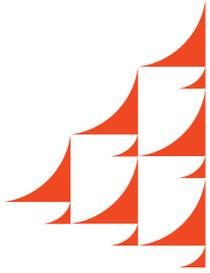


The Arab Gulf States  
Institute in Washington  
Building bridges of understanding



## After Sistani: Is There a Successor to Continue His Legacy?

Geneive Abdo



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## About the Author

**Geneive Abdo** is a fellow at the Wilson Center in Washington, DC. She was most recently a visiting fellow at the Brookings Doha Center. Her current research focuses on the shifting political and religious alliances within Shia communities in the Middle East. She has worked at several Washington-based think tanks, including the Atlantic Council and the Stimson Center. She was a non-resident scholar at the Brookings Institution from 2013-17. She was also a lecturer at the Elliott School of International Affairs at the George Washington University from 2016-19.

Her vast publications include monographs, books, and works in scholarly journals. Her newest publication is a chapter in the edited volume, *The Gulf Cooperation Council at Forty: Risk and Opportunity in a Changing World*, forthcoming from Brookings Press, July 2022. Abdo is the author of four books on the Middle East, including *The New Sectarianism: The Arab Uprisings and the Rebirth of the Shi'a-Sunni Divide* (Oxford University Press, 2016). Her other books, also published by Oxford, include a groundbreaking study of the Muslim Brotherhood's rise to power in Egypt. Abdo has received many awards for her scholarship, including the prestigious John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship. Abdo also was the recipient of the Nieman Fellowship for study at Harvard University.

She was formerly the liaison officer for the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations, an initiative established by former Secretary-General Kofi Annan, which aimed to improve relations between Islamic and Western societies. Before joining the U.N., Abdo was a foreign correspondent, where her 20-year career focused on coverage of the Middle East and the Muslim world. From 1998 to 2001, Abdo was the Iran correspondent for *The Guardian* and a regular contributor to *The Economist* and the *International Herald Tribune*. She was the first American journalist to be based in Iran since the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

Her thousands of articles and commentaries on Islam and the Middle East have appeared in *The New York Times*, *Newsweek*, *Foreign Affairs*, *Foreign Policy Magazine*, *The Washington Post*, and other publications. She is a frequent speaker at universities, think tanks, and international institutions in the United States, Europe, and the Middle East.

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## Executive Summary

For Shia Muslims, the question of who should have spiritual and political authority to lead the community of believers is vital to practicing the faith. Since the 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani has become a focal point of influence, not only for Iraqi Shias, but for Shias around the world. His fatwas, or religious rulings, have changed the course of history in Iraq and the region. Now that he is 92 years old, Shia Muslims in Iraq and elsewhere are concerned about who could succeed him, particularly because he has crafted a nuanced practice of clerical authority that could be applicable only to him. And he has served as a staunch opponent to the concept of the guardianship of the jurist – *vilayet e-faqih* – the Islamic governance enforced in Iran. His eventual passing is likely also to become a geopolitical issue: World leaders, particularly those in the West, worry his successor may not be as skilled in walking a fine line between weighing in on state affairs and prioritizing the interests of Iraqi citizens – working to achieve Iraqi sovereignty from its most intrusive neighbor, Iran.

## Introduction

Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, the outside world has developed a general impression of Shia clerical authority. Due to the repression and authoritarianism in Iran carried out by Grand Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the leader of the revolution, and his successor, Grand Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, having a Shia cleric running a state seemed to translate into human rights abuses for Iran's citizens and geopolitical threats to Middle Eastern neighboring states and the United States.

However, 24 years after Khomeini rose to power in Iran, the world was introduced to another form of clerical influence – that of Iraq's Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani, who has played a key role in Iraq's religious and political spheres since the 2003 U.S.-led invasion that toppled Saddam Hussein. From 1979 to 2003, clerics in Iraq confined their role to the religious sphere not because of theology but due to the dictatorial nature of Saddam's regime. That shifted with Sistani, who was not only instrumental in drafting Iraq's Constitution after the invasion; he also mobilized Iraqis against the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant in 2014, and he has supported the civil society protest movement against the government that began in 2019.

Unlike Iran's model of the guardianship of the jurist, *vilayet e-faqih*, whereby a cleric, as supreme leader, is officially head of state and has absolute power, Sistani has held no formal political office. Sistani's opposition to the form of clerical rule in Iran is based on traditional Shia doctrine, which reserves the right to rule a state for the Prophet Muhammad and his 12 successors, or imams, and their descendants. The juxtaposition of the three clerics – Sistani, Khomeini, and then Khamenei – has often confused the West's understanding of Shia clerical involvement in state affairs. This comparison sometimes invites a simplistic view of Shia religious authority whereby Sistani is said to be from the "quietest" tradition within Shia Islam, which implies he completely stays out of politics, unlike the Iranian model. But, in reality, Sistani's role in Iraq is filled with complexities. His formal title is *marja al-taqlid*, which means point of reference for an ayatollah. He is neither head of state nor interested in running the government. His authority was never formalized. Yet, at times, he has asserted his influence

marking turning points in Iraq's postwar trajectory. As Harith Hasan Al-Qarawee, a leading scholar on Iraqi religious authority, put it: Sistani "blurred the lines between formality and informality and created a shared space of governance."<sup>1</sup>

For Shia Muslims, the question of who should have spiritual and political authority to lead the community is vital to practicing the faith. Unlike Sunni Islam, which lacks an organized hierarchy, Shiism is built on the pillar of the imam, a leader of religious knowledge and a descendant of the Prophet Muhammad. In the absence of the Hidden Imam, who Shia Muslims await to return to Earth to serve as the religious and political authority, jurists are given the duty to provide Islamic interpretation on moral and judicial matters. This is known as the "quietist" school of thought to which Sistani has subscribed, but Khamenei and Khomeini have not. The highest-ranking religious authorities, *marjas*, serve as references in interpreting Islamic practice and have the right to issue religious rulings. His fatwas, or religious rulings, have changed the course of history in Iraq and the region.

Now that he is 92 years old, Shia Muslims in Iraq and elsewhere are concerned about who could possibly succeed him.

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*Sistani has become a focal point of influence, not only for Iraqi Shias, but for Shias around the world.*

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There are two general schools of thought regarding life after Sistani. Some religious scholars in Najaf believe that even if his successor is not as skilled as Sistani, the thousand-year-old religious institutions centered in Najaf will prevail and function as before. In other words, religious authority does not depend upon one man. The other school of thought fears Najaf's authority in the religious and political spheres will suffer, particularly because Sistani may have crafted a nuanced practice of clerical authority that is likely to be applicable only to him.

The holy city of Najaf, where Sistani lives and works, is the oldest scholarly place for Shias and the resting place of Imam Ali, one of the most revered imams. In fact, the four most sacred shrines in Shiism are in Iraqi centers, such as Kufa, Baghdad, Najaf, and Karbala. No matter who succeeds Sistani, there is little risk a form of Islamic theocracy will take hold in Iraq primarily because of the quasi-democratic rule of the Iraqi state and the scant support within the *marjiyya*, or religious establishment, in Iraq for such a form of religious governance – anathema to Shia tradition dating back 1,400 years, which generally requires clerics to stay out of political matters.

This paper examines the discussions in the holy Shia city of Najaf regarding religious authority after Sistani based upon interviews with religious scholars located there. Such discussions are officially taboo; it is frowned upon to speak publicly about the succession while the ayatollah is still alive. Still, because of Sistani's huge stature, there are open fears of his passing. Will Sistani be the last ayatollah of such grand standing who is an authority for Shia Muslims worldwide? Or, are these fears unfounded, particularly because they arise after the death of every grand ayatollah of Sistani's stature? This paper also examines Sistani's legacy and compares his religious thoughts to those of his contemporaries, who have shared his ideas on the role of the state in an Islamic society and the rights of citizens in that state.

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<sup>1</sup> Harith Hasan Al-Qarawee, "The 'Formal' Marja: Shi'i Clerical Authority and the State in Post-2003 Iraq," *British Journal of Middle East Studies* 46, no. 3 (February 2, 2018).

## Sistani's Legacy

Sistani's fatwas and statements are steeped in pragmatism in sharp contrast to the Iranian model, which is based upon ideology and the institutionalization of theocratic rule. A long-kept secret regarding many of the *marjiyya* in Qom is that they never accepted theocratic rule, as it was applied by Khomeini and then Khamenei.<sup>2</sup> Sistani's mentor also believed there was no evidence in doctrine supporting clerical rule as interpreted by Khomeini. 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."<sup>3</sup>

Sistani has kept religion out of the state, while also serving as a guide in religious matters. Additionally, he has acted as a watchdog and intervened dramatically at times when he believed the state was at risk of deterioration.

Although no statistics are available, an estimated 80% of Shia worshippers worldwide follow Sistani.<sup>4</sup> Unlike Khamenei, whose appointment as supreme leader was fiercely contested among the Iranian *marjiyya* in Qom after the death of Khomeini, Sistani's rise after the death in 1992 of his mentor, Grand Ayatollah Sayyid Abu al-Qasim al-Musawi al-Khoei, was widely accepted. Khoei, who was born in Iran, is considered one of the most influential scholars among the Twelver Shia – the school of thought most Shia Muslims, including those in Iraq and Iran, follow. Evidence of a similar or even greater popularity for Sistani is found in the

vast national and international networks of religious, educational, and charitable institutions that his followers finance through religious taxes – *khums* and *zakat*. Since 2003, Sistani's network of religious associations, with offices

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and seminaries in Afghanistan, Britain, Kuwait, Iran, and Syria, are the most well funded, challenged in strength only by those of Khamenei. Sistani's high stature predating 2003 and the special conditions after the invasion – a huge political power vacuum within the state, massive sectarian violence, primarily between Shias and Sunnis, and conflict between Iraqis and the U.S.-led coalition – combined to make him the greatest moral authority in postwar Iraq, and thus, the leader of the *hawza*, which consists of the clerical networks, schools, charities, and other institutions that constitute religious authority in Najaf. Another important change also enhanced Sistani's power: Under Saddam, the Shia shrines were controlled by the government, which appointed the staff, and were led by a Baath Party member. After 2003, a new law was implemented stating that the shrines' chief administrators must be appointed based upon Sistani's recommendations, in his capacity as the grand *marja*, and work with the highest religious source of emulation. This change allowed Sistani to consolidate his power and authorize his representative to give Friday religious sermons, which the state does not control.

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<sup>2</sup> Author interviews with dozens of Iranian clerics, Qom, 1997-2001.

<sup>3</sup> Harith Hasan al-Qarawee, "Sistani, Iran, and the Future of Shii Clerical Authority in Iraq," *Crown Center for Middle East Studies*, January 2017.

<sup>4</sup> Mehdi Khalaji, "The Last Marja: Sistani and the End to Traditional Religious Authority in Shiism," *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, September 2006.

When the Shias, who are about 65% of the Iraqi population, emerged as the largest and most powerful political group after 2003, the shift from Sunni domination under Saddam to Shia domination was a double-edged sword for the marjiyya. On the one hand, the political influence of the Shia Islamist parties spilled over into clerical circles and contributed to their rise in stature in the public square. But it also meant that, by association, Shia clerics appeared to be responsible for the Shia parties' blunders in running the state. Thus, Sistani has been careful to call out Shia politicians when he believes they are harming the public good.

This is exemplified in Sistani's fatwas and speeches since 2003. Those that made the most impact fall into three broad categories: his fight against sectarian conflict; his condemnation of government corruption, including corruption committed by Shia Islamist parties; and his support for Iraqi civil society, including his defense of human rights. Sistani has been committed to an Iraqi state that is neither theocratic nor completely secular but one in which Islam is recognized as the primary source of law for a majority of Iraqi citizens.

Sistani issued a fatwa in 2013, for example, denouncing sectarianism as other clerics were fanning the flames of the Shia-Sunni divide. "This is to be condemned and denounced and is contrary to the instructions of the Shiite Imams," stated the fatwa.<sup>5</sup> Another important statement from Sistani concerned an attack in February 2006 on the sacred Shia Samara shrine. Sunni extremists reportedly blasted the dome of the mosque, which prompted widespread

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*Sistani's statements suggest he believes that, when it comes to governance, all ethnic and religious identities should be included.*

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Shia protests and attacks on Sunni mosques.<sup>6</sup> Sistani described this period as a critical stage and encouraged Shias to restrain from revenge. The worst sectarian violence occurred in 2007-08 in brutal street fighting between Shias and Sunnis, known as the "sectarian events," and many Iraqis were displaced as children by violence. Former President George W. Bush at the time praised Sistani for trying to unite the country, citing Sistani's strong statement denouncing what he called "sectarian sedition." Sistani also urged all Iraqis "not to be dragged into committing acts that would only please enemies."<sup>7</sup> In June 2007, Sunni extremists bombed the mosque again, destroying its golden dome. Sectarian violence raged, and Sistani called for calm.<sup>8</sup>

Sistani's statements suggest he believes that, when it comes to governance, all ethnic and religious identities should be included. He has always been against the sectarian power-sharing agreement, or *muhasasa*, implemented after the 2003 invasion, which favored the majority Shia population at the expense of the Sunnis. When asked if Shias should hold special places in government, Sistani replied: "Shia want what all Iraqis want, the right to self-determination." According to Iraqi scholars who specialize in the clergy, during the height of sectarian violence, Sistani and other marjas feared that the Shias would be forever blamed for marginalizing the Sunni population. This was one of Sistani's many reasons for trying to encourage an end to the sectarian strife or at least to minimize it. And some religious scholars believe he has

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<sup>5</sup> Ali Mamouri, "Sistani Issues Fatwa Against Sectarian Violence in Iraq," *Al-Monitor*, October 11, 2013.

<sup>6</sup> Robert F. Worth, "Blast Destroys Shrine in Iraq, Setting Off Sectarian Fury," *The New York Times*, February 22, 2006.

<sup>7</sup> "President Discusses Freedom and Democracy in Iraq," White House statement, March 2006.

<sup>8</sup> "Top Cleric Calls for Calm After Shia Mosque Attack," *The Irish Times*, June 13, 2007.

succeeded. Speaking about Sistani, Sayeed Ezzedine al Hakim, the son of Grand Ayatollah Mohammad al Hakim, who died in 2021 and was considered the most likely successor to Sistani, said, "Whether Islamic or non-Islamic, and even parties that are Shia but differ with other Shia parties, have great respect for the reference. And even non-Muslims, Christians have great respect for the reference."<sup>9</sup>

Another hallmark of Sistani's legacy is his opposition to various Iraqi governments that have ruled since 2003 due to profound corruption inside the state. Over the years, Sistani has been known for snubbing Iraqi prime ministers and other high-ranking officials, who attempt to visit him at his home, as a sign of his displeasure with the government. Yet, he has welcomed foreign dignitaries for years on a regular basis.

After the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant occupied one-third of Iraqi territory, in 2014 Sistani issued perhaps his most written about fatwa calling upon all Iraqis to take arms against the group.<sup>10</sup> In 2016, Sistani blamed former Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki for the rise of Sunni extremists because Maliki had either presided over or initiated government policies marginalizing the Sunnis, including their place in government positions and the economy. During a Friday prayer service in Najaf in 2016, Abdul Mahdi al-Karbalai, Sistani's representative, said Sistani believed Maliki was to blame for the rise of ISIL.<sup>11</sup> Sistani also said government corruption was at least partially to blame for ISIL finding fertile ground in Iraq, particularly from 2014-17 when the group occupied parts of the country. Iraq is among the countries with the highest corruption rates in the world, according to Transparency International, which ranked Iraq 169 out of 175 countries in its 2017 Corruption Perceptions Index.<sup>12</sup> In 2020, Iraq was included in the "alert" category on the Fragile States Index, ranking the 17th worst globally out of 178 countries.<sup>13</sup> Sistani criticized Maliki before 2016, while he was in power and, in fact, was influential in preventing the former prime minister from serving a third term. Iraqi prime ministers are appointed after elections are held, and, after the 2014 elections, Sistani made his opposition to Maliki well known. At that time, the Iranian regime was pushing for Maliki but withdrew support once Sistani made his opposition known.

The 2018 parliamentary elections and subsequent government formation were followed by chaos, particularly a long stalemate over who would become the next prime minister. Sistani called for a "new, competent, transparent courageous and honest" prime minister who had not held a previous government position. Otherwise, he said, the "marjiyya will continue to boycott government officials and will remain the voice of the deprived and the defender of their rights."<sup>14</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Author interview in Najaf, May 2022.

<sup>10</sup> "Iraq Conflict: Shia Cleric Sistani Issues Call to Arms," *BBC*, June 13, 2014.

<sup>11</sup> Ali Sanger, "Al-Sistani Blames Maliki for Iraq Crisis," *Kurdistan TV*, January 2, 2016.

<sup>12</sup> World Bank, *World Development Report 2011: Conflict, Security, and Development* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2011); Transparency International, "Corruption Perceptions Index 2017," February 21, 2018.

<sup>13</sup> Nate Haken and Sarah Cockey, "Iraq's Improving Trajectory," *Fragile States Index*, May 10, 2020.

<sup>14</sup> *Bayan maktab Samahat al-Sayyid hawla l-intikhabat al-niyabiya fil-Iraq amm 2018*, al-Najaf al-Ashraf, 17 shaban 1439/4 May 2018 (Statement of Sayyid's office on the 2018 parliamentary elections in Iraq).

Sistani's criticism of various Shia-led Iraqi governments has often gone hand in hand with his support for civil society opposition movements. The grand ayatollah backed the protest movement that began in 2019, and his advisors held meetings with civil society activists in Najaf.<sup>15</sup> His representatives also provided material support to protest camps, including portable toilets, water, and food. Sistani's interests and those of the protesters have converged on a few points: They oppose government corruption; they blame older generation Shia Islamist parties, which have been in power since shortly after the U.S.-led invasion, for the corruption, government mismanagement, and lack of basic services; and they condemn Iranian meddling in Iraqi affairs, particularly Iranian-backed Shia militias under the umbrella group the Popular Mobilization Forces, which act independently of the Iraqi army and are responsible for kidnapping, killing, and injuring unarmed protesters. These groups have also killed high-profile Iraqi academics and researchers who have publicly exposed the militias' activities. Mohamed Alquraishy, a professor at Kufa University, said there are fears within civil society over Sistani's passing because "of the gains and national momentum" activists made with his endorsement of their movements.<sup>16</sup> While Sistani's support certainly gave credibility to the protest movement, his 2014 fatwa calling on Iraqis to fight ISIL inadvertently contributed to the Popular Mobilization Forces' increase in power in Iraq.

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Sistani's condemnation of the militias' violence against demonstrators has contributed to the younger generation's respect for him – even as they denounce Islamist parties in government and call for a secular state with no role for the clergy. The young activists' condemnation of the marjiyya is often interpreted in the West as sentiment that is anti-Islamic – against all religious figures. But their views, in fact, are more complicated. "The rising generation of youth differentiates between religious parties, which sometimes stand against the reference" referring to Sistani, "and the reference itself, which always supports youth demands for change and political representation," explained Shaheed Al Helfi, a professor of Islamic jurisprudence at Kufa University in Najaf.<sup>17</sup>

Indeed, Sistani's support early into the protest movement in 2019 gained widespread public support. In a November 15, 2019 statement published on his website and read by his representative during Friday prayers in Karbala, Sistani clarified his position of "supporting the protests," and he ensured "that they are peaceful and free from any form of violence."<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> For a detailed study of the Iraqi clergy's relationship with the protest movement, see Geneive Abdo, "The Long Game in Iraq: Shia Clerics, Activists Find Common Cause to Confront the State," *Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington*, May 17, 2021.

<sup>16</sup> Author interview in Najaf, May 2022.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> *Nas al-khutbat alati 'alqaha mumathil almarjeiat Fadilat Al'alamt al-Sayyid Ahmed al-Saafy fi yawm aljumeat* (17 Rabi' Al'awal 1441 AH) 15 November 2019.

## Sistani's Ideas of Democracy in the Context of Contemporary Shia Scholars

Although the comparison is not often made, Sistani's idea of the democratic spirit within Shiism is shared among some reformist theologians in Iran. Particularly, the late Grand Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri, who had been designated as Khomeini's successor until 1989, fell from grace for opposing supreme clerical rule, including authoritarianism as part of it, and advocating for some of the same ideas Sistani embraces. Montazeri, who died in December 2009, defended democratic Shia governance against authoritarian rule. In a groundbreaking and controversial interview in 2000, while he was under house arrest, he wrote as part of his responses to the interview questions: "Islam supports the separation of powers and does not recognize the concentration of power in the hand of a fallible human being."<sup>19</sup> At the time, Montazeri said his 10,000-word response to the author's questions should be considered a fatwa regarding state power in Iran. Both Montazeri and Sistani subscribe to the ideas of Grand Ayatollah Muhammad Husayn Naini, a 19th-century theologian who believed only a democratically elected government had legitimate power. He suggested such a government should assign Shia clerics duties but keep them away from day-to-day activities, ensuring the separation of religion and state. Like Sistani, Montazeri was an advocate for human rights and was hugely popular among university students in the decade before his death. Montazeri was in step with the younger generation's views – still true today – that the Islamic Republic of Iran was neither a republic nor was it Islamic. Montazeri said, "The system has no religious merit."<sup>20</sup>

### After Sistani

Unlike the succession of the Catholic pope, when cardinals meet at the Vatican and select a new pope through secret ballot, there are no official rules governing the selection of the grand marja, and there are no formal steps to reach a decision. The novel idea of the marja is relatively new; it evolved in the 19th century and never became institutionalized. As scholars in Iraq explained, the selection also depends upon the sociopolitical context at the time and whether a candidate has the support of society. In the past, when senior clerics disagreed on the choice and the position, it was shared among several clerics. It is unclear if such a scenario will emerge this time, particularly because there is no apparent successor to Sistani. Thus, the transition to another grand ayatollah could take months or even years. Sistani's own appointment after the death of Khomeini took six years, but that was during difficult and complicated times when the clerics suffered repression under Saddam's regime.

According to religious scholars, private discussions in Najaf and Karbala are ongoing in preparation for Sistani's passing. "There is no doubt that there are ongoing discussions. The topic concerns everyone," said Sayeed Ezzedine al Hakim.<sup>21</sup> Such discussions likely include the ayatollahs considered to be possible successors: Mohammed Baqir al-Irawani; Hadi al Radi; and Riyadh al Hakim, the son of the late Grand Ayatollah Mohammad al Hakim, who was believed to

<sup>19</sup> Geneive Abdo, "Re-Thinking the Islamic Republic: A 'Conversation' With Ayatollah Hossein 'Ali Montazeri," *Middle East Journal* 55, no. 1, (Winter 2001): 9-24.

<sup>20</sup> "The System Has No Religious Merit," *Qantara*, July 24, 2009.

<sup>21</sup> Author interview in Najaf, May 2022.

be the most likely successor until his death. It is unlikely Riyad al Hakim will succeed Sistani. As is the case with Sistani's own son, Mohammed Rida al-Sistani, the hawza does not permit the position to be inherited by an ayatollah's son. Although sources in Najaf suggest Irawani, who is in his 70s, is favored at this stage, he is not a descendant of the Prophet Muhammad, which could reduce his chances. It is often the tradition that the ayatollahs appointed to the highest positions, such as Sistani, are *sayyids* and wear black turbans to indicate their descent from the prophet. Irawani opened an official office recently in Najaf, which, according to a report from Najaf in *Al Monitor*, signaled his desire to succeed Sistani.<sup>22</sup> Irawani, like Sistani, studied under Khoei and is believed to share his views on the role of the grand marja in Iraq – no direct interference in politics with the objective to serve the interests of the people. Any cleric vying for the position would need the support of Sistani's networks of seminaries and foundations.

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*Conflict between the Shiraziyyin and the religious circles in Najaf dates back more than 50 years.*

*Although this rival group could act as a spoiler, there is little chance the successor would be chosen from among its members.*

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One potential irritant for rival clerics from the Shiraziyyin school of thought

is if the successor, such as Irawani, comes from Sistani's line of loyalists. Shiraziyyin, who primarily live in Karbala, are generally opposed to the system of seminaries in Najaf and the authority of the marjiyya there. They are more conservative when it comes to the issue of the separation of religion and state and have favorable views of theocratic rule in Iran. Conflict between the Shiraziyyin and the religious circles in Najaf dates back more than 50 years.<sup>23</sup> Although this rival group could act as a spoiler, there is little chance the successor would be chosen from among its members.

## Will Iran Intervene in the Selection Process?

One perpetual concern of the United States and other Western governments is whether Iran will try to influence the selection of Sistani's successor either by trying to appoint a cleric from Qom or an Iranian in Iraq who is sympathetic to Iran's interests in Iraq. Religious scholars as well as academic literature on the topic indicate this is unlikely for a few reasons. First, as mentioned, the hawza is opposed theologically to supreme clerical rule in Iran. Second, the hawza is also working against Iran's political influence in Iraq along with much of Iraqi civil society; a grand marja would need the support of Iraqis. And third, the hawza in Iraq has spent decades gaining independence from Qom's influence and would never willingly surrender such a key position to Iran – even though many respected clerics in Iraq either studied in Iran decades ago or are originally from Iran.

Irawani was born in Najaf, but Sistani was born in Mashhad, Iran. Many esteemed clerics in Iraq today spent years living and studying in Qom to escape Saddam's assassinations and other forms of violence and repression against the Shia clergy. As a result of the violence committed by Saddam's Baath Party, the Najaf seminaries lost most of their scholars and

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<sup>22</sup> Hassan al-Mustafa, "Najaf Seminary Prepares for Post-Sistani Iraq," *Al-Monitor*, December 1, 2021.

<sup>23</sup> Ann Wainscott, "Engaging the Post-ISIS Iraqi Religious Landscape for Peace and Reconciliation," *United States Institute of Peace*, November 26, 2019.

students. Their numbers dropped from a reported 16,000 in 1968 to 500 in 1991.<sup>24</sup> After 2003, clerics and seminarians who had escaped Iran returned to Iraq. "Whether clerics are Iranian or non-Iranian is an obsession," said Sayeed Ezzedine al Hakim. Regarding the selection process, he said, "In my opinion, it is not a practical reality to view it this way."<sup>25</sup> Still, others believe the Iranian regime will keep trying, as it has in the past, to interfere. "There have been great attempts since the outbreak of the Iranian Revolution to transfer the activity of the seminary from Najaf to holy Qom, but this did not happen due to the centrality of the religious traditions and its great historical depth," said Helfi, the scholar at Kufa University, "in addition to the fact that the Qom reference is a political and religious reference" regarding supreme clerical rule, "unlike the religious reference of Najaf."<sup>26</sup>

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The seminaries in Qom and Najaf have been intertwined for centuries, with Iraqi clerics studying regularly in Qom. However, Sistani's rise after the fall of the Baath regime in 2003 significantly altered the relationship. No longer was Najaf in Qom's shadow. Najaf regained its standing as the heart of Shiism and became the seat of the popular and respected Sistani. Sistani has evolved into a religious leader of a different style and persona than he was in the past, which Iraqi society believes should be the standard bearer of religious authority.

## Conclusion

There is a race against the clock between Sistani's death and the development of a stable and secure Iraqi state. Sistani's successor is highly unlikely to have the clout or acumen successfully to help keep the state and society functioning during difficult times as Sistani has done since 2003, but some religious scholars in Najaf who have faith in the institutions of religious authority believe it will not matter as much as others fear. In their view, the institutions in Najaf – the seminaries, shrines, and other religious centers – have established influence in their own right. Thus, religious authority depends on several factors, not just the persona of the grand marja.

At this point, it seems Sistani will die without seeing a relatively functioning Iraqi state, free of corruption and patronage. The October 2021 parliamentary elections are a prime example: Eight months on, a government still has not been formed. Sistani's successor will undoubtedly have a far less significant role in political matters and will likely not have the level of respect on the international stage.

However, the good news for Iraqis is that the declining legitimacy and relevance of vilayet e-faqih make it highly unlikely Sistani's successor will embrace this radical form of Shiism. Sistani's successor is also unlikely to have his transnational influence and networks. His successor could have a diminished role, leaving space for regional grand marjas to fill the void in their communities. At this point, there is no one on the horizon who comes close to Sistani.

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<sup>24</sup> Yitzhak Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

<sup>25</sup> Author Interview in Najaf, May 2022.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

