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Policy Backgrounder: Taqiyya

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About the Author

Professor Liyakat Takim is the Sharjah Chair in Global Islam at McMaster University in Hamilton, Canada. A native of Zanzibar, Tanzania, he has spoken at more than eighty academic conferences and authored one hundred scholarly works on diverse topics like reformation in the Islamic world, the treatment of women in Islamic law, Islam in America, the indigenization of the Muslim community in America, dialogue in post-911 America, war and peace in the Islamic tradition, Islamic law, Islamic biographical literature, the charisma of the holy man and shrine culture, and Islamic mystical traditions. His second book titled *Shi'ism in America* was published by New York University Press in 2009. He teaches a wide range of courses on Islam and offers a course on comparative religions. He is actively engaged in dialogue with different faith communities.

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Synonyms: None

Definition: In medieval times, faced with a hostile Sunni Muslim majority, Shī'ī Muslims often resorted to *taqiyya* (hiding their true beliefs and identity) to ensure their survival. At the same time, they postponed *jihad* to the time when the promised Messiah reappears. *Taqiyya* is only to be resorted to when one's life is in danger, and for those Muslims living in the West, it is prohibited, since such dangers no longer exist.

History of *Taqiyya*

Derived from the word *waqa'*, (to shield or guard oneself), the doctrine of *taqiyya* (dissimulation) refers to the act of concealing one's beliefs or identity when a person's life, property, or reputation is in danger. The practice is meant to guarantee, where necessary, the safety and survival of the individual or community. Those who practise *taqiyya* justify it by referring to a Qur'ānic verse (40:28-9) that mentions a believer in the army of the Pharaoh who hid his true beliefs in the face of extreme adversity. According to some reports, 'Ammār Yāsir, a companion of the Prophet Muḥammad, also practiced *taqiyya* when he was forced temporarily to denounce his Islamic faith.

Taqiyya is primarily associated with the minority Ithna 'Asheri Shī'ī Muslims, who, due to the persecution and hostilities they endured at the hands of the Sunnī majority, resorted to hiding their beliefs. The question of *taqiyya* must be understood in the light of the socio-political circumstances under which the Shī'ī Imāms and their close associates lived. The genesis of this Shī'ī practice can be traced to the time of the sixth Shī'ī Imām, Ja'far al-Ṣādiq (d. 765) who, according to Shī'ī sources, is reported to have urged his followers to adopt *taqiyya*, claiming that it was an essential component of his religion.

In addition, from Imam al-Sadiq's time on, Shī'īs conceived of *jihād* in terms of keeping their faith intact and paying allegiance to the Imām rather than staging armed revolts against political authorities. *Jihād* was thus declared to be in abeyance until the time of the Mahdī, the promised messiah. Ja'far al-Ṣādiq's refusal to accept political office and alleged proclamation of the doctrine of dissimulation ensured that henceforth, the Shī'īs adopted a politically quiescent posture. Gradually, *taqiyya* became a cardinal doctrine in the Shī'ī belief system. He who abandons *taqiyya*, warns the tenth-century Shī'ī scholar Ibn Bābawayh (d. 991), is like one who abandons prayer. As political conditions ameliorated, later Shī'ī scholars did not insist on the strict observance of *taqiyya*.

Shī'īs used *taqiyya* at different levels. At the political level, *taqiyya* was used to conceal their religious affiliations. This enabled them to interact with the wider Muslim community, while safeguarding their lives and maintaining their distinctive beliefs. In Shī'ī biographical literature, the Imāms' derogatory remarks reportedly uttered against some of their eminent disciples are often construed as arising from the need to protect the lives of these disciples. The Imāms' remarks against the disciples were meant to act as a camouflage, to conceal the close links that the Imāms had with their associates.

In Shī'ī *ḥadīth* literature, *taqiyya* is invoked to explain many traditions that contravene Shī'ī beliefs and to harmonize conflicting traditions. Stated differently, if the element of dissimulation were factored in, there would be no disparity among traditions. *Taqiyya* is also invoked to explain conflicting answers reported from the Imāms. Muḥammad al-Bāqir, (d. 747) the fifth Imām, is reported to have given

three conflicting answers to the same question posed by Zurāra and two other disciples from Kufa. When Zurāra, his loyal disciple, questioned the Imām about the different responses, al-Bāqir is reported to have said, “O Zurāra, this is better for us and [more conducive] to our and your survival. If you [all] agreed on a matter, people would have believed you and [thereby] followed us. That [would have meant] less [chances of] survival for us and you.”¹ It was in the interests of the Shī‘īs that they be given conflicting answers so as not to depict a unified image to the Sunnī majority. This would reduce the threat of the Shī‘īs in the eyes of the Sunnīs.

Taqiyya was also an important consideration in Shī‘ī legal discourse. Shī‘ī jurists in the medieval period were excluded from participating in Muslim legal discourse as their beliefs and practices were deemed heretical. Shī‘ī jurists resorted to *taqiyya* by concealing their beliefs and modifying their identities in order to participate more fully in Sunnī educational and juridical institutions. In fact, many Shī‘ī jurists participated in legal discourse by posing as Shāfi‘īs because the rulings of Shāfi‘ī were often close to those adopted by the Shī‘īs.

Another usage of *taqiyya* in Shī‘ī circles refers to the permanent guarding of secret doctrines, that is, esotericism. According to numerous statements handed down from the Imāms the purpose of this type of *taqiyya* is to protect the truth from those not worthy of it. It is believed that God has granted the Imāms a special, occult knowledge. This knowledge, is reportedly so extraordinary as to be oppressive; “Our words,” the Imāms say in the Traditions, “are so difficult that none can bear them save an angel near to God, a prophet sent with a message, or the servant whose heart

¹ See also Muhammad b. ‘Umar Kashshi, *Ikhtiyar Ma‘rifa al-Rijal*, edited by al-Mustafawi (Mashad: Danishgahe Mashad, 1969), 237.

God has tested for faith.”² The Imāms were reportedly commanded by God to propagate the secrets and knowledge given to them by Him; they found no one to deposit it with except the special among the Shī‘īs. In this context, *taqiyya* becomes a “trial,” one of many that the Shī‘īs undergo in this world to prove their faith. According to the words of Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq: “Our Shī‘ah are tested . . . by their keeping of our secrets.”³

Possession of the secrets confirms that the Shī‘īs are an élite. Because of their loyalty to the Imāms, the Shī‘īs are tested with every kind of adversity; and because they have been given a share of the knowledge, they are tested with keeping it secret, that is with *taqiyya*.

Today, most Shī‘īs disregard the esoteric *taqiyya*, or even deny any special significance of *taqiyya* to their religion altogether. They claim that unless one's life is in extreme danger, *taqiyya* is not to be observed.

Sunnīs reacted to the Shī‘ī insistence on observing *taqiyya* with charges of hypocrisy and deception. According to Ibn Taymiyah, *taqiyya* is a Shī‘ī “principle of religion,” that is an article of the Shī‘ī creed. *Taqiyya* is lying and “hypocrisy” -- for what is hypocrisy other than that a man pronounce with his tongue what he does not hold in his heart?”⁴

² Abu Saffar al-A‘raj al-Saffar al-Qummi, *Basa‘ir al-darajat fi ‘ulum al Muhammad*, ed. Mirza Hasan Kuchah-baghi (Tabriz: Matba‘at Shirkat-i Chap-i Kitab, 1380/1960), 20-28.

³ Abu'l al-‘Abbas ‘Abd Allah ibn Ja‘far al-Himyari, *Qurb al-isnad*, ed. ‘Abd al-Mawla al-Turayhi (Najaf: al-Matba‘ah al-Haydariyah, 1369/1950), 52.

⁴ Ibn Taymiyya, *Minhaj al-sunnah fi naqd kalam al-Shi‘ah*, 4 vols. (No publication information given), 1, 159-60.

Taqiyya in the West

Many critics of Islam accuse Muslims in the West of lying to immigration or law enforcement officers, civil servants or government institutions to gain financial or social benefits. They argue that such acts are performed under the guise of *taqiyya*. An essential prerequisite in practicing of *taqiyya* is an imminent danger posed to a person's life. For those Muslims living in the West, since such dangers no longer exist they are strictly prohibited. Scholars such as Ayatullah Sistani, Khamenei, Fadlallah and others have argued that moral imperatives and injunctions apply to Muslims wherever they are. Thus, Muslims must faithfully discharge all their contractual obligations and they may not violate the property of non-Muslims. Muslims in the West are required to fulfill pledges or agreements made to a non-Muslim state. If Muslims enter or reside in a territory, they must abide by the laws of the land. They may not cheat, lie, or give false information to government agencies like immigration officials. Sistani also states that a Muslim cannot obtain a passport illegally.

When asked whether it is permissible to deceive an insurance company in a non-Islamic country if one is confident that this will not lead to the image of Islam and Muslims being tarnished, he states quite unequivocally that deception in any form is not permissible. Muslim scholars are concerned that Muslims uphold ethical principles, especially when residing in non-Muslim countries.

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