Middle East Brief

January 2017
No. 105

Sistani, Iran, and the Future of Shii Clerical Authority in Iraq

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In 2005, local authorities in the city of Najaf, where the Shrine of the first Shii Imam and the major religious learning center in the Shii world (*al-hawza*) is located, inaugurated a new street connecting the city with its international airport. The street was named after Imam Khomeini, the leader of the Iranian revolution. This step provoked a controversy when Iraqi nationalists, liberals, and some Shii clerics criticized it: They argued that naming the street after a foreign leader and a symbol of Islamist militant ideology did not do justice to Najaf's local identity and would only serve to underscore the widely held belief that Iraq has been dominated politically and culturally by Iran.[1]

This controversy sheds light on the relations between Najaf's *hawza* and the cleric-led state in Iran. Shii clerics in Najaf speak proudly of what they call "the Najafi school," meaning that the *hawza*, today led by Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, rejected the Iranian model and backed a democratic form of government in Iraq. According to Jawad al-Khoui, a Shii cleric and the grandson of Sistani's predecessor, "the distance from politics is the strength of Najaf's *hawza*."[2] Other experts think that the differences with the Iranian model are exaggerated, and that Najaf is on its way to completely falling into the Iranian sphere of influence.[3] In a recent article, *Le Monde* lamented the vacuum that Sistani's death will create, predicting a gloomy picture for the *hawza* after him.[4]

This Brief offers a nuanced account of Sistani's approach to authority and his stance regarding the Iranian role in Iraq, and the implications of both for the future of the *hawza*. The Brief is divided into two sections. The main argument

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in the first section is that Sistani continued a tradition adopted by most clerics in Najaf of a pragmatic approach with respect to political authority. Instead of focusing on the common distinction between activism and quietism in Shiism, this Brief differentiates between ideological and non-ideological orientations, placing the Iranian model in the first category and Sistani's approach in the second. Working pragmatically to maintain the autonomy of the *hawza*, Sistani acted as a buffer against Iran's tendency to impose more influence on Iraq's Shii community.

The second section deals with the future of the *hawza* after Sistani, and the likely implications for the Iranian role. The Brief argues that Sistani's approach is transitional, made possible only by the massive changes Iraq has seen since 2003. The survival and continuity of this approach depend on the way the *hawza* is going to cope with the eventual absence of Sistani. The Brief argues that Sistani's place is unlikely to be filled by a cleric of comparable authority, and that post-Sistani Najaf will be a more divided and, therefore, weaker place. The immediate consequence would be that Iran will likely exert more influence on intra-Shii dynamics in Iraq.

Sistani's Approach and Relations with Iran

Sistani and Political Authority

Unlike Sunni religious professionals, who were often appointed by the state, Najaf's high-ranking clerics constructed their authority through studying and teaching in the *hawza* and gradually emerging as highly knowledgeable jurists known as sources of emulation (*maraja*). The term '*hawza*' in this Brief refers to clerical networks, schools, institutions, and charities that have evolved around senior Shii clerics through the years and that constituted the religious hierarchy in Najaf. In the Usuli school, which is the dominant trend in Shii jurisprudence, lay individuals have to emulate the instructions of at least one source of emulation in their religious practices and in their dealings with other individuals or with the community.

Historically, a main pillar in the political thought of Twelver Shiism, the religious doctrine of the majority in both Iraq and Iran, was the belief that the only legitimate states were those ruled by the Prophet Muhammad or one of the twelve infallible Imams. Therefore, all states that did not meet this requirement were considered, in theory, illegitimate. How to deal with the illegitimate state has been an issue debated for centuries by Shii scholars, especially after the assumed occultation of the twelfth Imam in the tenth century,[5] which ended the direct contact between the community and its "infallible" leader. This debate within Shiism produced different schools, views, and practices. The dominant practice, however, has been one that followed a pragmatic approach by finding ways to deal with rulers and existing political realities on some, even minimal, level.

This pragmatic approach can be distinguished from the Iranian model, which institutionalized and legitimized the theocratic leadership of the state by clerics. Ayatollah Khomeini, the leader of the Iranian revolution, was an advocate of this form of Islamic government, as he argued in his theory of the "general mandate of the jurist" (*wilayat al-faqih al-amma*,) which had a strong impact on post-revolutionary institutions in Iran. Khomeini developed this theory during his fourteen years' exile in Najaf. Based on his own interpretation of Shii

tradition and jurisprudence, he argued that all the powers of infallible Imams, including that of political leadership, should be transferred to a cleric, who is capable of deriving legal rules from their sources and has the credentials and willingness to rule the Islamic state.[6]

Some leading Shii clerics in Najaf and Qum did not adopt this principle in their jurisprudence and instead maintained their commitment to the limited mandate of a jurist. Among these clerics was Ayatollah Abu al-Qassim al-Khoui, the long-time leader of Najaf's *hawza* and Sistani's mentor, who argued that there was no legal evidence supporting the principle of the general mandate.[7]

Sistani's only public statement on this issue was when he answered a question about his definition of the general mandate of a jurist. He replied that every source of emulation has an authority with regard to matters that must be decided according to Islamic law, such as regarding religious endowments or orphans' possessions that have no designated supervisor. As for broader authority that takes in the entire political order of the Islamic community, Sistani said that such should belong only to a jurist whose eligibility has been proven and who is widely accepted by believers.[8] This rather vague answer reveals more about Sistani's approach than about his ideology. He did not try to offer clear and definite theoretical explanations with respect to these issues but instead conveyed, and modeled, a more pragmatic attitude toward authority. Sistani's representative in Beirut, Hamid al-Khaffaf, observed that "Ayatollah Sistani's attitude towards authority is better understood through his practices, rather than his legal theories." [9]

Ayatollah Mohammed Isaak al-Fayyadh, one of the three most senior clerics in Najaf besides Sistani, has been more explicit and detailed on this issue. He stated that the problem with the theory of the general mandate is not that it is wrong, but that it is inapplicable. He went on to say that there were two forms of Islamic government: one based on the general mandate (Khomeini's model) and one that is not ruled by a jurist but guarantees that all laws are consistent with Islam. The second form, according to Fayyadh, is the one that represented his and Sistani's school.[10]

In 2003, following the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, Sistani faced a unique mixture of challenges and opportunities that played a role in shaping his political engagement and taking his pragmatism to a different level. On the one hand, the downfall of the Sunni-dominated government meant that there was an opportunity to build a state in Iraq in which the Shii demographic majority would be reflected in the make-up of Iraqi governments and in their policies. This is one reason why Sistani insisted on an early election

as the most legitimate process to determine the collective will of the Iraqi people. On the other hand, the regime's collapse emboldened radical and risk-taking groups, such as the movement inherited by Muqtada al-Sadr from his father. Accordingly, Sistani pursued a path that aimed both to encourage state-building processes and to reduce the ability of occupation forces, and of Shii and Sunni radical groups, to direct the trajectory of post-Saddam Iraq.

Sistani's wide involvement in the early stages of the post-Saddam political process and his support for the parliamentary system were necessitated by the need to establish a new order suitable to Iraq's conditions. Unlike Iran, Iraq had a large Sunni community, and its national identity has been shaped by excluding, rather than incorporating, Shiism. Hence, it was very unlikely that a call to form a state based on Shiism, as was the case in post-revolutionary Iran, would succeed in Iraq. That was another reason why electoral democracy became the model envisaged by Sistani for Iraq, even as he urged citizens and political actors to accept the pluralism of Iraqi society. Once this goal had been achieved, he tended to minimize his involvement and avoided commenting on particular political issues, apart from emphasizing general principles such as the importance of elections, religious and sectarian tolerance, and criticism of corruption.

Moreover, Sistani carefully tried to relinquish a deep-seated suspicion of the state, which traditional Shii jurisprudence tended to view as illegitimate. After 2003, he instructed his followers to abandon this attitude, especially in his fatwas commanding them to respect public property and urging state employees to abide by the conditions of their employment contracts with the government. Sistani did not offer a jurisprudence-based ideology in support of political authority, however; his jurisprudence remained largely traditionalist, whereas his political attitudes were inspired by his role as a social leader.

Sistani and Khamenei: Different Policies in Iraq

A Najafi cleric argued that he does not believe there is a "competition" between Najaf and Tehran, "because competition has to be between 'equals,' and we are not equals. They represent a state, with all its resources; we are an institution with just moral authority."[11] In a way, this statement explains disparities between what the *hawza* and Tehran wanted in Iraq. Najaf's *hawza* was more concerned about protecting its own independence, which is increasingly tied to the survivability of the Iraqi state and its relative autonomy from Iran. The Iranian government, on the other hand—especially the most ideological wing, which identifies with the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei—views Iraq as part of a broader regional context of competition with their international and regional rivals. Iran had had a bitter experience when Iraq

was ruled by the regime of Saddam Hussein, who, backed by the West, waged a bloody war in the 1980s against its then nascent Islamic regime. The fall of Saddam Hussein created an opportunity for Iran to reshape the Iraqi state and strengthen its allies within Iraq.

While Sistani and Khamenei agreed with regard to empowering the Shii majority in Iraq, they differed on what type of Shii was to be backed, and to what end. The Iranians supported a broad spectrum of parties and paramilitary groups, with the goal of bringing Iraq further into their orbit and farther from the U.S. Sistani was more concerned with establishing order and resisting radical tendencies.

The gap between the politics of the two sides has been widening as the Iranians have become more assertive in exerting their influence in Iraq, especially following the U.S. withdrawal from the country. Iran's relations with former prime minister Nouri al-Maliki grew stronger as the threats created by the Syrian civil war, followed by a renewed Sunni uprising in Iraq, broadened their common interests. Maliki formed an alliance with groups backed by Iran, such as the Badr organization and Asaib Ahl al-Hak. He also discussed with Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)–backed Shii militias the possibility of forming a military force similar to IRGC in Iraq, even before the invasion of Mosul and other Sunni cities by ISIS.[12] This objective was achieved when the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) were formed following a fatwa from Sistani calling on Iraqis to join military forces in the fight against ISIS. The radical Sunni group has been viewed by Shii clerics and the Shii community as an existential danger, especially given its threats to march on Baghdad and on Shii shrine cities.

Khamenei described Sistani's fatwa as a "divine inspiration,"[13] which was unsurprising given that the fatwa provided IRGC-backed groups with an excuse to expand their role in Iraq. Qassem Suleimani, the leader of the Quds Force, IRGC's special unit for extraterritorial operations, appeared occasionally with the leaders of PMF factions. His appearances were orchestrated to convey the level of IRGC's involvement in military operations in Iraq. Besides him, two of his closest Iraqi allies, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis and Hadi al-Amiri, emerged as the PMF's actual leaders. Iranian-backed factions portrayed themselves as the only committed force in the fight against ISIS, questioning the effectiveness of U.S.-backed Iraqi forces and continuing to label themselves as the "resistance groups," which resonated with Iranian official propaganda.

Realizing that his fatwa was being used to empower Tehran-backed militias and some abusive and sectarian elements, Sistani became more careful in communicating his support for the PMF. Just a few days after Sistani issued his fatwa, his representative in Karbala clarified that the fatwa was not intended to legitimize the formation of irregular paramilitary groups, but rather was promulgated to support Iraqi security forces.[14] Sistani's statements and his representatives' avoided using the term PMF when this term became a reference to IRGC-backed groups, instead adopting the term "volunteers." When some of those groups were accused of committing war crimes or of mistreating Sunni civilians, Sistani's office issued a long proclamation urging fighters to avoid any type of abuses and to exercise a high degree of restraint.[15] Muqtada al-Sadr's militias, the Peace Brigades, and factions loyal to Sistani appeared to be responsive to this message. According to a Sunni politician and commentator, those groups were highly regarded by Sunni civilians, unlike those associated with IRGC, which were viewed as sectarian and revengeful.[16] That is why Sistani found himself closer to Muqtada al-Sadr as the latter went on to emphasize the Iraq-centric orientation of his movement, regularly criticizing the abuses of "sectarian militias."[17]

In November 2016, the Iraqi parliament passed a law making the PMF a formal military institution subject to the authority of the prime minister, who is also the commander-in-chief.[18] A close associate of the *hawza* commented that this law offered an acceptable compromise.[19] On the one hand, the Iraqi army is not yet a reliable force, which means irregular militias are still needed to sustain the recent victories against ISIS. On the other hand, the law would legally subordinate those militias to the Iraqi government, thereby placing more control on the IRGC-backed groups.

Another difference between Sistani and the Iranians was their attitude toward former prime minister Maliki. As relations between Iran and Maliki were improving, Sistani became more concerned about the prime minister's increasing authoritarianism and his exclusivist politics. Confronted by Iranian support for Maliki's bid to stay in office for a third term after the April 2014 election, Sistani made his objection to Maliki public. After receiving a letter from members in the leadership of the Dawa Party asking him for advice, he urged the party to select a candidate for the position of prime minister who enjoyed broad acceptance in Iraq.[20] Sistani's position influenced the Iranians and led them to withdraw their support for Maliki and accept the premiership of Haider al-Abadi, who did not have strong ties with Tehran.

Compromises between Khamenei and Sistani on these issues indicated that the two had an interest in containing their disagreements. Sistani avoided commenting on Iranian political affairs, despite being himself an Iranian citizen. There was an implicit understanding that Iran was

the domain of the Supreme Leader and that the only role Sistani could play there was confined to the management of his religious institutions and charities. Today, Sistani is one of the most religiously emulated clerics in Iran, but he has no political voice in the country. In Iraq, the story is different. The moral authority of Najaf's *hawza*, which has sometimes been expressed as political influence, has become one of the main characteristics of post-Saddam Iraq, a reality Khamenei has accepted, at least as long as Sistani is there.

Post-Sistani *Hawza* and the Iranian Role

The Hawza after Sistani

How will the *hawza*, its role and influence, be reshaped after Sistani's death? The quick answer is that, although Sistani's non-ideological line will continue to be adopted by several senior clerics, none is likely to fill the vacuum left by him. This has to do with Sistani's persona, the conditions that consolidated his authority, and the competition that his departure will launch.

Persona: Sistani arrived in Najaf in the early 1950s and remained close to its leading source of emulation, al-Khoui, who later granted him a certificate of *ijtihad*[21] when he was, according to the *hawza*'s standards, still young.[22] By adopting quietism and focusing on scholarly work, Sistani built a reputation as a highly pious, knowledgeable, and ascetic cleric. When he became politically active after 2003, Sistani cleverly built the image of a wise and reliable leader. His shying away from media appearances at the same time as he broadly engaged in political affairs has only strengthened his appeal as a leader who masterfully stood above political disputes and ideologies. Most of his actions—and, when circumstances warranted, his inaction—were taken after thorough thinking and investigation.

None of the top high-ranking clerics in Najaf today seems to have the same charisma or the same record. The tradition in Najaf has given clerics of Iranian or Arab origin a better chance to lead the *hawza* than those of other nationalities. (Two of the current senior clerics, for example—Mohammed Isaak al-Fayyadh and Basheer al-Najafi—originated respectively from Afghanistan and Pakistan.) This has to do with the size of their clerical networks and the extent of their sources of funding. Iranian clerics in Najaf were empowered by their broad networks and long-standing tenure, which extended over the last three centuries, since the migration of senior clerics to Najaf following the collapse of the Safavid Empire in the eighteenth century.[23] Iran has been a key source of funding and a main arena where the status of religious sources of

emulation had to be projected and legitimized. Today, this is reflected in the huge assets and financial resources that Sistani has in Iran under the supervision of his highly influential son-in-law, Jawad al-Shahristani.

Moreover, some potential successors have been less careful than Sistani in distancing themselves from political preferences, which has weakened their ability to generate consensus around their leadership. Basheer al-Najafi, for example, has been very vocal in his criticism of Maliki, sometimes expressing opinions of a sectarian bent. The same can be said about Mohammed Said al-Hakim, who is related to the Hakim family, which leads the major Shii party ISCI.[24] This is why many in Najaf expect a long transition and a period of uncertainty before a more qualified leader, if any, emerges in the *hawza*.

Conditions: Sistani's leadership was made possible by the nature of the conditions in post-2003 Iraq. The power vacuum created the need for a moral authority to wisely guide the Shii community and voice its concerns. In addition, there was a complex relationship of both competition and collaboration between the United States and Iran in Iraq, which meant that neither side could impose its full will or ignore the other's. Sistani appeared to both the Americans and the Iranians as a balancer who could bridge between their opposing interests and at the same time provide an indigenous Iraqi voice. Moreover, rivalries between the three major Shii political groups—ISCI, Sadrists, and Dawa—and between politicians returning from exile and the grassroots movements created the need for a guarantor of Shii consensus—and only Sistani, the highest source of emulation, could play this role.

Those conditions helped consolidate Sistani's authority and consequently weakened those who challenged him. As a result, the process of building the "new Iraq" progressed simultaneously with the assertion of Sistani's religious leadership. An illustration of this relation beyond direct political dynamics can be seen in the institutionalization of his role in the administration of the holy shrines in Najaf, Karbala, and other Iraqi cities, which became critical after 2003, when Shias in Iraq and abroad gained more freedom to practice their rituals and visit the shrines.

Still, the post-2003 power vacuum incited a competition between different factions to control these shrines and claim their material and symbolic resources. Previously the shrines had been controlled by the government, which appointed their staff, who were often led by a Baath party member. The current law of Shii endowments, which Sistani's office pushed for, has changed this arrangement by stipulating that the shrines' chief administrators must

be chosen in coordination with the highest religious source of emulation.[25] This arrangement not only resolved the dangerous competition to control the shrines, but it was also instrumental in the consolidation of Sistani's authority. Today, representatives of Sistani in Karbala's major shrines deliver their leader's message to people every Friday, thereby asserting his leadership and the state's recognition of it.

Whether this arrangement will survive after Sistani is questionable. On the one hand, it will give future governments more leverage in deciding who is the *hawza*'s leader. On the other hand, it will encourage several religious figures to claim this authority and seek to benefit from this unique association with the holy shrines.

Competition: In Najaf, talks on the *hawza*'s fate after Sistani are no longer a whisper. Sistani himself is trying to strengthen the *hawza* and its centrality in the Shii world, mainly by building new schools and learning centers to attract students from all over the Shii world. One of those recently built schools is Imam Ali school, which follows very strict standards in its admissions policy, with the objective of preparing highly qualified clerics.[26] The objective of such schools is to improve the quality of scholarship in Najaf as it competes with other learning centers, especially that of Qum.

Despite this effort, some experts[27] argue that the next most emulated cleric might be based in Qum, given that the scholarship in Qum's *hawza* has been advancing during the long period of stagnation in Najaf as a result of the former regime's restrictions and the security situation in Iraq. But it can also be argued that Tehran would prefer to see the most emulated cleric as either an ally of the Iranian state or as someone living in Najaf, where his large base of emulators would not represent an internal challenge to the state. The Islamic regime in Iran succeeded in imposing more control on Qum for the sake of preventing it from producing sources of emulation that might challenge the ruling cleric. Therefore, Najaf might be a safer place for the next source of emulation if he sought more autonomy from Iran—although the best outcome for Tehran remains one wherein both Qum and Najaf are subservient to its influence.

Evidently, Tehran will be pleased if religious authority in Najaf is held by a cleric who is loyal to its regime, such as Ayatollah Mahmood Hashimi al-Shahrurdi, the former head of the Iranian Judiciary, a supporter of Khomeini, and a likely successor to Khamenei. Shahrurdi, who had a long-time connection with the Dawa Party, was planning to return to Najaf after the many years he spent in Iran; former prime minister Maliki seems to have supported his return. Realizing the political calculations behind those plans, however, a joint committee representing Najaf's senior clerics made the unusual decision not to accept in their seminars any student attending Sharurdi's class and receiving a salary from his office. Although this threat has not been implemented, it was perhaps instrumental in impelling Shahrurdi to delay his return.[28]

The challenge to Najaf's authority, however, does not come only from the militant, ideological line supported by Tehran, but also from radical clerics, such as Mahmood al-Hassani al-Sarkhi, a self-proclaimed source of emulation who was a student of Mohammed Mohammed Sadiq al-Sadr.[29] Sarkhi portrayed himself as a representative of the Arab religious authority, directing his criticism both at the Iranian influence and at clerics of Iranian origin, such as Sistani. Sarkhi, whose religious credentials were not recognized by Najaf, has a limited support base in parts of southern Iraq. His supporters clashed with Iraqi security forces on several occasions, the last of which led him to flee Karbala, where he had briefly been seen, and hide in an unknown place.[30]

Another, more serious, threat to both Najaf's traditions and Iran's influence is the Shirazi trend, led by clerics based in Karbala and outside Iraq. In the course of their long-standing activity in the Gulf, Shirazi clerics secured significant resources and built a broad network of preachers, institutions, and media outlets across the Shii world. The Shirazi trend is known today for its advocacy of literalism and ritualism—along with its provocative anti-Sunni narratives—that both the Iranian government and most of Najaf's clerics view as backward and shortsighted. While pro-Iranian figures such as the leader of Hezbollah, Hassan Nasr Allah, publicly criticized this trend,[31] Sistani was reluctant to openly express his objection to it. According to Sistani's representative, Najaf does not think this issue can be resolved through fatwas or public statements,[32] although Sistani's office did issue instructions for followers regarding their religious rituals, encouraging more pious and less controversial practices.[33] Also, it can be argued that Najaf views the growing hostility between the Shirazi trend and Tehran as another opportunity to play a balancing role in the Shii world.

In this increasingly competitive sphere, Najaf's prominent religious families and high-ranking clerics might find a common interest in preserving the *hawza*'s status post-Sistani by trying to swiftly build a consensus on his successor. Still, the selection of a new supreme source of emulation is a non-institutionalized process and one heavily contingent on political and social conditions, as well as on the character of various candidates and on clerical balances of power. There are no written rules

regulating this process, and even if Sistani selected a successor, his selection might be challenged by others afterwards. This makes it unlikely for the position to be filled smoothly and rapidly. More likely, there will be a fragmented spectacle wherein several clerics compete for this status, and for the power and resources emanating from it.

Implications

In post-2003 Iraq, Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani acted as an extra-constitutional force seeking to sustain the political system while pushing it to deliver better governance. He used his religious authority to legitimize the political process and keep pressure on the elite to act more responsibly. In this way, Sistani has both weakened the radical elements and at the same time provided an accepted channel through which to communicate popular demands. Additionally, he offered a third path between activism and quietism, repositioning Najaf as the representative of a pragmatic Shiism. Sistani managed to preserve his moral authority without having to institutionalize his political influence or tie his religious authority to a particular political ideology.

A vacuum in the leadership of the *hawza* or the lack of a leader who can competently play the role Sistani has played means that the Iraqi political elite will tend to act without the restraint provided by Najaf's moral authority. The feeling that there is no ultimate authority to refer to, or that this authority is not credible enough, will prompt political actors to pursue maximalist policies. In this respect, competition among Shii groups to reshape the balance of power in their favor will further destabilize the country. This competition is likely to benefit groups with radical tendencies who will try to gain ground by adopting populist agendas—and, perhaps, by using violence to expand their influence.

Additionally, with the potential absence of agreement between major Shii Islamist groups, each will seek to empower a religious figure associated with its own interests. Tehran will back clerics who are more susceptible to its influence, while seeking to manage the fragmentation rather than prevent it. From Tehran's perspective, there will be opportunities arising from intra-clerical competition, with no cleric appearing to be strong enough to dominate the *hawza*, like Sistani did, or weak enough to give up the ambition for religious leadership.

Of course, alternative scenarios can be imagined based on who dies first, Sistani or Khamenei, and the nature of the conflicts that might result from each event. If the nature of Iranian policies and alliances has not changed by the time of Sistani's departure, however, the implications for Iraqi-Iranian relations could be significant. On the one hand, as the only well established authority in the Shii world, the Iranian Supreme Leader could emerge as the key power broker and the ultimate guide for competing Shii groups in Iraq (a role that he is now sharing with Sistani). If so, Tehran would gain even more leverage in dictating the trajectory of the political process in Iraq. On the other hand, Iran will have more incentives to push the process in favor of its allies, thereby empowering the more radical and ideological elements in Iraq and providing them with resources and tools to amplify their political weight. This would have the potential to further destabilize Iraq, weaken its autonomy, and threaten its integrity—the very consequences that Sistani's approach has sought to prevent.

Endnotes

1   Ahmed Waheed, "Shari' al-Khomeini yutheer jadalan fil-Najaf,"*Al-Hayat*, February 22, 2015 [In Arabic].

2   Interview with the author, Najaf, March 2016.

3   Mehdi Khalaji, "The Last Marja: Sistani and the End of Traditional Religious Authority in Shiism," *Washington Institute for Near East Policy* (Policy Focus #59), September 2006.*

4   Louis Imbert, "En Irak, Ali Al-Sistani, un prophète de l'ombre," *Le Monde*, January 6, 2017 [In French].*

5   In Shiism, it is believed that the twelfth Imam, al-Mahdi, has not died, but went into hiding from his enemies and will reappear at the end of times to establish the legitimate Caliphate on the earth.

6   For further details, see Kadivar Muhsin, *Naẓariyāt al-ḥukm fi al-fiqh al-Shīʿī : buḥūth fi wilāyat al-faqīh* [Arabic translation by Rasha al-Ameer and Luqman Saleem] (Beirut: Dar al-Jadid, 2000).

7   Al-Khoui, "Sirat annajat," *Al-Seraj*, http://www.alseraj.net/maktaba/kotob/feqh/serat1/html/bo/sirat/1/index.htm. [In Arabic]*

8   Website of Ayatollah Sistani's office: http://www.sistani.org/arabic/qa/0755/.*

9   Interview with the author, Beirut, December 2016.

10 Mohammed Isaak al-Fayyadh, "Bayan hawla Ta'reef al-hukuma al-islamiyya," *Al-Fayadh*, March 1, 2004 [In Arabic].*

11 The speaker preferred to remain anonymous. Interview with the author, Najaf, November 2016.

12 This was confirmed by a Shii politician who preferred to remain anonymous. Interview with the author, Najaf, November 2016.

13 *Bratha News*, August 2014, http://burathanews.com/arabic/news/246324 [In Arabic].*

14 Website of Ayatollah Sistani's office, June 2014: http://www.sistani.org/arabic/archive/24915/[In Arabic].*

15 Website of Ayatollah Sistani's office: http://www.sistani.org/arabic/archive/25034/ [In Arabic].*

16 Yahya al-Kubaisi, interview with the author, Milan, November 2016.

17 "Sadr yuhajim almilitiat," *Alaraby al-Jadeed*, January 2016 [In Arabic].

18 "Iraq Parliament Passes Law Legalising PMF Shii Militias," *Middle East Monitor*, November 26, 2016.

19 Skype interview with the author, December 2016.

20 Details were published (in Arabic) on Sistani's website, accessed on March 30, 2016.

21 This type of certificate states that a certain cleric has managed to reach the level of *mujtahid*—that is, the ability to derive Islamic rules from their sources.

22 For more details on Sistani's official biography, see his website: http://www.sistani.org/arabic/data/1/[In Arabic]*

23 For details, see Said Amir Arjomand, ed., *Authority and Political Culture in Shiism* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1988), and Yitzhak Nakash. *The Shiis of Iraq* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003).

24 The Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq, which was founded in Iran in 1988.

25 See the *Atabat* law, No. 19, 2014, http://wiki.dorar-aliraq.net/iraqilaws/law/19517.html [In Arabic].*

26 Conversation with religious students in Najaf, November 2016.

27 Imbert, "En Irak, Ali Al-Sistani, un prophète de l'ombre."

28 Conversation with religious students in Najaf, November 2016.

29 The father of Muqtada al-Sadr; he emerged in the 1990s as the representative of the activist school and was an advocate of the general mandate. He was assassinated by Saddam's regime in 1999.

30 *Al-Mustaqbal News*, July 2014, https://www.almustaqbalnews.net/137531 [In Arabic].*

31 "Prime Time News - 12/10/2016," *MTV Lebanon News*, October 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e7Yz0y-eDW8 [In Arabic].*

32 Hamid al-Khaffaf. Interview with the author, Beirut, December 2016.

33 Website of Sistani's office. http://www.sistani.org/arabic/qa/0529/ [In Arabic].*

*Weblinks are available in the online version at
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