

SUDDEN SUCCESSION



Examining the Impact of Abrupt Change in the Middle East

ALI MAMOURI
MEHDI KHALAJI



Shia Leadership After Sistani

AYATOLLAH ALI AL-SISTANI is a transnational *marja* (Shia source of emulation) who is based in Najaf, Iraq. He was born in 1930 in the Iranian city of Mashhad. Although no official statistics are available, strong evidence suggests that alongside Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Sistani is the most followed *marja* in the Shia community, with a vast gulf between him and the next contestant. In Iraq's post-Saddam Hussein era, Sistani has played a bold reconciliatory role, supporting a constitution-based society and the Iraqi electoral process.

What follows are two distinct treatments of Sistani and what could follow him by former seminarians within the Shia clerical establishment, Ali Mamouri and Mehdi

Khalaji. These analyses both address Sistani's succession and the Shia leadership vacuum that will result not only in Iran and Iraq but in the worldwide Shia community. In particular, these authors examine how dynamics could change in the absence of Sistani's political role, while also looking at Khamenei's political-religious clout, Iran's interference in Shia affairs across the Middle East, and its dominance of transnational Shia religious networks and resources. The jostling for power among clerics that will inevitably follow Sistani therefore warrants close attention, as do potential related opportunities for Iran to expand its influence in Iraq and elsewhere in the Middle East.



The Najaf Seminary as an Enduring Check on Shia Political Islam

By Ali Mamouri

Under the leadership of Ali al-Sistani, the seminary in Najaf, Iraq, has successfully revived a traditional approach to Shia politics as a rival to *velayate faqih* (rule of the jurisprudent), the school embraced by the Islamic leadership in Tehran. This revival began around 2003, about a decade after Sistani assumed the position of grand *marja*. A pivotal question is whether the seminary will be able to sustain this position after Sistani leaves the scene.

Najaf's Civil State Doctrine

Saddam Hussein's fall in 2003 provided an ideal opportunity for Shia clerics in Najaf to claim authority over the Iraqi state. Shia political parties in Iraq pursued such a course, turning to Sistani for support. But Sistani instead insisted on backing the notion of a civil, or nontheocratic, state, calling for the establishment of a democratic system in Iraq.

Sistani's opposition to a theocratic system is deeply rooted in theological and jurisprudential Shia doctrine, which reserves the exclusive right of governance to the Prophet Muhammad and his twelve successors. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, this approach led a group of Shia clerics who supported the Persian Constitutional Revolution to start viewing laypeople rather than clergy as sources of political authority. This led to theorizing, then practice of a semi-democratic system of governance in the absence of the Prophet and imams. In articulating his own version of this trend, Sistani refers explicitly to *velayate insan* (state guardianship by the people), as opposed to *velayate faqih* (guardianship of the jurist), a concept innovated by the founding leader of the Islamic Republic, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. In his turning toward a civil state, Sistani was also driven by a pragmatic view about the post-2003 Iraqi reality, characterized by much complexity and ethno-religious conflict along many lines.

Sistani's rejection of clerical guardianship is deeply rooted in the Najaf school. Prominent influences have included his own teacher Abu al-Qasem Khoei (1899–1992) and Khoei's teacher Mirza Muhammad Hussein Naini (1860–1936). Naini, in his text *Tanbih al-Ummah wa Tanzih al-Millah* (Stimulating the Community and Transcending Religion) called for "guardianship of the *umma* [community]," according volition to the people instead of the jurist. In turn, Sistani not only avoided calling for the creation of a religious state, he went even further by standing against attempts by Islamic parties to implement a sharia-based legal system.

Nor do Sistani's potential successors appear to hold differing views from his own on the civil state doctrine. These next-generation candidates include Hadi al-Razi (b. ca. 1949), Muhammad al-Sanad (b. 1962), Ali al-Sabzevari (b. ca. 1956), and Muhammad Reza al-Sistani (b. 1962), the *marja*'s son. Likewise fortifying Iraq's current consensus-based political system against attempts at theocratic cooptation is its very complexity, a product of Sistani's own efforts. This system, which encompasses different ethnic and religious groups, by definition cannot coexist with theocracy. No cleric can credibly claim *velayate-faqih* in a system like Iraq's.

Sistani's Social Network

The rise of a *marja* in Shia Islam differs from the selection of a pope in Catholicism, which is decided by a gathering of cardinals. The new *marja*, by comparison, emerges less formally through support from his social and financial network, whose members develop his legacy over time.

Sistani's religious authority has been built through just such a widespread, influential social network. Across Iraq, he has some six hundred representatives and, worldwide, authority over numerous organizations. At the seminary in Qom, his offices are run by his son-in-law, Sayed Javad Shahrestani, and his official

spokesman, Hamid al-Khaffaf, is based in Beirut. Such figures have fostered an extensive network that will play a role in the next marja's rise.

The Najaf seminary has a multilayered structure, granting it stability and fortifying it against outside manipulation in choosing a new grand ayatollah. This structure includes a range of social groups within the seminary and representatives among outside Shia communities, in addition to various organizations and financial institutions.

Another Shia seminary is based in Karbala, Iraq, which is home to the Imam Hussein Shrine. Historically, the Karbala seminary was led by the politically quietist Akhbari, whose practice was rooted in interpretation of Quran and hadith, while eschewing reasoning outside the bounds of holy texts. But the Akhbari presence has now been replaced almost entirely by adherents to the Shirazi school. Although the Najaf and Karbala seminaries have been rivals for centuries, Karbala has shrunken in stature. The Shirazi are known for their sectarian opposition to Sunnis and also their extreme commitment to Shia rituals such as *tatbir*, which involves striking one's head with a sword.

Moderation and Global Shia Communities

In order to succeed Sistani, a candidate for *marjaiya* will have to extend his influence over Iraq as well as Shia communities in the Gulf, Lebanon, the Indian subcontinent, and other parts of the world. This successor will only achieve this goal by adopting a moderate stance on the predominantly Sunni Arab governments; Shia in these countries often live as part of a vulnerable minority. This would mark continuity with Sistani's own moderate positions over the course of his leadership.

Specifically, Sistani has long avoided meeting with hardliners. In the Iran context, he has refused to meet with any figures associated with Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, with former president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, or with the late former chairman of the Expediency Council, Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi. In 2004, en route home to Iraq from medical treatment in London,

he did not allow Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah to welcome him at the Beirut airport.

Shia Militias

After the U.S. overthrow of Saddam Hussein, the spread of both Shia and Sunni militias posed a major challenge to Iraqi stability. Some fifteen years later, as part of Iraq's liberation from Islamic State rule, the country's Sunni militias were almost wiped out. But more or less all the Shia militias were able to regenerate themselves as part of the state-run Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), which in fighting the Islamic State enhanced its power and influence over the country's security and political spheres.

It was Sistani's 2014 fatwa that inspired the formation of the PMF, but ever since he has been trying to curb PMF ambitions. This effort has centered on integrating the units into the state military to prevent the emergence of a parallel force under Iran influence. For his part, Iranian Supreme Leader Khamenei has taken the opposite position, on different occasions asking Iraqi politicians not to integrate or dissolve the PMF.

Until now, Sistani's call to avoid using the PMF name, his insistence on populating the units with volunteers, and his attempts to integrate the forces within the state military have limited Iranian influence. Only a handful of PMF factions are today Iran affiliated, including

Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba, Asaib Ahl al-Haq, and Saraya al-Khorasani. On the other side of the ledger, the al-Abbas Combat Division, Ansar al-Marjaiya Brigade, Kataib al-Tayyar al-Risali, and Kataib al-Imam Ali are among the majority to pledge allegiance to the Iraqi state, as demanded by Sistani.

Indeed, on July 1, 2019, Iraqi prime minister Adil Abdulmahdi issued a decree ordering all PMF factions to "be integrated into the police and army ranks according to Iraqi military regulations."¹ Yet even despite such measures, many PMF elements and their affiliated parties have developed power structures independent of the state, and eliminating these will produce challenges for Iraq, especially if the planned integration into state security does not go smoothly. Such challenges could well stretch into the post-Sistani era.

Iranian Strategies for Dominating the Najaf Seminary

Leaders in the Islamic Republic have long voiced suspicion about any prospective marja outside the country, given the difficulty of imposing their will on him. Back in 1994, the Friday prayer imam in Tehran, Ahmad Jannati, attacked Sistani, calling him a British agent and citing his poor relationship with Khomeini during the latter's lengthy exile in Najaf. The former Iranian president Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, in his collection of daily memos, revealed that he and Khamenei would often discuss the rise of a religious authority outside Iran and strategize about how to strengthen Qom's position against Najaf.

Two candidates thought to be favored by Ayatollah Khamenei as successors to Sistani have now passed away. The more recent was Ayatollah Shahrudi, a cleric and former head of Iran's Expediency Council—an advisory body to the Supreme Leader—who died in late 2018. Born in Najaf to an Iranian family, he also served as Iran's judiciary chief for a decade.² The second candidate was Mohammad Mehdi Asefi, Khamenei's official representative in Najaf, who died in 2015. Other prominent clerics close to Khamenei include Sayyed Kadhim al-Haeri and Sayyed Kamal al-Haydari, but both are based in Qom and lack popularity in Najaf. As for Qom, Khamenei has been

trying to manipulate this seminary into demonstrating full support for *velayat-e faqih* and his political agenda. But so far, most Qom seminarians have maintained respect for Sistani's political doctrine, while showing no interest in *velayat-e faqih* or the Supreme Leader's political agenda.

Given these limitations, Khamenei is trying to expand his political influence in Najaf through alternative avenues. For example, he appointed Sayyed Mojtaba Hosseini as his special representative in Najaf, where he runs three schools grooming students to become religious figures in the seminary. Most Iraqi Shia political parties close to Iran, such as the Dawa Party, also sponsor a center in the seminary that seeks to promote Shia political Islam among students. Khamenei grants regular salaries to all students in the Najaf seminary.

Such efforts reflect Khamenei's recognition that he cannot simply name a successor to Sistani in Najaf. Instead, he has settled on a strategy based on splitting the seminary into two camps: those who back him and his *velayat-e faqih* doctrine, and those traditional Shia who back Sistani and his approach. The Supreme Leader, in this effort, is pursuing multiple courses to strengthen his position in his favored camp. In the end, despite all the obstacles and resistance faced by Khamenei in Najaf, the inevitable vacuum created by Sistani's departure will present a great opportunity for him, assuming he is still alive, to widen his dominance in the city.

Endnotes

1. Ali Mamouri, "Iraq Orders Militias to Fully Integrate into State Security Forces," Al-Monitor, July 2, 2019, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/07/iraq-pmu-iran-abdul-mahdi-shiite-militias.html#ixzz5shAEK1tB>.
2. Mehdi Khalaji, *The Future of Leadership in the Shiite Community*, Policy Focus 152 (Washington DC: Washington Institute, 2017), p. 62, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/PolicyFocus152-Khalaji.pdf>.

Islamism, Secularism, and the Decline of Marjaiya

By Mehdi Khalaji

The clerical rank known as *marjaiya*, the highest Shia authority and one regarded as a source of emulation, emerged some two hundred years ago in Iraq. Most officeholders were of Iranian origin. In the first half of the twentieth century, the newly founded Qom seminary in Iran became the chief rival to its Iraqi counterpart in Najaf. The *marja* himself leads the clerical establishment as well as the Shia community's religious affairs.

The *marjaiya*'s first landmark involvement in politics followed an 1890 event known as the Tobacco Protest, which arose over the Iranian shah's granting of a tobacco concession to British interests. The uprising was followed by a fatwa issued by Mirza Hassan Shirazi, a Samarra-based *marja*, who likened tobacco consumption to an act of animosity against the last of the Twelver Shia imams. He sent this ruling to Iran by telegraph, soon after the advent of the technology, which effectively transformed the *marjaiya* into a transnational religious authority. Except for a few intervals, the Iraq-based *marjaiya* in the twentieth century continued to play a strong political role in both Iran and Iraq. This stopped in the 1970s, when Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein ruthlessly cracked down on Shia leaders by expelling individuals with Iranian origins and killing those engaged in political activity. The mass expulsions and other measures aimed at weakening the Najaf seminary did major damage to this historic center of Shia authority and learning, while also isolating it from the outside world.

In Iran around the same time, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini succeeded in overthrowing the shah and establishing an Islamic government based on *velayat-e faqih* (guardianship of the jurist). But political Islam was inherently opposed to the Shia seminary, which was rooted in tradition and orthodoxy, a dynamic that carried some irony. Political Islam emerged outside the seminary framework and found its typical representatives in lay activists and writers who rejected the conservative tendency of traditional institutions. In advocating a

revolutionary version of Islam, almost all Iranian political Islamists were heavily influenced by Marxism. Ayatollah Khomeini stood out as an exception in serving as a *marja* and a leader of Islamic revolution.

Initially, the post-revolutionary constitution in Iran made *marjaiya* a requirement for the ruling jurist position. But after Khomeini died in 1989, the political elite found it too risky to appoint a living *marja* as his successor. This was because none of the candidates appeared to match the republic's founding leader as a true believer in revolutionary Islam and the broad political and executive authority of the jurist. As a result, the amended 1989 constitution dropped the *marjaiya* requirement, replacing it with the lower-status *mujtahid* (ayatollah), referring to a religious authority not yet recognized as a source of emulation.

In the Islamic Republic, several other key positions besides Supreme Leader are designated for ayatollahs, including judiciary chief, all (roughly) ninety members of the Assembly of Experts, six of twelve members of the Guardian Council, and minister of intelligence. But the government has overridden seminary authority in determining the religious credentials of candidates for these positions. Furthermore, the gap between the country's legal system and the seminary has widened based on the constitutionally exclusive legislative rights of the Majlis (parliament) and the Expediency Council's authority to refuse the Guardian Council's view on an ayatollah if such a refusal serves the regime's interests. Consequently, despite the religious nature of Iranian government ideology and the absolute authority granted to the ruling jurist, the country's religious and political spheres exist separately, with the clergy holding no organizational influence over the political system.

The concept of *velayat-e faqih* provides the Supreme Leader total authority over government affairs. But this dictate does not elevate the status of ayatollahs overall, instead abasing it by effectively rendering them ordinary citizens who must obey the Supreme Leader on almost all public issues. By claiming the precedence of

the ruling jurist's opinions over all other authorities on public matters, *velayat-e faqih* has drastically changed the notion of "emulation." Officially, the pluralism of the Shia leadership is recognized, with worshippers free to choose their own ayatollah as an authority to be emulated, but such emulation ends up only being possible in private rituals. This is because *velayat-e faqih* requires adherents to all marjas to follow only the Supreme Leader on the public front.

Marjaiya Under the Islamic Republic

Traditionally, the marjaiya held a threefold responsibility: leading the Shia community in its religious affairs, managing the clerical establishment, and overseeing religious endowments. But under *velayat-e faqih*, the social and political role of marjas has been severely constrained to fit within the government framework. Moreover, marjas only enjoy room to maneuver if they demonstrate support for the government and refrain from weakening it through criticism or active opposition. Marjas have therefore seen their space contract for influencing their followers' public life. In addition, the government has taken over supervising endowments and religious financial resources.¹ Especially since Ali Khamenei came to power in 1989, bureaucratization of the clerical establishment has edged marjas out of their past role in managing seminaries and clerical affairs. Beyond that, the government has begun overseeing the financial resources of each particular marja, along with his financial relationship with the larger clergy. For instance, while formerly every marja could have his own budget and pay a salary to his affiliated clerics, the government-run bureaucratic system has now centralized and digitized the salary-payment mechanisms and imposed severe regulations on marjas both inside and outside the seminary. This full-scale intervention by the government has encompassed planning, recruitment, and evaluation of clerics' missionary work. More important still is payroll and benefits administration, along with clerical activities and relations with outside institutions such as universities and sociopolitical entities, including

political parties. The overall impact has been nothing short of transformational.

For years, orthodox clerics in various ranks criticized *velayat-e faqih* and questioned its religious legitimacy. But gradually the Iranian regime's approach, combining carrots and sticks, has effectively quieted this opposition.² Now clerics generally recognize the Supreme Leader's de facto ruling status over the Islamic Republic. On the one hand, they know this reality would be tough to change; on the other, they consider it safer compared to various alternatives and also a safeguard for clerical interests in general. The new clerical class in Iran, meanwhile, has seen booming numbers of ayatollah and marja titleholders, versus the historical reality wherein one or a handful of prominent clerics held the higher status and collaborated with others to lead the clerical and broader Shia community. The regime has helped fuel this trend, in large part as a check on the older class of clerics, for which it harbors suspicion, but also simply to staff clerical positions. (Shia theological doctrine, it bears noting, does allow for multiple marjas.) Most marjas and ayatollahs today earn their designation not from clerical authorities, but instead based on political ties and media acclamation.

In the past, a marja established his position through various steps, including the creation of a financial network, support from the business community, along with recognition of his religious credentials from seminary elders. Yet another step was building a madrasa. This allowed a cleric to consolidate his status as marja and join the establishment, thereafter training clerics who would go on to advocate his worldview and connect him to prospective adherents. In the post-revolutionary period, however, the government has forbidden any cleric from constructing a madrasa on his own. Instead, both the government and its allied ayatollahs have started to build institutes for education, research, religious outreach, and publications on a seminary's outskirts. In Qom, more than four hundred institutes currently operate, serving an array of purposes, without directly reporting to the seminary's central administration.

Then there is the matter of foreign students. In the past, these students were given a high level of freedom regarding whom they studied with and what they did

with their knowledge. But after the revolution, the government gradually created entities to manage the activity of foreign students and separate them from the main seminary and clerical establishment, including marjas, of their native lands. Today, the largest institution that trains foreign seminarians is al-Mustafa International University, with almost 18,000 multinational students under the direct supervision of Ayatollah Khamenei.³ Likewise, before the Iranian government solidified its monopoly over religious education, foreign seminarians could return home to campaign for the marjaiya of their preferred clerics. Now foreign students are trained only for competence in advocating for Islamic ideology, the interests of the Iranian government, and the leadership of Ayatollah Khamenei. This includes encouraging Sunnis to convert to Shiism and Shia to follow Iran's Supreme Leader. A select few Iraqi and other Arab seminarians, if they show competence in Persian, are authorized to study in regular seminaries along with Iranians instead of at al-Mustafa.⁴

Relationship Between the Najaf and Qom Seminaries

Before the decline of their seminary during Saddam Hussein's rule, Najaf seminarians looked down on the intellectual aptitude and educational system at their counterpart in Qom. The Najaf seminary also had a view distinct from Qom's on the political leadership in Iran. Under the Ottoman Empire, Arab Shia were a minority, and under the postcolonial Arab nationalist governments, they endured persecution. As a result, the Shia leadership in Iraq largely sought good relations with Iran's various monarchies, including under the Pahlavi dynasty. For Iraqi ayatollahs, Iran represented leadership over the world's Shia community and the most powerful state protector of its interests. In regarding the king of Iran as the "sultan of Shiism," these religious figures expected the Iranian government to use state leverage against Ottoman and later Arab governments that discriminated against Shia and constrained their religious freedom. Iranian clergy, who lived in a predominantly Shia country, had a different perspective on

the Iranian monarchy, especially under the Pahlavi leadership—one that manifested itself boldly in Ayatollah Khomeini's delegitimization of Muhammad Reza Shah and his successful attempt to overthrow his government.

Whereas most traditional ayatollahs, whether in Najaf or Qom, viewed Khomeini's *velayat-e faqih* doctrine to be heretical, certain clerics in Najaf, especially Ayatollah Abu al-Qasem Khoi, did not actively oppose Khomeini's newly formed government. He took this stance for two main reasons: (1) He expected the Iranian government to continue its role as the ultimate protector of the Shia community against unjust practices by Arab governments, especially increased pressure under Saddam in Iraq. (2) Ayatollah Khoi's assets in Qom, including madrasas, residential campuses, and libraries, were valued in the tens of millions of dollars. Indeed, amid the decline of the Najaf seminary, including the large-scale forced emigration of its clerics, Iran, and especially Qom, became the main safe haven for Arab clergy and the largest, most important center for the Shia clerical establishment. For Khoi, taking a hostile attitude toward the Iranian government would have jeopardized his interests in Qom and dramatically affected his practice as a marja by limiting his access to the Shia community's financial resources and social networks.

Most expelled Iraqi clerics chose to immigrate to Iran, especially Qom. Politically speaking, they were divided into two major groups: traditionalists who were reluctant to interfere in political affairs and did not believe in the revolutionary mission of Islam and its justifications such as *velayat-e faqih*, and those close to the Iraqi Dawa Party and Muhammad Baqr al-Sadr, a revolutionary ayatollah who was killed by Saddam Hussein in 1980. The first group, represented by personalities such as Javad Tabrizi and Hossein Vahid Khorasani, confined its activities to clerical affairs and focused on training seminarians. While its members appeared not to believe in the religious legitimacy of the ruling jurist for an "Islamic state," they took a passive stance toward the republic by avoiding any visible behavior that could be regarded as subversive or undermining of the government's authority. The second group took an opposite position by supporting the regime. Certain disciples of Sadr, such as Mahmoud Hashemi

Shahrودي as well as the Hakim family, helped carry out the government's agenda by forming an organized political and military force against Hussein during the Iran-Iraq War. Later on, ayatollahs such as Shahrودي entirely reinvented their national identity from Iraqi to Iranian, serving in various government bureaus and working closely with Khamenei.

When the Baath Party's reign in Iraq ended in 2003, Ayatollah Sistani sought to follow his master Khoi's precedent in dealing with the Iranian government. His practice as a marja, as well as his assets and offices in Qom and Lebanon, were under Iranian control, making it apparently unwise to actively oppose *velayat-e faqih*, even if he lacked belief in the legitimacy of "Islamic government" or the specific qualifications of the ruling jurist. Separately, skepticism of *velayat-e faqih* hardly implied withholding respect for national leadership. Prior to Iran's Islamic Revolution, Shia clergy recognized the authority of the ruler—sultan or king—in the absence of an infallible imam, provided that he would protect the Shia community and its territories against Sunnis or infidels. The Iranian monarchy as a de facto authority was religiously respected, and any subversive action against it was considered religiously forbidden.

After the Islamic Revolution and the associated crackdown on opponents both religious and secular, most Shia clerics who had previously opposed *velayat-e faqih*—whether Iraqi origin or not—took refuge in public or else tacit support for the view. By drawing an analogy between the ruling jurist's authority and that of historical kings, they arrived at a justification for their limited collaboration and coordination with the Islamic Republic. Furthermore, in regarding ideological militarism or secular democracy as the alternatives to Islamic governance, these clerics accepted the existing system as the lesser evil, while acknowledging its ability to boost the status and living conditions of Shia and enrich the clerical establishment across the Middle East. By comparison, the ideological militarism and secular democracy options would have been far less friendly to the clergy, sidelining them politically and depriving them of their unique privileges. In this way, the former doubters recognized the authority of the ruling jurist without belief in the idea's underpinnings.

The Age of Secularism and Individualized Religion

Parallel to political developments that have transformed the nature, social function, and political dimension of marjaiya, the Shia community in general and Iranian society in particular have navigated waves of social change that have reshaped religious concepts, rituals, authority, and the lay worshiper's relationship to the religious leadership.

The well-known Canadian theoretician of secularism Charles Taylor suggests that the modern age is not an age without religion. Instead, he writes, secularization heralds "a move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and, indeed, unproblematic to one in which it is understood to be one option among others."⁵ The result is a radical pluralism that, as well as offering unprecedented freedom, creates new challenges and instabilities. If one understands secularism in this way, indications are plenty that the Shia community is living in the age of secularism and that individuals feel more comfortable to invent their own religious conceptions and practical frameworks for them, independent of a specific cleric's guidance. Apart from those who leave the religion, convert to other religions, turn to atheism, or define themselves as religious only in name without practicing, many Shia choose only partially to follow clerical guidance on the worshiper's duty.

Specifically, traditional women who follow any personal marja on a relatively strict basis often refuse to recognize polygamy as being divinely sanctioned. In this and other ways, the gap between codified, or "official," religion and practiced religion is as old as Shiism itself. As the pace of modernization increases in Muslim-majority countries, this gap also widens. Such a divide between encoded value systems or authorities and people's behavior is a prominent feature of the modern, globalized world.⁶ Today, human acts or sequences of acts are driven by multiple and changing clusters of values, as detailed in multiple studies.⁷ The idea can be traced back more than a century to the work of sociologist Max Weber, who posited that "with multiplication of life chances and opportunities," individualization becomes an increasing phenomenon

in societies. The associated decoupling of human values from traditional value-generating institutions issues from a desire by the individual to shape his or her own destiny, regardless of group or traditional authorities. Today, in countries like Iraq or Iran, such trends can manifest themselves in the mounting number of people who differentiate between religiosity and morality through the self-construction of codes of behavior based on nonreligious criteria and commands.⁸

In Iran specifically, evidence abounds on the prevalence of anticlericalism or declericalization, suggesting the clergy's weakened position as a societal actor. Points of reference outside the clergy have appeared as alternatives. The middle and upper classes in the Islamic Republic, for example, tend to follow "religious intellectuals" who are university graduates rather than seminary-trained clerics, and who provide a more liberal and democratic interpretation of Islam. In turn, being religious does not necessarily mean following an ayatollah on all issues, or at all. Creative modes of practice have also flourished in recent decades, such as those advanced by Abdolkarim Soroush, a well-known Muslim intellectual who believes that the Quran cannot be a source for legislation and that the holy text is a result of the Prophet's dream rather than divine revelation. Such examples show how the influence of marjas on the Shia community has markedly decreased.

Marjaiya After Sistani

Sistani is likely the last marja to develop a wide-reaching transnational network and exert his influence on regional issues, such as in his historic conciliatory role after the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq. His demise would certainly create a power vacuum, encouraging the Iranian government to fill it rapidly. But Iran would probably find enhancing its stature in Iraq easier through soft power and the sustaining of militias, rather than through direct intervention in its religious leadership or grooming a pro-Iran ayatollah to replace Sistani. In any case, the future will likely see a grand marja with a scaled-down role, complemented by the rise of local marjas throughout the world's Muslim communities.

One reason for the waning appeal of the transnational marja is growing nationalism, and the Shia community's recognition that it must respect a state's sovereignty and prove allegiance to it. Such a necessity could motivate each country's Shia community to adhere to a native marja, thereby avoiding any charges of disloyalty. Furthermore, the growing number of marjas in various countries should allow each religionist to find an ideal clerical authority meeting his or her expectations. In her two studies translated into English, the French scholar Laurence Louër demonstrates how Shia communities in Persian Gulf countries are struggling to maintain a balance between political autonomy and religious loyalty.⁹ Her work shows how Shia politics in general have become increasingly detached from transnational marjaiya and even from local Shia religious authorities.

In place of the traditional public role held by marjas could be an expanding purview for Shia political organizations and parties. Some such parties might feel the need to adopt their own marja to legitimize their Shia character and track record, while others may not. Those especially inclined to do so could include Arab Shia seminaries wanting to portray themselves as fundamentally religious institutions separate from political affairs.

Finally worth noting in this scene is the diminishing relevance of *velayate faqih*. Just as Shia leaders historically regarded the sultans as rulers without assuming their religious legitimacy, most Shia leaders today, whether religious or political, adapt their relations with the Islamic Republic and its ruling jurist based not on their belief in his legitimacy but on their own political interests and factional aspirations.

Given declining debate (and publications) on the legitimacy of *velayate faqih* among Shia and intellectual circles, including those in Iran and Iraq, one can conclude that the political idea is effectively dead. As a result, Iran will likely seek to insert itself into the Shia community at the governmental level through political institutions and military elements such as the Qods Force of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. Such entities will be far more active in this endeavor than the clerical establishment and religious authorities.

Endnotes

1. See the law on entities and authorities of Iran's Organization for Hajj, Endowments, and Charity Affairs, <http://bit.ly/2Kzg2zf>.
2. A prominent tool is the extraconstitutional Special Court for Clerics, which emerged in the 1980s before being codified under Supreme Leader Khamenei in 1991.
3. See the al-Mustafa International University website, <http://en.miu.ac.ir/>.
4. No official statistics are available on how many Iraqis or Arabs study at Iranian seminaries or al-Mustafa University.
5. Charles Taylor, *The Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2007).
6. See, e.g., Lowell W. Livezey, ed., *Public Religion and Urban Transformation: Faith in the City* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), p. 6. Among other things, this text explores how "structural changes are...linked to the social transformation of the 1960s and 1970s, which extended the presumption of individual autonomy and the moral legitimacy of personal choice at the expense of traditional collective authorities, including religion."
7. Some prominent examples include: Olivier Galland and Yannick Lemel, "Tradition vs. Modernity: The Continuing Dichotomy of Values in European Society," *Revue Française de Sociologie* 49, no. 5 (2008): pp. 153–86; Samuel P. Huntington, "The Change to Change: Modernization, Development, and Politics," *Comparative Politics*, 3, no. 3 (1971): pp. 283–322; and Gerhard Lenski, *The Religious Factor: A Sociological Study of Religion's Impact on Politics, Economics, and Family Life* (New York: Anchor Books, 1963).
8. See, e.g., Saeid Golkar, *Cultural Heterogeneity in Post-Revolutionary Iran* (Washington DC: Washington Institute, 2018), <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/cultural-heterogeneity-in-post-revolutionary-iran>.
9. Laurence Louër: *Shiism and Politics in the Middle East* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012) and *Transnational Shia Politics: Religious and Political Networks in the Gulf* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).

About the Authors

A L I M A M O U R I is a scholar and journalist specializing in religious dynamics and fundamentalism in the Middle East. He trained in seminaries in Iraq as well as Iran and holds a PhD in philosophy and theology. A former lecturer at the University of Sydney and the University of Tehran, he is currently editor of Al-Monitor's "Iraq Pulse" desk. Mamouri has published several books and essays on the politics of Islam. His forthcoming volume, "The Dueling Ayatollahs," explores the conflict between Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and Ali al-Sistani.

M E H D I K H A L A J I is the Libitzky Family Fellow at The Washington Institute, focusing on the politics of Iran and Shia groups in the Middle East. Previously, he was a political analyst on Iranian affairs for BBC Persian, and later became a broadcaster for the Prague-based Radio Farda, the Persian-language service of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. Khalaji trained in Shia theology and jurisprudence in Qom. He is currently writing a political biography of Supreme Leader Khamenei.

