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THE SHIITE CLERGY IN IRAQ AFTER SISTANI – GROWING IRANIAN INFLUENCE?

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THE SHIITE CLERGY IN IRAQ AFTER SISTANI – GROWING IRANIAN INFLUENCE?

With Iran being the sole Shiite state in the world, it seems only natural that it views itself as representing not only Iranian Shiites, but the entire Shiite community worldwide. Based on and justified by the expansionist notion of Khomeinist Shiism, upon which the Islamic Republic of Iran was built, Iran aims to expand its ideological and political influence in other countries in the region. Due to its proximity and majority Shiite populations, this first and foremost applies to Iraq. Over the past years, Iran has been continuously expanding its political influence on Iraqi soil, first through its close ally, the Badr Organization, which now controls the interior ministry and the police, and more recently with the creation of the so-called Popular Mobilization Forces (*al-ḥašd aš-šaʿbī*, PMF). The majority of these militias are closely allied with the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, and among which the Badr Organization also holds a central position.[1]

However, Iranian attempts to increase its religious influence over its neighbor have so far been largely futile, and Iran is far from a takeover of the Iraqi Shiite religious establishment. The self-perception of Iran's main religious seminary at Qum is that of being the world's center of Shiism, and its massive expansion of schools and numbers of students seem to support this perception. Nonetheless, nowadays, most Shiites do not follow Iran's Ayatollah Khamenei, but Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, the most

1 Cf. Steinberg, Guido (2017): Die Badr-Organisation. Irans wichtigstes politisch-militärisches Instrument im Irak. Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik. SWP-Aktuell, pp. 1 f., 5 f., 8.

respected *marâjiʿ at-taqlīd,* or source of imitation,[2] of the 10-13 percent of the world's Muslims who identify as Twelver Shiites.

Like the vast majority of clerics at the prestigious, independent Iraqi seminary of Najaf, Sistani does not aspire to any political office, not to mention a replacement of the Iraqi democracy with a model similar to that in Iran. Many view the Iranian model critically, unsuitable for their demographically diverse home state. Sistani, backed unanimously by the religious establishment in Najaf, has not only served as a bastion against an Iranian takeover of Iraq's moderate Shiism, but also as the voice of reason in many of the country's political conflicts since the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003. Sistani, completely unknown to the West and to many in Iraq as well before his rise to power in the 1990s, has since positioned himself as a defender of a moderate, rather modern Shiism that champions democracy and free elections and that strongly discourages clerics from any form of executive political involvement, all contrary to what was espoused in theory by Khomeini before and put into practice after the Iranian Revolution.

Currently, there is little that Iran can do in the face of Sistani's undisputed standing and following. But aging 86, the cleric is old and is expected to step down in the foreseeable future. Iran's Ayatollah Khamenei has been trying to expand his influence upon Iraqi soil, mostly by using funds provided by the Iranian government. Yet, Khamenei seems far from winning at the most important front: the battle for people's hearts and minds. His following is not nearly as large as Sistani's, and, although the latter holds no political office whatsoever, his influence on Iraqis is

2 See pp. 4 ff. of this paper. The transcription used throughout this paper corresponds to the one suggested by the Deutsche Morgenländische Gesellschaft (DMG) for the transliteration of the Arabic into the Latin alphabet, and will be used for all terms that do not have a common English transliteration, except for names.

considerable: due to particular characteristics of the Shiite faith, a *marǧaʿ* with a vast public following can exert an enormous influence on people's daily and political behavior alike. Therefore, it can be argued that to establish and strengthen the preeminence of Qum's *marāǧiʿ* over those of Najaf would be the smartest and easiest way for Iran if it wants to further expand its influence in Iraq.[3] In light of this, the relevance of the question about Sistani's successor as the most followed *marǧaʿ* becomes clear: whoever succeeds him could not only significantly increase Iranian influence in Iraq, but could furthermore determine the fate of moderate, quietist, traditional Shiism as such – and, ultimately, that of the Shiite clerical establishment as a whole. What will come after Sistani is therefore a key determinant for the future of Iranian religious influence in Iraq. If Iran manages – as it has been trying – to install one of its clerics as a successor, the effects would be far-reaching.

However, as this paper will argue, there are a variety of factors which stand in the way of and will likely impede this development. Sistani's network and funds are considered to be the largest that any single cleric has had in history, and his representatives will make sure to use them wisely to prevent an Iranian takeover after his death. Even though there might be no single strong candidate visible at this point in time, this does not mean that the (Iraqi) Shiite establishment is bound to face an irreversible decline and will be replaced by an Iranian-style, institutionalized and ultimately government-controlled clerical establishment dominated by Iran. The *marǧaʿiyya* as a centuries-old institution has survived declines and rough patches before, and will do so in the future. Sistani was not a force that anybody reckoned with, neither before his ascension in the 1990s nor in 2003,

3 Cf. Blanche, Ed (2013): The Battle for Iraq's Soul. Najaf v Qom. The Middle East, p. 31.

and yet his influence has persisted. Likewise, a successor might emerge who has not gained a large public and political recognition yet, just as Sistani before the death of his mentor Grand Ayatollah Abu al-Qasim al-Khoei in 1992. As Iraq expert Haydar al-Khoei so fittingly put it, "Sistani is [...] a product of a thousand-year-old institution that produced many Sistanis before him. It will produce the next Sistani too and many after that."[4]

The Twelver Shia and its Religious Centers

Traditionally and historically, the Twelver Shiite sect and its institutions were largely unpolitical. For centuries, political involvement of clerics, jurists and religious scholars was seen as contrary to the interests of the faith, and they saw their role as limited to guiding the believers' personal lives, not the state. The current politicization of the Shia arguably started with the dissatisfied, politically interested generation of young clerics to which also belonged Grand Ayatollah Khomeini. Largely due to his theory of clerical authority and the Iranian Revolution, this politicization resulted in the split of the Shia in a quietist and a political-revolutionary school. The contrast between those two is today exemplified by the competition between the Iraqi seminary of Najaf and its Iranian counterpart in Qum, representing the quietist and the political-revolutionary school of Shiism, respectively.

The Traditional View on Political Authority in Twelver Shiism

Political involvement in the practical sense and political thought in the broader sense are both new developments in Twelver Shiite Islam. After the slaughter of Imam Ḥusayn, the son of Alī b.

4 Hayder al-Khoei (2016): Post-Sistani Iraq, Iran, and the Future of Shia Islam. War on the Rocks. Available at: https://warontherocks.com/2016/09/post-sistani-iraq-iran-and-the-future-of-shia-islam/.

Abī Ṭālib, in 680 AD, the revolutionary *šīʿat ʿAlī* (the party of Ali) turned into a passive movement practicing dissimulation (*taqīyya*, literally care or caution), the hiding of one's faith to avoid danger and persecution. Most Imams after Ḥusayn advocated this concept, which was seen as pious and honorable, and most of them avoided any form of political involvement that could have drawn the Sunni authorities' attention to the growing Shiite sect.

The emerging Shiite self-perception as a quietist, elitist movement largely aloof from all worldly – and thus, political – affairs became even more distinct and prevalent after the 12th Imam, Imam Mahdī, went into hiding or occultation. He is said to re-emerge at the end of times as the head of a then-formed, just and ideal state. The theory of the Imamate, which was subsequently fully developed, implicated that all forms of government were to be regarded as illegitimate and unjust until said return of the Mahdi, who was the only one entitled to establish a truly just, truly religious and truly Shiite state, in which all of the Sharia could be applied.[5] Despite undeniable historical instances of Shiite clerical participation in politics, this view remained largely unchallenged until the 19th century. Political participation of Shiite clerics pre-20th century can be seen as motivated mostly by historical circumstances, self-interest or necessity, and not by any form of theoretical consideration or a distinct clerical political agenda. Earthly government was generally seen as illegitimate and always as of a temporary nature, and the theory of the Imamate rendered all occupation with political theory unnecessary in expectation of the Mahdi, who would establish a just and

5 Cf. Crow, Douglas Karim (2003): The death of al- Ḥusayn b. ʿAlī and early Shīʿī views of the Imamate. In: Kohlberg, Etan (Ed.): Shiʿism. Abingdon: Routledge, pp. 41-45; Halm, Heinz (2015): Die Schiiten. München: C.H.Beck, pp. 21-26; Mavani, Hamid (2013): Religious Authority and political thought in Twelver Shi'ism. From Ali to Post-Khomeini. New York/Abingdon: Routledge, p. 118.

perfect state without being in need of any previous preparation, be it of theoretical or practical nature.[6]

The Development of the *marǧaʿiyya* as an Institution

During the occultation of the 12th Imam, the tasks entrusted to the Shiite *fuqahāʾ* (sg. *faqīh*) or jurists gradually expanded from the collection of the Imams' sayings or *aḥādīṯ* (Sg. *ḥadīṯ*, lit. conversation, speech) until they included almost all the tasks of the Imam: most importantly, collecting religious taxes from the believers, issuing fatwas on important religious issues, and guardianship (*wilāya*) over those who cannot decide for or take care of themselves, such as orphans or the mentally ill.[7] The latter later became a point of debate when Khomeini expanded the use of the concept of guardianship (*wilāya*) beyond the aforementioned traditional meaning. It is worth mentioning here that over centuries, there was a strong consensus among Shiite clerics that the *wilāya* of the jurists – understood here as authority to guide and rule – merely comprised authority over those who cannot decide for themselves, and not the community of believers as a whole. The latter was the only Imamite task that the Shiite jurists historically never assumed, as it was reserved for the Hidden Imam upon his return.

Over time, the authority and different ranks of the jurists became more and more institutionalized and led to the formation of a Shiite clerical establishment around the important seminaries

6 Cf. Arjomand, Said Amir (1988): Introduction. Shi'ism, Authority and Political Culture. In: Arjomand, Said Amir (Ed.): Authority and Political Culture in Shi'ism. New York: State University of New York Press, pp. 13 f.; Sachedina, Abdulaziz Abdulhussein (1988): The just ruler (al-sultān al-ʿādil) in Shiʿite Islam. New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 21 f, 62, 205.; cf. Halm (2015), pp. 61 ff., 71-82.

7 Cf. Sachedina (1988), pp. 27 f., 38-41, 55 ff., 62 ff., 231; Arjomand (1988), p. 3; Mavani (2013), pp. 12, 135-139; Halm (2015), pp. 28-32, 56 ff.; Crow (2003), pp. 115 ff.

where scholars went to study the different Islamic disciplines. The emergence of a powerful elite within those seminaries originally stems from a central tenet of the Shiite faith: the necessity of *taqlīd*, or the following of a learned scholar's opinions as expressed in his writings, fatwas and sermons. Shiite jurists are allowed to practice *iǧtihād* (lit. putting one's upmost effort into the struggle for something), or the extraction of rulings from the traditional Islamic sources through hermeneutical concepts, and, thus, through the use of reason (*ʿaql*). Only learned scholars are allowed to practice *iǧtihād*, and they receive the title *muǧtahid* and the allowance to issue fatwas; every Shiite believer is therefore either a *muǧtahid* himself or a follower of a *muǧtahid*. In theory, the selection of a *muǧtahid* to follow is based on who is deemed most knowledgeable and pious in the opinion of the individual believer. During past centuries, this was usually the most learned local Imam.

Over time, certain *muǧtahidūn* managed to gain popularity across local areas and finally also across borders.[8] These popular clerics then also benefited from larger incomes from religious taxes, which believers are supposed to pay to the cleric they follow. In turn, this income enabled them to provide more services to the community, thereby further increasing their popularity. This exemplifies how popularity and wealth of a *marǧaʿ* reinforce each other, and makes clear how the Shiite tenet of paying religious taxes directly to clerics (as opposed to their Sunni counterparts) allows them to be economically independent from the governments of the countries that they inhabit. In fact, argu-

8 Cf. Halm (2015), pp. 70 f., 82-86; Walbridge, Linda S. (2001): Introduction. Shiʿism and Authority. In: Walbridge, Linda S. (Ed.): The Most Learned of the Shiʿa. The Institution of Marjaʿ Taqlid. Oxford et al.: Oxford University Press, p. 4; Amanat, Abbas (2007): From ijtihād to wilāyat-i faqīh: The Evolution of the Shiite Legal Authority to Political Power. In: Amanat, Abbas; Griffel, Frank (Hg.): Shari'a. Islamic Law in the Comtemporary Context. Stanford: Stanford University Press, pp. 127 f.

ably it was often not the most knowledgeable who is followed, but the one who is most visible through his organized network of offices, institutions, representatives and charities.[9]

Ever since the time of the Imams, a scholar had to prove his goodness in faith, knowledge and character to rise through the ranks and gain importance. Similar criteria apply until this very day, and, in theory, the most learned (*al-āʿalam*) and the most virtuous (*al-afḍal*) of all scholars shall be recognized as the *marǧaʿat-taqlīd,* the source of imitation, whose example and fatwas are meant to guide the ordinary believer's life. Therefore, despite the obscurity of its inner workings, this clerical establishment came to exert a significant influence on any pious Shiite's life. Only rarely has there been one *marǧaʿ* who was recognized by all as the most knowledgeable – usually, there are between three and ten *marāǧiʿ* who divide among themselves the largest numbers of followers.

The gradual process of the formation of the Shiite clerical establishment did, however, never led to the formation of an institution comparable to the catholic priestly caste, and the use of terms such as 'organization' or 'institution' in this context can be problematic, as they, from a Western point of view, evoke notions that are not applicable to the Shiite clerical system: it is a lot less tangible than what would be viewed as an institution in the West, and is characterized by a fluidity and a level of personalized networking that make it seem obscure and mysterious at worst and unpredictable at best from the outside. Within a traditional clerical seminary, learning is not completed in fixed classes that

9 Cf. Khalaji, Mehdi (2006): The last Marja. Sistani and the End of Traditional Religious Authority in Shiism. The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Washington, Policy Focus No. 59, pp. 1 f.; Hazran, Yusri (2010): The Rise of Politicized Shi'ite Religiosity and the Territorial State in Iraq and Lebanon. The Middle East Journal, Volume 64, Number 4, Autumn 2010, pp. 527 f.

result in the reception of a degree, but is based on a personal teacher-student relationship, personal recognition, reputation and assessment, with unwritten rules governing learning processes and relationships.[10]

Although some argue that a similar form of hierarchy headed by a main jurist recognized by most believers has existed within the Sunni schools of law and is not a modern phenomenon,[11] the Shiite clerical establishment remains unique in a number of ways: first of all, due to the necessity of *taqlīd*, this religious establishment wields a considerable (and potentially political) influence over ordinary believers' lives that has no equivalent in Sunni Islam. Besides this, the practice of *iǧtihād* – although for a long time not used to such ends – opens the possibility of new rulings, interpretations and theories in Shiism that are (potentially) adapted to historical circumstances. Arguably, a theory that is as divergent from traditional interpretation as Khomeini's *wilāyat al-faqīh* would not have been possible to justify for a scholar of Sunni Islam. Another major difference is the economic independence (and sometimes even wealth) that Shiite jurists are able to amass due to the direct payments received from believers, which provides them with a degree of independence from governments and politics. However, their dependence on the popularity among believers adds a certain element of populism to the clerical establishment: some scholars argue that this may make certain clerics more inclined to following popular demands or wishes, as the public's approval is what their standing ultimately depends on.

10 Cf. Khalaji (2006), pp. 2 f.

11 Cf. Stewart, Devin J. (2001): The Portrayal of an Academic Rivalry. Najaf and Qom in the Writings and Speeches of Khomeini, 1964-78. In: Walbridge, Linda S. (Ed.): The Most Learned of the Shiʿa. The Institution of Marjaʿ Taqlid. Oxford et al.: Oxford University Press, p. 216.

Qum vs. Najaf: From Academic to Political Rivalry

Although it is technically possible to study with a cleric who is not part of a seminary, the Shiite centers of learning were always extremely important for the clerical establishment. It is where most students go to find their teachers, where they remain for several years or settle permanently to conduct their studies, and where they potentially find their mentors from whose networks they benefit; arguably, no cleric can rise to become a *marǧaʿ* outside of the seminar system. Shiism is transnational by nature, and thus, scholars started early to cross borders in order to study at different seminaries. As a scholar will always be identified with the seminary where he studied, the academic reputation of said seminary is of extreme importance for the reputation of the later *muǧtahid.* Historically, Qum in Iran and Najaf in Iraq have been among the most important seminaries, while, throughout their history, both have faced phases of popularity and decline. Both cities host central Shiite shrines and, as such, are popular destinations of pilgrimages. They are both established in the consciousness of Shiite believers as spiritual, holy places.[12] Qum hosts the shrine of Fāṭima al- Maʿṣūma, the sister of the 8th Imam, while Najaf is home to the Imam Ali mosque and his tomb.

Qum was an important Shiite center from the 8th until the 10th century, with many important scholars emerging from here. In the 10th century, it was the most important seminary together with the one in Baghdad. However, it lost much of its popularity in the 11th century and was completely destroyed by the Mongols in 1224, after which it was not fully rebuilt until the 20th century. Apart from a period of reconstruction and flourishing during the Safavid period, Qum did not regain its prestige until modern times and could not compete with the Iraqi centers of learning. The modern school as it is today was established only in 1922,

12 Cf. Stewart (2001), pp. 216 ff.

when Ayatollah Abd al-Karim Haeri Yazdi followed an invitation to Qum and relocated there. He brought with him his students, among whom was the young Khomeini; the renewed rise to popularity of the Qum seminary began.[13]

Najaf, first established in the mid-11th century and soon after this an important center of Shiite studies, likewise faced periods of declining importance in the 13th and 14th centuries. After the fall of the Safavid dynasty in 1722, it attained its full prestige again and did not face serious competition until modern times. A proof of this is that until the 1960s, it was still common practice to go to Najaf in order to finish one's clerical education, and even the most important scholars of Qum went to attend the prestigious seminary to this end. Until the 1970s, *marāǧi'* were very rarely based in Qum or Karbala; most of them still resided and taught in Najaf. After the 1970s, however, the competition for prestige, students, pilgrims and funds paid by believers began to increase.[14] There has always been a certain rivalry between different Shiite centers of learning, but it has been largely academic in nature. Despite the transnational nature of Shiism, it has also revolved around motives of Persian vs. Arab, Iraq vs. Iran, etc., with Arabs accusing Iranians of lacking proper Arabic skills, and Iranians accusing them of having no culture. These accusations further underline the academic context of this competition, and the reputation of a seminary accounted for the academic reputation of a cleric, not his political affiliation. Stewart aptly compares this early rivalry between Qum and Najaf to that between Oxford and Cambridge.[15]

13 Cf. Halm (2015), pp. 91 f., Stewart (2001), p. 217.

14 Cf. Stewart (2001), pp. 217 f., 221; Braam, Ernesto H. (2010): All Roads Lead to Najaf. Grand Ayatollah Al-Sistani's Quiet Impact on Iraq's 2010 Ballot and its Aftermath. Journal of International and Global Studies. The Hague, pp. 2 f.

15 Cf. Stewart (2001) pp. 217, 220.

Iraq had been the center of Shiism during the entire 19th century – when Grand Ayatollah Haeri Yazdi relocated to Qum in 1922, it marked the first time in centuries that a *marǧaʿ* was located in Qum, with the two other *marāǧiʿ* of his time residing in Iraq.[16] When he established the modern seminary, he also attracted students from Najaf, especially those who opposed the Iraqi King's close ties with Great Britain and were thus exiled. In subsequent years, Qum became a stronghold for a young, politically interested and anti-imperialist elite of clerics. Their politicization was a slow process mostly inspired by the historic events in Iraq and especially Iran at that time, and was further fueled by ideas and concepts provided by religiously interested, non-clerical writers such as Ali Shariati, who promoted a return to the revolutionary Shia of Imam Ali, fighting against injustice and to free the oppressed masses, in order to break with the passive, quietist tradition that had ruled the Shia since.[17]

In 1944, Ayatollah Burujirdi became the main *marǧaʿ* in Qum and further expanded the seminary. It was under his leadership that Qum rose to actual importance, not only because of the expansion, but also due to Burujirdi's almost undisputed standing among believers even outside Iran. Burujirdi, by nature a traditional quietist cleric, did not approve of the political activities which many of the younger clerics at the seminary were involved in, and openly criticized them. These politically active clerics included Khomeini; at the time, he was still one among many who were dissatisfied with the political situation in Iran and the inactivity of the clerical establishment in the face of it.

16 Cf. Halm (2015), p. 84.

17 Cf. Halm (2015), pp. 84-92; Arjomand (1988b), pp. 184 f., 187; Lahidji, Abdol Karim (1988): Constitutionalism and Clerical Authority. In: Arjomand, Said Amir (Hg.): Authority and Political Culture in Shi'ism. New York: State University of New York Press, pp. 134, 153, 156; Keddie, Nikki R. (1983): Introduction. In: Keddie, Nikki R. (Hg.): Religion and Politics in Iran. New Haven/London: Yale University Press, pp. 10 f.

After Burujirdi's death in 1962, eight *marāǧiʿ* emerged, whose reaction to Khomeini's political activism ranged from open accord to open criticism.[18] However, it was not in Qum, but in Najaf, where Khomeini first formulated and propagated his theory of *wilāyat al-faqīh*, or guardianship of the jurist, and from where he gained a vaster audience and popularity. Khomeini relocated to Najaf after being exiled from Iran to Turkey in 1965 due to his political activities. At first, Khomeini spoke highly of the prestigious Najaf; later, he harshly criticized the seminary for its political inactivity. In Najaf, Khomeini elaborated his theory in a series of lectures, which were written down, collected and published by his students. Here, he laid out – supported by *aḥādīṯ* of sometimes disputed reliability – why and how the Shiite faith mandated the establishment of a religious state even in the absence of the 12th Imam.[19] As a theory of the imamate, it is particularly vulnerable to critique, and since the Iranian revolution, secular scholars of Islam, philosophy or history as well as a number of Shiite clerics have undertaken the task of fundamentally or partly criticizing it.[20]

Khomeini's main innovation lies in the expansion of the concept of *wilāya* from the guardianship over those who cannot decide for themselves to the entire *umma*. The verses and *aḥādīṯ* referring to *wilāya* are vague, and concepts such as commanding

18 Cf. Halm (2015), p. 85.

19 Cf. Tabari, Azar (1983): The Role of the Clergy in Modern Iranian Politics. In: Keddie, Nikki R. (Hg.): Religion and Politics in Iran. New Haven/London: Yale University Press, pp. 66-69; Halm (2015), pp. 85, 101 f.; Keddie (1983), p. 14; Dabashi, Hamid (1993): Theology of Discontent. The ideological foundations of the Islamic revolution in Iran. New York et al.: New York University Press, pp. 416-419, 437 f.

20 Cf. Mavani, Hamid (2001): Analysis of Khomeini's Proofs for al-Wilaya al-Mutlaqa (Comprehensive Authority) of the Jurist. In: Walbridge, Linda S. (Hg.): The Most Learned of the Shia. The Institution of Marja Taqlid. Oxford et al.: Oxford University Press, p. 184; Arjomand, Said Amir (1988b): Ideological Revolution in Shi'ism. In: Arjomand, Said Amir (Hg.): Authority and Political Culture in Shi'ism. New York: State University of New York Press, p. 196; Keddie (1983), p. 15.

the right and forbidding the evil can, through tendentious exegesis, be expanded to include the political sphere.[21] Khomeini goes beyond this and claims that the jurist holds an absolute *wilāya* which is derived from that of the Prophet, as passed on to Ali and his male offspring (the *ahl al-bait*), among which are the Imams, and then to the Shiite jurists as representatives of the 12th Imam during his occultation. The jurists, therefore, are the only ones entitled to rule, and the result will be a just Shiite state as a temporary 'placeholder state', so to speak, until the return of the Imam.[22]

Although a range of Shiite political theories have been developed since,[23] it is undeniably true that the history of the Shia in gen-

21 Cf. Khalaji (2006), pp.14 f.

22 Cf. Arjomand (1988b), pp. 194 f.; Rose, Gregory (1983): Velayat-e Faqih and the Recovery of Islamic Identity in the Thought of Ayatollah Khomeini. In: Keddie, Nikki R. (Hg.): Religion and Politics in Iran. New Haven/London: Yale University Press, p. 180.

23 The events in Iran and Iraq of the first half of the 20th century sparked political thought in Shiism, and the Iranian Revolution served as its catalyst. Initially, *wilāyat al-faqīh* was presented as a choice between black and white: either a cleric adhered to the traditional quietist Shiite view, which limited the role of the jurists to religious life, or he propagated the executive authority of the jurists in every matter. This dualistic view has been challenged by a number of clerical and non-clerical authors such as Mohsen Kadivar, who outlined other theories of Shiism in order to show that, according to Shiite clerics, a vast range of political systems are permissible and possible during the occultation of the Imam. Between the two extremes of no role for the jurists and their absolute authority lie a range of theories that accord the jurists a certain degree of influence, such as a supervising role in politics. Those who do not agree with Khomeini's theory generally hold that no fallible human being, and therefore nobody in the absence of the 12th Imam, can have absolute authority over another human being, and that no single system is prescribed in the Imam's absence. Some argue that, therefore, it is the community's decision and duty to choose the system which it deems best for itself until the Imam's return. Apart from Khomeini's theory, there are also other prominent active notions of Shiism, such as the theory of Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr, the ideological founder of the Hizb ad-Dawa (Rizvi, Sajjad (2010): Political Mobilization and the Shi'i Religious Establishment "(marja'iyya)". The Royal Institute of International Affairs, Vol. 86, No. 6, Post-American Iraq, pp.1301-1304; Hashemi-Najafabadi, Adel (2011): The Shi'i Concept of Imamate and Leadership in Contemporary Iran. The Case of Religious Modernists. Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses. Canadian Corporation for Studies in Religion. Vol. 40, No. 4, pp.480 f.

eral and the *marǧaʿiyya* in particular "in the last three decades has been one of conflict around the question of *wilāyat al-faqīh*. The key question posed to every major member of the religious establishment today is whether he subscribes to this theory and what exactly he means by it."[24] In this unavoidable decision lies the core of the politicization of the Shia, as it is now no longer possible for a cleric to be fully secluded from worldly matters: at least for himself, he will have to make the – political – decision whether or not he supports the theory of *wilāyat al-faqīh* and its implementation in Iran.

This development went hand in hand with the politicization of the Najaf-Qum rivalry: since its re-establishment in 1922, Qum has clearly perceived itself in direct competition to Najaf. There was a sense of conviction that, in the long run, Qum was supposed to replace Najaf, and jurists adduced *aḥādīṯ* to support this thesis.[25] In the 1970s, while clerics in Iran were inciting the masses on the streets, Najaf had largely kept out of politics. Accordingly, it has since come to be identified with the quietist or traditional stance of Shiism, according to which a cleric should not hold political office, and is clearly not entitled to establish his absolute authority in a theocratic state. After a period of decline with the establishment of the modern Iraqi state in 1921 and subsequently during Saddam Hussein's regime, Najaf has seen a "renaissance as the Vatican of the Shiite faith"[26] since the regime's fall, undeniably also due to Sistani's popularity.

Qum, on the other hand, has inevitably become the stronghold of clerics adhering to *wilāyat al-faqīh* since the Iranian Revolution. The latter and the events that followed it completed Qum's rise to power: as the only Shiite state in the world, it seems only nat-

24 Cf. Rizvi (2010), p. 1300.
25 Cf. Stewart (2001), p. 220.
26 Cf. Blanche (2013), p. 32.

ural that Iran should host the main center of Shiite legal learning as well, and Qum clearly views itself as such, while the Iranian government has been pumping massive funds into the school and its expansion to uphold this image. The events in Iran and Qum's new standing have given rise to an unprecedented rivalry between the two seminaries.[27] Students of either one of the seminaries are no longer just identified with the academic reputation of their center of learning – they are also clearly 'politically colored', and will be known as quietists or 'Khomeinists' from then on. This political component of the rivalry between the two seminaries is the true innovation brought to the clerical establishment by the Iranian Revolution alongside the general politicization of the Shiite faith. The attempts of the Iranian government to exert influence on Iraq through its seminary in Qum and the seminary in Najaf go hand in hand with these developments, and would have been unthinkable one hundred years ago, when Shiite seminaries were places of learning rather aloof from worldly matters and largely outside the focus of politicians and governments.

Qum vs. Najaf on the Iraqi Playground

Due to his extremely large following and his vast network, both near unprecedented in the history of the Shia, Sistani clearly has more religious influence – and, thus, influence on ordinary believers' lives – in Iraq than Khamenei, who lacks behind him in both learning and followership. Through this undisputed standing and the immense support he commands, Sistani has been able to intervene in politics, mostly through fatwas and sermons delivered by himself or more often by one of his representatives. He has used this power of intervention wisely by limiting it to instances of crises or of crucial importance to the foundations of the Iraqi state. Khamenei on the other hand, equipped neither

27 Cf. Stewart (2001), pp. 216, 219, 221; Halm (2015), pp. 84 f.

with a vast network nor with a large support base in Iraq, has only had limited influence on the lives of the majority of Iraqi Shiites.

Sistani's Role in Iraq after 2003: A Bulwark against Iranian Influence

Despite their identification with the quietist school of thought, Najafi clerics have shown important instances of political involvement in modern Iraq, with Grand Ayatollah al-Sīstānī clearly the most prominent example. Sistani is one of the rare *marāǧiʿ* in history whose standing as the single most followed *marǧaʿ* in the Shiite world is undisputed, despite actual numbers being hard to assess due to the personal nature of the decision of followership and the transnational nature of Shiism. While it is almost universally conceded that Sistani is the most followed, concrete numbers are seldom mentioned, much less such based on factual evidence. Estimates range from 40[28] up to 80 percent[29] of all Shiite believers. The followership of Iran's Khamenei, in contrast, is estimated to range around a mere 10 percent of believers. As the most followed *marǧaʿ*, Sistani is also the wealthiest, with a yearly income of $500-700 million; his worldwide assets are estimated at around $3 billion.[30] While such numbers are always based on rough estimates rather than actual quantitative, representative research, they point to two indisputable key aspects: first of all, Sistani's followership is significantly larger in number than Khamenei's. Second, Sistani disposes of a much larger personal income received from these followers. This, however, does not mean that Khamenei is not likewise wealthy: with the

28 Cf. Braam (2010), p. 3. Braam bases this on quantitative research, according to which Grand Ayatollah Sayyid Mohammad Sadeq Hussaini Rohani, an Iranian *marǧaʿ* residing in Qum, commands the same percentage of followers as Sistani (40 percent).

29 Cf. Khalaji (2006), p. 7.

30 Cf. Khalaji (2006), p. 9.

support of the Iranian government, he is able to use government money to build institutions, pay clerical salaries at seminaries, and thereby create the impression of a larger followership.[31]

While he is today seen as one of the more influential actors in Iraqi politics, Sistani had shown virtually no involvement in and concern for politics before 2003. Originally from Iran, he came to Iraq in 1951 to complete his studies in Najaf, as was customary at the time. He became known for his careful scholarship and vast knowledge, but remained removed from politics and had no significant own following; however, he was closely associated with Grand Ayatollah Khoei, a very well-known quietist *marǧaʿ* with a vast network all over Iraq, who became Sistani's mentor. During the Saddam regime, Sistani was under house arrest for eleven years and quit teaching in 1998 due to government pressure; there is no record of any opposition to the regime.[32]

Sistani's rise to popularity commenced after the death of his mentor Khoei in 1992, who made subtle, symbolic hints at Sistani being his preferred disciple before his death.[33] What sets his ascension apart from that of other *marāǧiʿ* is that it seems to have been largely initiated by his supporters in Iraq and internationally. Especially his son-in-law, the well-known cleric Sayed Javad Shahrestani, was very active in promoting Sistani as Khoei's preferred disciple, and intelligently used his own resources and Khoei's vast network to push for Sistani's leadership. The announcement of the *marǧaʿiyyat* and the subsequent rise to power of a cleric from Najaf came as a surprise to Iran, where no such thing was expected after years of Najafi inactivity under Saddam's regime. Qum and the Iranian government did

31 Cf. Khalaji (2006), p. 9.
32 Cf. Rizvi (2010), p. 1307; Khalaji (2006), pp. 3, 8.
33 Cf. Khalaji, Mehdi (2017): The Future of Leadership in the Shiite Community. Policy Focus 152. Washington: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, p. 92.

their best to campaign against Sistani, but ultimately, thanks to Khoei's immense popularity, his vast network and Shahrestani's careful actions, they could not stop Sistani's rise.[34]

Today, Sistani's prestige in Najaf and Iraq is undisputed, and while he maintains good relations with the other three *marāǧiʿ* there, it is clear that none of them is in a place to challenge his authority. He leads a frugal life and inhabits a modest house in Najaf, where he dedicates one hour per day to meeting people, while he refuses to meet with journalists and foreign diplomats, except for certain UN representatives. Sistani is reluctant to answer questions about politics or his stance on *wilāya al-faqīh*. While he remains especially vague on the latter, he can be assumed to hold the same views as his former mentor Khoei, who opposed the political expansion of the concept. Saying he supports or opposes it would present Sistani with a dilemma: if he supports it, he must claim to be the leader of Iraq; if he is against it, he is challenging Iran's authority. Sistani has never been linked to Iran, although he was born there, and his house is reportedly being observed by Iranian intelligence. Throughout Iraq and, to a lesser extent, also Iran, he maintains a network of institutions, offices, representatives and charities that is said to be the most extensive one a *marǧaʿ* has ever had.[35] Sistani is the only *marǧaʿ* who resides outside of Iran and yet pays salaries to clerics there.[36]

Supporters stress that he has a good understanding for the demands of the modern world, but also for traditional Shiism; they applaud "his skill in resolving controversial issues, his shrewdness, insight, keen desire for learning and extensive knowledge

34 Cf. Rizvi (2010), pp. 1307 f.; Khalaji (2006), pp. 8 f.
35 Cf. Khalaji (2006), pp. 11 – 16; Rizvi (2010), p. 1308; Blanche (2013), p. 32.
36 Cf. Khalaji, Mehdi (2016): Balancing Authority and Autonomy. The Shiite Clergy Post-Khamenei. Research Note No. 73. October 2016. The Washington Institute of Near East Policy, p. 10.

in various fields".[37] In his self-perception as a man of God, not a political leader, he creates a distance between himself and the public, and refuses to have his life and person publicized. Mehdi Khalaji points out that this specific creation of distance is especially important and powerful in Islam, where distance also serves as an indication of the power order.[38] Generally, Sistani has maintained the view of other *marāǧi*ʿ such as Ayatollah Khoei, according to which the relation between the individual believer and the *marǧa*ʿ is the main focus of concern; the former asks questions, the latter provides guidance. However, what accords for Sistani's international fame are the rather rare, but immensely significant instances of political activism that he has shown since 2003.

Arguably his politically most active years were the 'forming years' of the Iraqi state after the end of the regime in 2003. Immediately after the fall of the Saddam regime, he urged people to return stolen state property and to stop looting buildings; large piles of stolen property and even arms were consequently returned and stored at mosques. Sistani soon became a vocal critic of the Interim Governing Council and the Transitional Administrative Law: as early as June 2003, he issued a fatwa criticizing the Americans for plans to appoint a committee to draft a constitution. He insisted instead on the election of a committee and a referendum on the acceptance of the constitution; in this vein, he strongly opposed Paul Bremer, as did his followers. While Sistani never dealt directly with the occupying authorities, he did not call for armed resistance either. Instead, he met with UN representatives, who, in his view, were internationally legitimized actors. Sistani ultimately succeeded in toppling Bremer's plan to create a system which was not based on 'one person, one vote'.

37 Yasin, Nabeel (2004): A Man of his Word. God and Democracy: Iraq. Index on Censorship 4, p.81; also Rizvi (2010), p. 1308.
38 Cf. Khalaji (2006), p. 12.

Bremer wanted a parliament elected by caucuses, while Sistani insisted on holding open elections as soon as possible. Finally, after negotiations with the UN, the election date was set for January 30, 2005.

Ultimately, even the Sadrists and other Shiite movements came to strongly support elections and democracy – the Iraqi Shiite elite adopted these terms willingly and did not see them as contradictory to Islamic teachings. Whether this was inspired by the course of events in Iran, their own experience of oppression under Saddam's regime, or the prospect of being in power in Iraq for the first time in modern history (and to achieve this without bloodshed) remains hard to assess. Most likely a combination of these factors led to their support for elections and a democratic system; besides this, Shiite clerics were sure of the fact that their followers would not give their vote to a system incompatible with the teachings of Islam.[39]

The culmination of Sistani's activism was his support for the United Iraqi Alliance, the main Shia bloc in the 2005 election, which then won 48 percent of the vote. His call to vote and the famous statement that voting was more important even than fasting led to a large participation of the Shia majority in the election. After this victory, it was clear to all observers, both Iraqi and international, that Sistani was willing to interfere politically when he deemed it necessary, and that he did so with a potentially enormous effect.[40]

After this period of increased activism, Sistani went back to a strategy of minimal involvement in the years after 2005. In 2005 and 2006, he refused to give his support to any single par-

39 Cf. Blanche (2013), pp. 13 f., 25 f.; Yasin (2004), pp.78 f., 82.
40 Cf. Shukla, Shashi (2005): Iraq: Case of 'Coercive' Democratisation. India Quarterly: A Journal of International Affairs, Vol. 61, No. 1, p. 150.

ty, stating that he supported and acknowledged all Iraqi political parties.[41] In 2006, he tried to intervene in support of Iraqi minorities when sectarian violence escalated. He urged the political parties to reach a conclusion in the debates around the election law in 2009, with the parties finally choosing the open list system favored by him. He again called on people to participate in the elections and to choose the party that best represented their needs, but he did so not quite as visibly as in 2005. Furthermore, prior to the election, he stated that the practice of vote-buying was forbidden according to Islam, and discouraged politicians from using measures such as presents and favors to get votes, while he recommended to his fellow clerics that they be neutral concerning the participating parties. When there was no clear outcome of the election, even non-Shiite politicians and reportedly US President Barack Obama called for Sistani's interference and advice.[42]

As the then-acting Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki gained strength and aimed for clinging to power, it seemed like Sistani's influence was declining, while Iran's was on the rise. However, and once more through prudent and measured interference in order not to create more chaos and dispute than necessary, Sistani managed to prevent al-Maliki from vying for a third term as prime minister. He reportedly sent a letter to the ruling party's officials, insisting that the parties in the parliament choose another consensus candidate. Sistani achieved this despite Maliki's attempt to raise the support of Sistani-opposed clerics in his favor, and calls to Sistani that a cleric should not interfere in politics. This can be seen as another example of Sistani's commitment to an inclusive democracy in Iraq, where all minorities should feel represented

41 Cf. Rizvi (2010), p.1310.
42 Cf. Braam (2010), pp. 4 f., 9-13.

by their politicians.[43]

Another recent key interference was Sistani's call to arms three days after the so-called Islamic State's (ISIS) conquest of Mosul. In a fatwa, Sistani called upon Iraqi Shiite men to wage jihad against ISIS – a call that was soon followed by tens of thousands of young men. However, the emerging militias soon turned into what could be described as a Trojan horse for Sistani, as 40-50 of the Popular Mobilization Forces are closely allied with the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, opening up the gates to increasing Iranian influence in Iraq.[44] While some argue that this has diminished his power to influence the direction that Iraq's politics are taking,[45] it has arguably thus far not diminished his influence on Iraq's people. This was exemplified in summer 2015, when he supported large popular protests against insufficient government services, and Prime Minister al-Abadi promised to address the concerns voiced by Sistani in the name of the Iraqi people, while – unlike other calls by Sistani – it was met with opposition by much of Iraq's political elite.[46]

Due to his popularity, every single one of his acts and statements is scrutinized and carries an enormous weight with the believers who follow him.[47] Even so, in light of a careful analysis of his utterances, opinions concerning his underlying intentions are divided. While some say that he merely championed democracy as a measure to bring the Shiites to power, others stress his state-

43 Cf. Mamouri, Ali (2014): How did Sistani succeed in ousting Maliki? Al-Monitor. 20.08.2014; al-Khoei (2016). Available at: http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/08/iraq-sistani-democratic-ways-successors-maliki.html.

44 Cf. Steinberg, (2017), pp. 1 f., 5 f., 8.

45 Cf. Hiltermann, Joost (2015): Iraq: The Clerics and the Militias, NYR Daily.

46 Cf. The New Arab (2015): Sistani calls on Iraqi PM to expose corrupt officials. Available at: https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2015/8/7/sistani-calls-on-iraqi-pm-to-expose-corrupt-officials; al-Khoei (2016).

47 Cf. Braam (2010), p. 3.

ments in favor of protecting and including minorities in Iraq, and see in him the 'democratic conscience' of modern Iraq.[48] Braam aptly compares him to the Thai king or the pope: as a person with no direct political authority, but a vast recognition, he can exert significant influence within the right circumstance.[49] What is clear is that he maintains a strategy of selective political involvement, focusing on instances that affect or threaten the underlying framework of the Iraqi state, such as elections, the constitution or respect for minorities. He has been very consistent in his support for elections, democracy and constitutional politics, while staying out of daily politics with the same consistency. By maintaining his distance to the day-to-day issues of party politics, which are tainted by the reputation of clientelism, nepotism and corruption, he ultimately increases his power and remains in the background, aptly described as a conscience that calls the actors to reason in times of need. From a more realpolitik oriented point of view and in practice, he thereby maintains the power of the Shiite majority without interfering in the rights of any of the Iraqi minorities.[50] All in all, an analysis of his stance paints a "nuanced picture of Sistani as a flexible and dynamic leader who often acts in ways not wholly bound by either quietism or activism",[51] and who is "committed to both the ballot box *and* the *Shari'a*".[52]

Rizvi argues that, while it would be exaggerated to speak of a Shiite enlightenment in Iraq, there is clearly no desire within the Iraqi clergy to replicate Iran, and that people look to Sistani and the *marāǧiʿ* for guidance, not as potential executive leaders.[53]

48 Cf. Mamouri (2017); Rizvi 2010, p. 1309 f.
49 Cf. Braam (2010), p. 6.
50 Cf. Rizvi (2010), pp. 1309 ff.; Braam (2010), pp. 1, 5, 9, 14.
51 Cf. Braam (2010), p. 3.
52 Cf. Braam (2010), p. 4.
53 Cf. Rizvi (2010), p. 1299.

Sistani has repeatedly discouraged clerics from assuming political office, and while he has promoted an Islamic framework for Iraq with laws not contradicting the Sharia, he clearly advocates a large political-public space without any clerical interference. In this vein, and despite his political involvement, Sistani is a classical quietist *marǧaʿ* in the tradition of Grand Ayatollahs Khoei and Burujirdi. In Sistani's writing, likewise, one can find a classical Shiite understanding of the state as a "temporal non-religious government run by either just or unjust men".[54] Like many traditional Shia clerics, he sees himself as a vigilante, an observer of the state who has all the right to intervene in order to safeguard Shiism and its followers, but only when the circumstances necessitateit.[55]

Khamenei vs. Sistani – the Limitations of Iran's Religious Influence in Iraq

Over the past years, Iran has been continuously expanding its influence on Iraqi soil: With a pro-Iranian Prime Minister, Nouri al-Maliki, in power in Iraq for eight years from 2006 until 2014, Iran was able to gain a strong foothold in Iraqi politics. Now, with the closely Iranian-allied Badr Organization controlling the interior ministry and the police, Iran can exert significant influence on Iraq. Most recently, the military aspect of this influence has increased greatly since the creation of the PMF, composed of either pre-existing or newly-formed Shiite militias aiming to fight ISIS. Most of them are closely allied with the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, and the Badr Organization, arguably Iran's most important instrument of influence in Iraq, holds a very central position among the militias.[56]

54 Cf. Khalaji (2006), p. 15.
55 Cf. Khalaji (2006), pp. 17 f., Yasin (2004), p. 82.
56 Cf. Steinberg (2017), pp. 1 f., 5 f., 8.

Contrary to this political and military expansion of influence, the religious influence that Iran is able to exert on the Iraqi clerical establishment is currently limited. This is also due to the relative weakness of the cleric that heads the Iranian clerical establishment: Sistani's Iranian counterpart, Ayatollah Khamenei, is in no way on a level with him when judged by the standards of the traditional Shiite *marǧaʿiyya*. When forces within the Iranian government started promoting Khamenei as Khomeini's successor, they did so regardless of the fact that the candidate did in no way meet the necessary standards for the office, which required the Supreme Leader to be a *marǧaʿ*. Khamenei was at that time merely a mid-ranking cleric, not certified even to perform *iǧtihād*. Before Khamenei could fully assume his new position, the Iranian constitution had to be amended to allow a non-*marǧaʿ* to become leader. Hastily, some *muǧtahidūn* granted him the title under alleged government pressure, and soon after his appointment, the controversy around him not being fit for the office started and has continued ever since. Among his most prominent critics was the former Khomeini-successor designee Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri, who claimed that Khamenei did not possess sufficient academic and religious knowledge to be allowed to issue fatwas.[57]

There is a strong sense of personal competition for prestige from Khamenei's side. In contrast to Sistani with his immense following, assets and popularity, Khamenei gains prestige mainly through his association with the Iranian government, not through his learning, his standing within the population or the traditional clerical establishment, where he is much lower-ranking than Sistani and will most likely never reach the latter's learning and position. Khamenei is well aware that he is in no position to harm

57 Cf. Gieling, Saskia (1997): The *'Marja'iya'* in Iran and the Nomination of Khamenei in December 1994. Middle Eastern Studies, 33(4): 777-87; Khalaji (2006), pp. 21-24.; Khalaji (2006), pp. 21-24.

Sistani or to undermine his power and position, and a seemingly cool respect and distance dominates their relationship. Since his appointment, Khamenei has been trying to get a foothold in Iraq, and while his many opened schools, institutions and charities clearly expand his visibility, efforts to exert influence on Najaf itself have proven largely futile. After Sistani's fatwa calling people to take up arms against ISIS in 2014, Khamenei worked incessantly on drawing the emerging militias under Iranian control, also by cutting off support for Sistani-affiliated militias.[58] While it is certainly true that many of the militias now follow Khamenei and carry his image on their banners, it is Sistani's voice that carries the weight of law-making for the vast majority of Iraq's Shiite population and in Najaf, putting a limit to Iran's influence, no matter how strong it may be otherwise. There is no imminent takeover of Najaf by Iranian clerics – while Sistani is alive, Najaf will stay true to its role as a stronghold of Shiite traditionalism and minimal clerical involvement in politics, and to its support of Iraq's democracy, and Iranian control over the Shiite clerical establishment will undeniably be limited. Thus, there remains little more to do for Iran's clerics than to await the death of the 86-year-old *marǧaʿ* in Najaf.

The Question of Sistani's Successor

'Succession' within the *marǧaʿiyya*

Traditionally, a *marǧaʿ at-taqlīd* has to fulfill the criteria of being the most learned (*al-āʿalam*) and the most pious (*al-afḍal*) *muǧtahid*. Especially the latter clearly concerns the morale and character of the jurist and can therefore hardly be measured in terms of numbers or statistics, which was also never the idea: A *marǧaʿ* was thought to emerge from the masses, simply so

58 Cf. Mamouri (2017).

learned, pious and good that everyone would realize and subsequently recognize his authority. There was never a clear method of selection because this was not deemed necessary.[59] Despite nowadays possessing more defined ranks and positions, the clerical establishment remains, to this day, a very fluid institution that is hard to assess and impossible to access from the outside, as it is based on oral tradition and recognition, not on certificates or measurable knowledge. A cleric who goes to study with a *muǧtahid* will, at some point in his learning, be recognized by his teacher as being capable of *iǧtihād*, and thereby become entitled to practice it and issue rulings. Rising up through the ranks is a very gradual, long process that is intimately connected to personal relations and networks.[60]

As such, it is not part of the tasks of a *marǧaʿ* – and thus also not part of the tasks of Sistani – to appoint a successor, and therefore, even the term succession can be seen as problematic in this context,[61] particularly in light of the fact that there are always multiple clerics with the rank of *marǧaʿ* at the same time. An actual succession in the sense of an empty post that has to be filled is not applicable to what happens within the clerical establishment after the Supreme *marǧaʿ*'s death.

A Supreme *marǧaʿ* does not appoint a successor for this and other reasons. Although he may well be able to evaluate someone's fitness of character now, this does not hold true for a time after his own death. Shiism acknowledges the fallibility of humans, and thus, also the fallibility of the statements issued by clerics, even by a *marǧaʿ*. Therefore, a successor declared as the most suitable candidate might later fail to meet the criteria or be surpassed by another, better candidate that emerges after the

59 Cf. Gieling (1997), pp.21-24.
60 Cf. Khalaji (2006), p. 2.
61 Cf. Khalaji (2017), p. 91.

Supreme *marǧa*ʿ's death. Determining a successor is therefore mostly left to the clerical establishment and, ultimately, the people.[62] Even if the Supreme *marǧa*ʿ appointed someone, it could never be guaranteed that this person would actually become the *marǧa*ʿ after his mentor's death. A large part of the *marǧa*ʿ's power is of symbolic nature and as such as intangible as the criteria for his ascension; he cannot transfer this symbolic power and inherit it to his desired successor.[63] There is one part of the *marǧa*ʿ's power, however, that he can indeed pass on to his disciples: his network of institutions and representatives with their respective funds, which – as exemplified during Sistani's ascension – can be utilized to expand a *marǧa*ʿ's popularity and thus his influence. However, even then it cannot be predicted with certainty if a candidate will actually be recognized as a *marǧa*ʿ, let alone manage to become the most followed one and thus the Supreme *marǧa*ʿ. Nobody exemplifies this better than Sistani himself: before he rose to power, nobody expected to see a strong *marǧa*ʿ from the weakened Najaf for years to come.

Usually, the death of a Supreme *marǧa*ʿ is followed by a period of 5-10 years of competition between different suitable candidates before a new Supreme *marǧa*ʿ emerges. In the case of Sistani's death, this process might be accelerated due to the political significance of his succession, and because Iraq's Shiites would call for a strong clerical leader from Najaf who can also fulfill the role of occasional political involvement.[64] However, the Shiite clerical establishment follows its own rules and procedures, and is more often than not completely oblivious to outside pressures. Either

62 Cf. Khalaji (2006), p. 17.

63 Cf. Khalaji (2006), p. 32; al-Khoei (2016).

64 Cf. Mamouri (2017); Arango, Tim (2012): Iran Presses for Official to be Next Leader of Shiites. The New York Times. Available at: http://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/12/world/middleeast/iran-promotes-its-candidate-for-next-shiite-leader.html; al-Khoei (2016).

Sistani's or Khamenei's death would certainly create a power vacuum, which especially Khamenei would try to use in order to expand his influence. Several scenarios seem possible:

The Likelihood of Expanding Iranian Influence in Iraq

A first possibility is that, depending on who succeeds Sistani, Iranian (religious) influence in Iraq could increase considerably. If Khamenei or his successor as Supreme Leader of Iran managed to somehow attract Sistani's followers, thereby becoming the Supreme Religious Authority of most Shiites, this would mean the ultimate victory of activist Khomeinist Shiism over the quietist, moderate traditionalism currently espoused by Najaf, whose clerics would then be significantly restricted by Iranian influence and control.[65]

However, this scenario seems unlikely for a number of reasons. First and foremost, Khamenei's power in Najaf is limited. As mentioned before, a cleric's network is crucial when trying to assert his position and expand his following. The fact that Khamenei does not dispose of such a network in Iraq in the same way that Sistani does makes his ascension less likely. Khamenei has been continuously trying to expand his network of institutions in Iraq; however, it is not comparable to Sistani's, who disposes of a very well-established and well-funded network of aides and agents all over Iraq with over 600 representatives.[66] Besides this, and perhaps more importantly, Iraqi Shiism and Shiite culture in Iraq have in the past proven themselves to be not very susceptible to Iranian religious influence.[67] As mentioned before, neither the Shiite clerics nor their Iraqi followers overall show a strong desire to follow the Iranian example. To follow a radical

65 Cf. Khalaji (2006), pp. 32-34.
66 Cf. Mamouri (2017).
67 Cf. Braam (2010), p. 16.

Iranian cleric, a significant change of mind among many of Sistani's followers would be necessary, and the persona of Khamenei seems unsuitable to inspire such a change. The Iranian leader neither has Khomeini's charisma nor his religious standing as a Supreme Religious Authority, and his appointment in disregard of these criteria inspired a lot of criticism. Khamenei was, is and will be unable to re-create the unity the Shiite world has seen under Khomeini, and this will limit his influence on the Iraqi clerical establishment now and in the future.[68]

However, the possibility remains that a new Iranian *marǧaʿ* from Qum might establish his power after Sistani's death. Iran is currently promoting Ayatollah Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi as the next Supreme Leader. If Shahroudi managed to succeed both Khamenei and Sistani by attracting the latter's followers, this would make him the most powerful Shiite cleric alive.[69]

Ayatollah Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi was born in Najaf in 1948, where he studied under Khomeini. He fled Iraq in 1980 and, according to his biography, was Muhammad Baqir as-Sadr's representative in Iran before the latter's execution by Saddam Hussein. Among Shahroudi's students in Qum was Hassan Nasrallah, the now-leader of Lebanon's Hezbollah. Shahroudi was the head of Iran's judiciary for ten years, an important post reserved for Khameini's closest allies. In this position, he was known for acting harshly and violently to crush opposition. Shahroudi also joined the powerful Council of Guardians, which checks new laws and parliament candidates. Now, he chairs the Assembly of Experts, and he is also said to have ties to the Revolutionary Guards Council. Shahroudi is seen as a great scholar and a conservative cleric leaning towards militant Islam who is close in both thought

68 Cf. Khalaji (2006), pp. 24-28.
69 Cf. Khalaji (2017), pp. 89 f.

and relation to Khamenei and other hardliners.[70]

Shahroudi opened an office in Najaf in 2011 and has since been working incessantly to establish close contacts with Iraqi political officials, among which include Nouri al-Maliki, whom he met in both 2014 and 2015, and Ammar al-Hakim.[71] By offering higher stipends than Sistani and other benefits, he is reportedly trying to attract more students, and is trying to create a support base for himself in Najaf by relocating teachers residing in Iran to the Iraqi seminary. An Iranian government official and high-ranking cleric opening an office in Najaf is an unusual and alarming occurrence for Najaf's clergy. Sistani reportedly did not agree to meet with Shahroudi during the latter's Najaf visit after opening the office.[72]

However, numerous scholars and observers argue that the importance of Shahroudi's Najaf office is limited and that, despite the close ties to Dawa politicians, the party would not go as far as trying to assert him as the official *marǧa'* of the Dawa party, replacing Sistani.[73] Mutual respect, even if tainted by underlying, clear tensions, is of great importance within the clerical estab-

70 Cf. Arango (2012); The Economist (2015): The Ailing Ayatollah. The Economist. Available at: https://www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21679508-ali-al-sistani-iraqs-best-hope-curbing-iranian-influence-he-85-and.

71 Cf. Khalaji (2017), pp. 93 f.

72 Cf. Arango (2012); Al-Kifaee, Fadel (2012): Between Najaf and Tehran. Sada – Middle East Analysis. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Available at: http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/49629.

73 Some reports quoted by Israeli and Iranian media (supposedly relying on Iraqi sources) point to Shahroudi already being the *marǧa'* of Abadi and Maliki, but as this decision is entirely personal, this cannot be finally confirmed. It is, however, possible, especially in light of Shahroudi's close connections to Baqir as-Sadr, the ideological founder of Maliki's and Abadi's Dawa party. See for example Javedanfar, Meir (2014): The future of Iran after Khamenei. Al Jazeera America. Available at: http://america.aljazeera.com/opinions/2014/9/iran-khamenei-succession.html.

lishment, and Shahroudi "[o]utwardly espousing ambitions to succeed Ayatollah Sistani would be a breach of etiquette."[74] Despite his scholarship being seen as remarkable, Shahroudi is not viewed as an attractive candidate for spiritual leadership in Iraq. This is largely due to him being a businessman interested in leading a comfortable life in wealth (he is said to be one of the richest men in Iran), and his career in the Iranian judicial system, all of which stand in stark contrast to the frugal life of pious, unworldly men who safeguard the quietist tradition and their independence from any government, the image portrayed by the Najafi *marǧaʿiyya*. Furthermore, the latter is well-established and well-funded enough to fend off Iranian influence.[75] In addition, Shahroudi's network outside of Najaf in Iraq is very limited.[76]

To some, it is not clear that Shahroudi even aims for a takeover of Najaf. Some argue that him establishing a presence there is merely a stepping stone on the way to his ultimate goal: becoming the new Supreme Leader of the Iranian Republic. His connections and power in Iran – and, to a lesser extent, also in Iraq – greatly increase his chances to achieve this goal, and observers see him as currently the only visible, viable candidate for Khamenei's succession.[77] However, arguing that, if he became the next Supreme Leader, this would also increase his followership in Iraq,[78] does not stand a check with the facts on the ground. First of all, this did not happen with Khamenei either, as "[t]he Iranian government cannot control who pious Shias will look to"[79], and this is unlikely to be Shahroudi for the same reasons that he is not able to gain a foothold in Najaf; namely, his wealth,

74 Cf. Arango (2012).
75 Cf. Al-Kifaee (2012); Arango (2012).
76 Cf. Mamouri (2017).
77 Cf. The Economist (2015);
78 Cf. Reback (2015).
79 Cf. Vali Nasr, quoted in Arango (2012).

his political positions and his treatment of the opposition – he is seen as an unjust, businessman-like political figure, and as such not very appealing to those who have revered and lauded Sistani for being the exact opposite.[80] Therefore, while he can be seen as a likely new Supreme Leader of the Iranian Republic, he is rather unlikely to be Sistani's successor as the most followed *marǧaʿ*.

A New Najafi Supreme *marǧaʿ* and the Dangers of More or Less Interference

It is likely that, along the traditional lines of appointment and ascension within the *marǧaʿiyya*, students currently studying in Najaf would promote their teachers to replace Sistani, with the candidates then entering a period of subtle competition for public acknowledgement and popularity both with the people and other clerics. Najaf has solid financial sources throughout the world, and is therefore, as mentioned before, up to the challenge of countering Iranian influence during this process.[81]

Despite the obscurity of the inner workings of this process, Hayder al-Khoei argues that only a small number of clerics exist today who are able to achieve a consensus over their knowledge and piety. He names the three other *marağiʿ* currently residing in Najaf, Grand Ayatollahs Mohammed Saeed al-Hakim, Mohammed Ishaq al-Fayadh, and Bashir Hussain al-Najafi, none of whom believe in Khomeini's theory of government, as potential successors.[82] Among these three, Grand Ayatollah Mohammed Ishaq al-Fayadh, an Afghan-born cleric who moved to Najaf at the age of 10, appears to be the one who is most often mentioned. He is said to be the most adamant in rejecting Khomeini's theo-

80 Cf. Khalaji (2017), p. 92.
81 Cf. Mamouri (2017).
82 Cf. Al-Khoei (2016).

ry,[83] and although some contrary reports can be found, there is in fact a video of him stating that a cleric who is involved in politics has no value whatsoever, because current politics are based on corruption.[84] However, and despite his undisputed prominence and popularity in Najaf, he is as old as Sistani and does, at least currently, not enjoy the same popularity with the people.[85]

Some mention Mohammed Reza Sistani, Sistani's son, as a potential successor, as he is said to control Sistani's office and often delivers his father's messages. Furthermore, Mohammed Reza Sistani prominently voices his opinions on politics in Iraq.[86] There are also contrary reports stating that Sistani's son's importance is overrated.[87] As mentioned before, Sistani became the main candidate after the death of his mentor because the latter subtly hinted at him being the preferred disciple shortly before his death. It will be crucial to see whether or not Sistani decides to make such a gesture before his passing. If Sistani aims to help promote one of his disciples as a successor, his global network and financial assets will probably be the most important factor. However, hinting at one's son to be followed is extremely unusual and does not seem as likely, especially considering Sistani's caution in portraying himself as completely aloof from worldly matters and desires, such as passing on the power and influence to his kin.

Despite the promotion of certain candidates within Najaf that will surely take place after Sistani's passing, it is still largely the-

83 Cf. Rabkin, Nathaniel (2007): Who Speaks for Iraqi Shiites? The Weekly Standard. Available at: http://www.weeklystandard.com/who-speaks-for-iraqi-shiites/article/15556.

84 Video available at: http://www.clipjoy.com/ww/#!/video/e-learning/2653/-a-political-marj-a-has-no-value-whatsoever-sheikh-ishaq-al/yt/3DtnkgjqrHM.

85 Cf. Blanche (2013), p. 35.

86 Cf. Mamouri (2017); Rizvi (2010), p. 1309.

87 Cf. Khalaji (2006), p. 12.

people who will be confronted with the decision whom to look to after his death. Ordinary followers "will begin to organically defer to one of the existing Grand Ayatollahs after Sistani",[88] until one of them eventually has enough followers to emerge as the most followed, a process that could take several years and does not necessarily have to lead to the emergence of a single, clearly most followed cleric. If a current or a new *marǧaʿ* in Najaf were to emerge as the most followed, this would mean that Iranian influence in Iraq would remain unchanged in the religious sector for the foreseeable future. Arguably, this would also be the case if not one, but multiple clerics divided the largest numbers of followers among themselves, as long as they were quietist, Najaf-based *marağiʿ*. The Najaf establishment is strong enough to resist Iran as long as its clerics are the ones who Shiite believers in Iraq look to; their support is what ultimately serves as a bulwark against an Iranian religious takeover.

However, even if that one suitable strong candidate emerges and manages to create the same consensus over the Supreme Religious Authority's standing in Iraq which we find now under Sistani, certain dangers remain. First and foremost, Sistani's positive impact depends to a large extent on his finding a balance between too much and too little political involvement. If he intervened more, his actions might lose their significance, as it has become established in the minds of all Iraqis that, if Sistani interferes, it must be a matter of major importance. Besides this, the involvement with daily political issues and party politics would damage his conscience-like position as the voice of reason when it comes to the foundations of the Iraqi state. Likewise, if he did not interfere at all, people might feel abandoned and thus estranged from the cleric they follow, if he does not seem to show the concern for their political life that they have got used to. If

88 Cf. Al-Khoei (2016).

Sistani's successor was unable to uphold this important balance by intervening more or less in Iraq's political issues, this could have negative consequences: if he interfered more, he might lose his standing and ultimately followership; if he interfered less or not at all, people might eventually turn to a *marǧaʿ* with a more activist stance – a Qummi one, potentially.[89]

An individual worth mentioning due to his large political appeal and important religious lineage is Muqtada as-Sadr. Despite being a descendant of the great and revered Muhammad Baqir as-Sadr, Muqtada's ascension to any official religious post is extremely unlikely.[90] He is only a low-ranking cleric and reportedly did not finish his education at the seminary, where, in his youth, he earned the nickname 'Mullah Atari' because he reportedly preferred video games over Islamic studies.[91] His appeal is based on a mix of nationalism, religion and calling out to minorities and the Shia urban poor, but has the character of a movement, revolutionary at times, but far from being based on religious guidance. There were some reports of Muqtada studying again to earn the level of scholarship necessary to issue fatwas in 2007,[92] but even if he does so, it would take years or decades before he could gain the prestige (and age) necessary to make a name for himself in Najaf. Besides this, and perhaps just as importantly, he has repeatedly criticized the religious establishment, giving his movement an anti-clerical turn.

89 Cf. Braam (2010), p. 16.

90 Cf. Rizvi (2010), p. 1305.

91 Cf. Al Jazeera (2010): Profile: Muqtada al-Sadr. Al Jazeera. Available at: http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2008/04/200861517227277282.html.

92 Cf. Farid, Sonia [transl.] (2007): Iraq's Muqtada Sadr studying to issue fatwas. Al Arabiya News. Available at: https://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2007/12/16/43018.html.

The End of the *marǧaʿiyya*

Some authors argue that Sistani's death will mark the end of the *marǧaʿiyya* in the classical sense. According to this view, Sistani will be the last *marǧaʿ* to achieve such a strong standing and worldwide popularity. Traditionally, the vast majority of *marāǧiʿ* are – like Sistani – of Iranian origin, independently of where they studied. Najaf is now largely isolated from Iran; the once active exchange of students has been curbed by competition and political tensions, with rather few Iranian scholars now going to Najaf to study there, and Najaf being increasingly cautious to admit Iranians for fear of undermining activities. Thus, new scholars with the potential to become *marǧaʿ* are harder, if not impossible, to find.[93]

The decline of the *marǧaʿiyya* is said to have begun with the Islamic Revolution in Iran and the subsequent politicization of the *marǧaʿiyya* and its procedures; when the government controls and ultimately decides who becomes a *marǧaʿ*, the latter does no longer possess any legitimacy in the traditional sense. It is then a political, government-appointed and no longer a religious office. Khalaji argues that, while the Shiite clerics in Iran will be further polarized into either opposing or following this process, there will be a re-localization of the office in Iraq, with *marāǧiʿ* being no more influential than a simple tribal leader. This would also significantly alter their relation to politics: if there is no one big *marǧaʿ* with significant influence, winning his support will be a lot less high up on the agenda of politicians.[94] Iraq may then lose an important referee in situation of chaos and confusion, where a strong *marǧaʿ* can serve as a voice of reason and uphold the foundation upon which Iraq is built.

93 Cf. Khalaji (2006), pp. 32-34.
94 Cf. Khalaji (2006), pp. 4 f., 19, 32-34.

Conclusion: Qum on the Rise?

As this paper has outlined, we are far from an Iranian takeover of the Iraqi religious establishment. Sistani's enormous network and financial assets will serve as a bulwark against such a takeover even when he himself cannot do so anymore. Despite the undisputed exceptionalism of his standing, followership and historical position, he is but a part of a thousand-year-old establishment that, despite the obscurity of its inner workings, is just that: established and strong. Even if it is not able to produce a Sistani-style candidate any time in the near future, and the current consensus is lost, this does not mean that Iraqi Shiites will immediately turn to follow an Iranian *marǧaʿ* instead. For such a shift, an important change of mind within Iraq's population would be necessary, and currently, no candidate appealing enough to inspire such a change is visible.

However, and despite Najaf being aloof from daily politics, the interconnectedness between the political and the religious situation cannot be ignored: the only factor potentially strong enough to divert people's loyalties away from Najaf seem to be the Popular Mobilization Forces, who enjoy a strong popularity within large parts of Iraq's Shiite population. Depending on what happens to them after the defeat of ISIS, if they increase their popularity, they could eventually become an important factor in shifting people's loyalties towards Iran. Finally, it remains with the people to decide whom they pledge their allegiance to, and people's decisions are influenced by multiple factors, of which political considerations can be one. This shows that it is indeed important for Najaf to put forth a strong candidate who people can look to after Sistani, and who manages to attract a similar following at least within Iraq, and, just as importantly, who can uphold the balance between political activism and quietism that Sistani maintains so well. Who such a candidate might be

remains hard to assess at this time due to the workings of the clerical establishment and its selection procedures. Although no clear candidate is visible from the outside, this does not mean that there will be none: nobody envisaged a strong unifying *marǧaʿ* to come from Najaf in the 1990s, and yet Sistani rose to power. Such an unexpected ascension might happen again.

Either way, the *marǧaʿiyya* as an institution will likely persist, at least in Iraq – it has faced periods of decline in history before, and while the Iraqi seminaries are not under Iranian government control, they will stay true to their quietist tradition and occasional interference in politics. This will be the case even if the establishment does not include a single most powerful *marǧaʿ*, but a number of 'weaker' *marǧaʿ* instead; such a situation was, historically, the more common one anyway, with the difference that current historical circumstances have people calling for a strong cleric to follow. Iran will keep trying to influence Najaf, but it will ultimately fail to bring it entirely under its control. Again, the most important battle is fought for people's hearts and minds, and this battle is what Najafi clerics need to win if they want to fend off Iranian influence not just on their religious establishment, but also on their people.

Finally, it is important to realize and recognize, also and especially for outside observers, that the Iraqi Shiite establishment differs in important ways from other similar establishments in the Middle East, who are bound to their governments and dependent on them. Najaf is and will be independent from the Iraqi and the Iranian governments in the foreseeable future, and prides itself in this independence, which is both financially and ideologically well-established, stable and secure. Meanwhile, the interference of Najafi clerics in Iraqi politics remains a force to be reckoned with when dealing with Iraqi politics and politicians. If Najafi clerics manage to bind Sistani's followers to them after his

death, they will continue to have the ability to exert an important influence on Iraq's Shiite population and ultimately their political behavior. As outlined above, Najafi clerics need to continue using this influence wisely in order to neither lose their power and standing by interfering too much, nor lose the population's support by interfering too little and making them feel abandoned in their struggles.

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