WORKSHOP — CALL FOR PAPERS

The Social Dynamics of Communal Affiliation in Early Islam

Universiteit Leiden, Netherlands
11–12 June 2026

RATIONALE

In much existing scholarship, our understanding of Muslim groups in early Islam has been gauged through a reliance on later works of heresiography and doxography. These fourth/tenth century works portray a diverse range of groups (including the Imami, Zaydi, and Ismaili Shiʿa, Kharijis, Muʿtazilis, Murji'is, and various others who eventually came under the banner of 'Sunnism') emerging in the first three centuries of Islam, often over issues surrounding the rightful political leadership of the Muslim community and later coalescing around other theological beliefs which facilitated more coherent, structured systems for members of these groups to adhere to. Studies engaging with such works have greatly enriched our understanding of the doctrines and beliefs ascribed to these groups, their evolution over time, and what images the sources construct of them.

In studies on the social dynamics of this period, however, more attention has been paid to relations between Muslim and non-Muslim groups through processes such as conversion and cross-communal engagement with alternative legal systems than has been between the various Muslim groups. There is arguably a lacuna in thinking about how individuals belonging to divergent Muslim groups interacted, and how the interactions between them were practically structured. Research on interactions between Muslims belonging to divergent groups has tended to focus on theological polemics or political violence, rather than day-to-day interactions. We therefore lack a deeper understanding of what it meant to belong to a Muslim group during this early period of the first/seventh to third/ninth centuries on a more practical level. With the aim of addressing this, in this workshop, organised under the auspices of the ERC Horizon Starting Grant project 'Embodied Imamate: Mapping the Development of the Early Shiʿi Community 700-900 CE', we encourage participants to think about interactions between Muslim groups, and the

institutions and mechanisms which facilitated these interactions during the first three centuries of Islam. To this end, three key concerns are identified as central to this workshop:

The Fluidity/Ambiguity of Communal Affiliation

The question of how fixed the boundaries between the various groups were during this period should not necessarily be taken for granted. This is not to say that such boundaries did not exist, but rather that they may not accurately reflect the historical realities of what these boundaries implied as a result of the tendency to back-project later heresiographical categories onto these groups. We are interested in exploring new ways of thinking about these groups beyond the constraints of heresiographical categories. The use of categories such as 'Khariji' or '*ahl al-sunna wa-l-jamāʿa*', for example, have been problematised in recent scholarship and should act as an impetus for reconsidering our terminology and the categories we apply to figures of this period. Some potential themes for participants to consider include:

— Critical reflections on the terms and categories used in the study of Muslim groups
— Ritual actions as shared/exclusive identity markers
— Cases of multiple communal affiliations
— Conversion between Muslim groups

Means of Demarcating and Enforcing Communal Boundaries

What mechanisms were utilised to demarcate and enforce communal boundaries? Building upon recent important work on ritual actions such as prayer, for example, as a means of communal boundary-making, we encourage participants to think about other cases — legal and otherwise — which demonstrate the ways in which Muslim groups established themselves apart from each other. Some potential themes for participants to consider include:

— Legal mechanisms of social exclusion
— Restricting relations to certain groups (e.g. marriage, patronate relationships)
— Restricting and withholding of capital
— Cases of disassociation and excommunication
— The use of space in enforcing physical boundaries
— Codewords of exclusion

— Initiatory practices (e.g. oaths of allegiance)

Cases of Interactions across Communal Boundaries

What the adherents of such groups believed aside, how did one's communal affiliation impact relations with those of other persuasions and what implications did adherence to one of these groups have on how one negotiated daily life in a communally diverse society? Most cases we have access to in this regard are inevitably centred around elite individuals, research on which nevertheless still requires further attention; for example, scholarly debate and exchange, court politics, attempts at state control of religious authorities etc. Innovative readings of the sources with this concern in mind can also, however, provide us with some insight into the lived experiences of non-elite individuals with regards to interactions across communal boundaries. Some potential themes for participants to consider include:

— Legal questions posed to authorities on inter-communal interactions
— Literary accounts of inter-communal interactions as a reflection of historical realities
— Cases of interactions across social hierarchies, including with and between non-elites
— Prosopographical insights into the formation of inter-communal relations and bonds
— Documentary and material evidence for thinking about inter-communal interactions (e.g. papyri, inscriptions, archaeology and architecture)
— Organisational structures for facilitating interactions (e.g. agents, courtiers, government officials)

ABSTRACT SUBMISSION

Please submit an abstract of no more than 400 words along with a brief biography of no more than 100 words as a single PDF document to Adam Ramadhan (contact details below). Submissions from established as well as junior scholars, including PhD students and independent researchers, are welcomed. **The deadline for abstract submission is 14 November 2025**. You are encouraged to outline in your abstract the sources you will use in your paper and the scholarly interventions you intend to make. Accepted participants will be notified by 5 December 2025.

WORKSHOP FORMAT

The workshop will be held in-person at Universiteit Leiden between 11–12 June 2026; there will be no scope for online participation. Participants will have 20 minutes to present their paper followed by 30 minutes of discussion for each paper. The language of the workshop is English.

PUBLICATION OF WORKSHOP PROCEEDINGS

The aim of this workshop is to produce a special issue in a peer reviewed journal, and participants' contributions will therefore be considered for publication. Participants are asked to indicate their interest in contributing to this publication when submitting their abstract.

LOGISTICS

Reasonable travel and accommodation costs will be covered for participants. Those with access to institutional support to cover these costs are asked to inform the organisers when submitting their abstract so as to be able to direct more support towards junior scholars.

CONTACT DETAILS

The main point of contact for this workshop is Adam Ramadhan who can be reached at a.a.a.h.ramadhan@hum.leidenuniv.nl.

ORGANISATION

This workshop is organised by Adam Ramadhan and Edmund Hayes under the auspices of the ERC Horizon Starting Grant project 'Embodied Imamate: Mapping the Development of the Early Shiʿi Community 700-900 CE' (grant no. 101077946) based at Universiteit Leiden.