by militant youth, religious taxes [*khums*, *zakat*, *jizyah*, and *khaeaj*] being collected in accordance with *Velayati* framework of beliefs, services provided to occupant, law enacted by the clergy, and all events are planned and administered by the designated committee of twelve senior clerics through handpicked activists?

From early the days of the protests, Diraz occupiers have been subjected to significant pressure from the *Shiite* religious and sectarian authorities outside Bahrain national borders. Iran's Supreme Leader *Ayatollah* Ali Khaminie [the supreme leader of the state sponsor of international terrorism], Iraqi *Ayatollah* Sayyed Kazem Al Haeri [known for his direct affiliation to domestic and International terrorism], Sayed Hassan Nasrallah, Secretary General of *Hezbollah* [an organisation designated Foreign Terrorist Organisation by the United States Department of State], all issued fatwas calling for violence in Bahrain.[47,48,49,50] Edicts and fatwas of *Velayati* leadership in abroad targeting Diraz occupation exposed lateral connections between the leadership of the Occupy Diraz movement in Bahrain and *Shiite* religious oligarchs outside Bahrain's national borders as well as vector gradients connecting members of the movement to known political violence movements and Muslim radicals throughout the Middle East and North Africa.

While Occupy movements informed by progressive values sought to expand the meaning of 'public' in public space, Occupy Diraz redefined the meaning in accordance with *Velayat-e Faqih* edicts pertaining *al-Gheebah Era.* The agent of state responded by imposing restrictions and attempts on disrupting Occupy gatherings and public Friday sermons that in the experience of authorities incited violence and posed

public inconvenience when contrasted with other, permitted gatherings. The restrictions imposed by the authorities in turn provoked the occupiers and their supporters to defend their de facto possession of space. In Occupy Diraz, confrontations with the PSF, even though armed with non-lethal defensive weapons, came to be a defining characteristic of the movement and to a significant degree determined the reaction of international public opinion. The vast majority of the occupants had extensive experience in engaging in political marches, manifestations, and acted out of belief that the state is repressive and that asserting their rights means engaging in truculent, potentially unlawful activity. Some other occupiers did not have such clear views, but the very act of participating in the occupation was a force of proselytisation and indoctrination in *Velayati* twelver ideology.

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Collective participation in acts of defiance energises and empowers participants and escalates discourse. Individual commitment to participation in high cost collective action, such as Occupy Diraz, fosters conditions for a risk-avert group of individuals to overcome the 'free rider' problem by the participants transmitting harvested and amplified anger and frustration, ratifies one's commitment to the cause and creates confidence in the outcome. Those responses are expected to manifest even more likely when actions are disruptive and risk of repression is elevated. Participants in gatherings that are forbidden or subject to repression make a rational choice to transgress established norms of behaviour to act on their beliefs. The act of transgression, especially when it is repressed, ratifies the belief in one's righteousness, furthers the conviction that those rights are being trampled on, and elevates the determination to assert them. Even in the event of failure, this heady experience recasts their understanding of the rest of the world in light of their belief in the cause, draws boundaries between those who are for and against, and clearly identifies comrades and enemies.[51]

Throughout the Diraz occupation, the Bahraini government maintained an information blockade pertaining to events taking place in the area surrounding the Issa Qassim compound or policing procedures with respect to occupants. However, a confidential 27-page 'agreement for the provision of services', obtained by *The Observer*, signed on 14 June 2015 by the UK's College of Policing and Bahrain's Ministry of Interior, predicts the response of the Bahraini Security Force to a collective action such as an occupation.[52] It is inferred that the PSF defines

protest as a policing problem and sees its job as preventing disorder. When engaging protestors, it creates a self-fulfilling prophecy, producing the very violence it fears, as shown by the 22 December 2016 event.

Bahraini Security has a well-established strategy for dealing with protest that can be surmised as 'command and control'. The overall objective is to impede protesters from entering the designated area, and responding forcibly when they attempt to do so; conduct video surveillance of the occupied site; interfere with means and ways of protest mobilisation by impeding the flow of normative and utilitarian resources in and out of the area.

PSF were the occupiers' main counterparts in confrontation, although occupiers also faced off against the judicial powers and state administration. Violent confrontations between agents of state and protesters took place primarily on the outskirts of the Diraz village. Initially, these skirmishes drew the attention of the media. Allegations of PSF abuses, circulated by Shiite media sources, created public sympathy for the protesters.[53] Images and commentaries from Diraz disseminated through weaponised-by-activists social media acted as a cognitive amplifier to reactive emotions that mobilised dozens of protests and violent confrontations in various areas across the country. The image of the repressive PSF became a central part of the Diraz overall critique of Bahraini society and, by contrast, of its sense of itself.

Some observers would argue that the PSF response was disproportionate in relation to any kinetic threat that could emanate from occupiers. The number of arrests accentuated elevated levels of repression targeting members of the sect, increasing the perception of risk associated with continuation of collective action in support of interests of the *Shiite* twelver clergy. And it seems the result was self-fulfilling, emboldening the protesters to raise the level of provocation.

The overwhelming majority of the protesters, however, were committed to nonviolence as a principle and were ready to pursue nonviolent solutions. They acted peacefully, if provocatively, albeit a small number of militant youth scattered at the perimeter of the occupied terrain and armed with white-weapons and Molotovs exhibited the propensity for violence and sought opportunity to incite chaos. They knew that the PSF response made them look good to the *Velayati* audiences, and the experience fostered a culture which essentially glorified the impending arrests. The PSF, however, responded as if violence or

the realistic threat of violence by the protesters were the norm. It must be noted that for months the Ministry of Interior, increasingly wary of the occupation's apparent staying power, made no decisive move to dislodge them and end the occupation.

Loss of space

The enduring nature of the social movement is comprised of three core functions: it must survive; it must strengthen itself; and in its fidelity to first two functions it must weaken the power structure of state. It follows that the loss of control over space weakens the movement and in turn strengthens the state this movement is striving to oppose. Events since June 21, 2016 confirm the importance of physical space to the Occupy Diraz movement and its offshoots. It was proven that its concentration in a single location [Diraz] was a source of energy feeding a nationwide campaign of resistance. Also, ambiguity surrounding the concept of 'space occupied by *Shiite Umma*' precludes the state from complete eradication of the movement, since life in Diraz is likely to continue as it was — in strict adherence to *Velayat-e Faqih* — emblematic to a core premise of the movement. On the other hand, once occupiers return to their own villages and their own daily lives, the attention of masses domestically and on the international stage will no longer centre on a specific site, and the aura of Occupy Diraz will inevitably fade away.

The success of Occupy Diraz was constrained by a number of structural factors. The first and perhaps most significant factor lies in its duality of the movement of being both religious and political. Within the socio-political environment dominated by the propensities for ethno-religious reconciliation, a movement inspired by *Velayati* twelver's ideology has to weigh out benefits and losses it incurs in pursuit of its interests through collective action, since at the essence of such a pursuit lies hard to reconcile ambiguity. The ambiguity in ideas and values embraced by the *Shiite* Islamic organised group pursuing its collective interests is rooted in its dual nature as both a religious and political actor. As a religious actor, it fully accepts the preeminence of Sharia interpretation by the *Shiite* spiritual leaders [*Ayatollah* Issa Qassim] over laws enacted by parliaments and states, and has to base its collective action programs and policy prescriptions on primacy of the sect's interests and religious views. As the political actor, it is required to exhibit a higher degree of flexibility, perhaps even replacing the idea of

strict adherence to the sect's views of Islam with the mere requirement that laws and policies be compatible with their spiritual leader's interpretation frame of reference. However, due to *Velayati* twelver's innate ideological rigidity, the latter may only come as the result of a deleterious internal power struggle. Such group will have a hard time retaining the support of the devoted *Velayati* if they perceive the action as renunciation of *Velayat-e Faqeeh* values as the basis for legislation. Therefore, the dual source of authority, religious and political, inside the *Shiite* Islamic movement is mitigated by subjugation of the political leadership and decision-making process to religious authority.[54] Such an arrangement appears detrimental to the ability of a movement to achieve its aim as it denies the *Shiite* movement an element of horizontality, and hinders the ability to pursue political goals and solutions on behalf of all *Shiites* irrespective of their sectarian affiliations. Moreover, though occupiers claim to represent the entire *Shiite* population, they mainly come from a particular subset, chiefly the *Shiites* on *Velayat-e Faqih*.

Furthermore, this structural limit is manifested by the concept of the *Shiite* religious hierarchy and subjugation on all issues to the sect's religious authority. Apart from its conflict with ideals of horizontality, it implies the council on all affairs of the organised group by *Shiite* religious entities external to the group's territorial domain. Such a council on affairs of the group by an external *Shiite* religious-sectarian authority induces the common lateral gradient to the group's organisational structure. The dichotomy of this authoritarian mechanism lies in the benefit, on the one hand, from provision for a nucleus universal to the *Shiite* movement's structure responsible for the capacity to act, and losses, on the other hand, incurred from the rise in the cost of collective action in the environment, where a group's interests are in unremitting conflict with Bahrain's national security interests and sovereignty. This structural element denies the movement operational flexibility, reduces the speed with which it responds to a fluid external sociopolitical environment, allows agents of the state to control operational tempo, seize the initiative and place the Occupy Diraz movement in a position of weakness in a constantly reactionary state.

Primacy of 'religious over political' limit has to do with the underlying tenets of *Velayat-e Faqih* twelver doctrine that is likely to induce an embryo of authoritarian structure to *Shiite* Islamic movements, expand on the intimate need for establishment of governance and seed judicial

practice in a space occupied by the *Shiite Umma*, provide rationale for claim to a space, stipulate exigency to collect taxes, and wield coercive power on behalf of collective interests of the community—all in strict adherence to interpretations of the *Qur'an* and the *Sunna* by the elected spiritual leader or the elected council of religious authorities. *In précis*, a *Shiite* Islamic movement, progeny of *Velayat-e Faqeeh* paradigm, in control over space or terrarium inside nation-state's national borders can be defined as a *Shiite* Islamic protostate. Hence, the state takes a dim view of the occupation as a threat to its national security rather than a collective action by the movement that seeks an opportunity to address its grievances associated with economic inequality, a general rejection of the materialism and alienation the *Shiite* community finds in Bahrain's contemporary culture. In this paradigm, irrespective of occupier position on confrontation, PSF agents of the state are committed to violence and will win the immediate violent confrontation. The agents of the state, in position of superior forces, will succeed in removing non-residents [members of Occupy] from Diraz.

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The history of the Occupy movement informs us that the occupation is impermanent — yet another structural limit. Whether because of protestor fatigue, repression, inadequacies in mobilisation and operationalisation of the movement, the occupation will end. If a movement depends on or is identified with its possession of a fixed space, the loss of that space will weaken the movement while strengthening the state it endeavours to oppose.

Marcuse writes: 'The defence of the permanent and round-the-clock occupancy of a specific space can lead to a fetishisation of space that make[s] the defence of that space the overwhelming goal of the movement, at the expense of actions furthering the broader goals that that space is occupied to advance'.[55] The relevance of space to the movement was especially elevated, in the case of Occupy Diraz, where the movement is mobilised around urgency to prevent an agent of state from entering the space where the *Velayati* twelver supreme leader finds refuge. Here the term fetishisation, coined by Marcuse, accentuates excessive preoccupation with a persona at the centre of occupation and occupation itself, in detriment to goals of social justice and sectarian equality.

The *Velayat-e Faqih* paradigm removes Marcuse's concern that pursuing political goals in society at large at the same time as forming the relations of a new social order poses a dilemma. It was demonstrated

that prefigured alternative social arrangement is an intrinsic quality of the movement informed on the ideology of *Velayat-e Faqih*. Hence, the process of assembling a community out of *Velayati* twelvers [such as Occupy Diraz] directly and actively promotes goals associated with an immediate sociopolitical change, and there is nominal or no divergence (in resources expended) between forging the relations of a new social order and larger socio-political goals. Therefore, Occupy Diraz does not exhibit the same detriments from fetishisation with prefiguration as observed in the Occupy Wall Street movement in the United States, in the Occupy *Abay* movement in Russia, and in the *Indignados* in Spain.

Lastly, we stress the fetishisation of confrontation. The occupation of public space places the movement in opposition and conflict with the authorities. Given the mode of operation of the PSF, any such confrontation is likely to result in coercive counter-action by means of direct violence and judicial proceedings. For many young members of the movement, violent confrontations with PSF, acts of episodic low intensity terroristic activities, arrests, became a goal in itself. *Velayati* youth in Bahrain often reserve to the strategy of confrontation with agents of the state in order to win the attention of domestic, international community and human rights activists. This tactic has significant and irreconcilable shortcomings. In the environment of international hypersensitivity to any manifestation of terroristic activity by the organised group pursuing political goals, such strategy further alienates militant Bahraini youth and widens the chasm between the radical fringe and *Shiites* actively seeking political dialogue with the royal family and peaceful resolution to sectarian tensions in the Kingdom. Clearly, fetishisation with confrontation only distracts attention from the larger goals of social justice.

The aforementioned fetishisms might have diminished the movement's capacity to represent grievances of the *Shiite* community in Bahrain and call out the government on issues of sectarian inequality and justice. Organisers of the movement had extensive experience and awareness of the history of protest activity in the current socio-political environment, and were fully aware of deleterious effects of tactics inspired by religious-sectarian tenants to the overall strategy of reconciliation and democratic reform.

Conclusion

At the inception of the movement, public discourse was about social justice for the *Shiite* majority, economic and political inequality. The international media was dominated by themes of Occupy Diraz – calls for freedom to Bahraini prisoners of conscience and news stories spiked providing welcoming exposure to the movement, comparable only with the coverage of the 'Pearl Revolution' itself. Criticism of treatment of prisoners in Bahrain, and violation of human rights became an important part of policy advocates throughout the region, Europe and America as lawmakers and human rights defenders adopted the language and position on those issues by the movement. Nearly all major political entities from the European Union to the United States condemned the actions of the Kingdom with respect to Issa Qassim and prisoners of conscience held by the Ministry of Interior, and they issued stern warnings to the government of Bahrain. The international outrage culminated with human rights agencies releasing a flurry of reports and statements concerning the state of affairs in the Kingdom.[56] Innovative actions of Occupy Diraz, its physical presence, and the contest for space fulfilled the goal of garnering the attention of the international community and significantly advanced the collective interests of the *Velayati* twelver sect in Bahrain. However, fetishisation with prefiguration further exposed the ambiguity of subjugation within the movement of collective interests and action to tenants of *Velayat-e Faqih*, those substantially handicapping its ability to reach political goals. In the same paradigm, the causality of the movement's confrontation with authority, which rests with *Velayati* twelver doctrine, relegated the movement to an incessant deleterious struggle for survival, drawing it further away from socio-political and economic objectives. Occupy Diraz became a laboratory where top-down bureaucracy in a social movement was rigorously tested for its ability to push for political change in an autocratic society. Diraz offers strong evidence that the pursuit by the movement of socio-political interests may significantly benefit from implementation and fidelity in its future endeavours to principles of horizontality and, most importantly, departure from *Velayat-e Faqih* ideological precepts.

Lessons from Occupy Diraz

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Notes

1   The political association "Islamic *Al-Wefaq*" was founded on November 7, 2001, by Bahraini members and exponents of *Hizb Al-Da'wa al-Islamiya* of Najaf, the Islamic political party tied to acts of brutality and terrorism in Iraq dating back to the mid-twentieth century. As its antecedents, it stems out of Marxism-Leninism, the ideology of communism, socialism, and Shiite sectarian supremacy, and incorporates the mission of preservation and expansion of the nationalistic identity of the *Shi'a* on *Velayat-e Faqeeh* [*velayati* twelvers] and Islamic revolution employing political violence, as means of attainment, as fathered by Imam Rouhullah Khomeini, potentate of the Islamic Revolution in Iran. *AlWefaq* was dislodged in July of 2016, accused of undermining the state, spreading sectarianism, and getting involved in "terrorist" activities.

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