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The succession of Grand Ayatollah  
Sistani in the hierarchy of the Shiite  
religion

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## *The succession of Grand Ayatollah Sistani in the hierarchy of the Shiite religion*

### *Abstract:*

*This document aims to analyzing the power and influence of Grand Ayatollah Sistani as the leader of the Shiite religion and it will develop a thesis on who his successor might be, due to his advanced age. Thus, firstly, the rivalry between the sanctuaries of Najaf and Qom will be studied, as well as how this affects the influence that Iran exercises in Iraq and the relations between both regimes. Secondly, this article will research the political differences between the governments of Iran and Iraq and the position that Ayatollah Sistani defends. Lastly, the different candidates to succeed the Grand Ayatollah will be exposed.*

### *Keywords:*

*Sistani, Ayatollah, succession, Shiism, Iran, Iraq, Najaf, Qom.*

**\*NOTE:** The ideas contained in the Opinion Documents are the responsibility of their authors, without necessarily reflecting the thinking or the IEEE or the Ministry of Defense

## Introduction: Historical and political context

In 1991, there was an uprising by the Iraqi Shiites in the south of the country that was followed by a rebellion dominated by the Kurds in the north. This uprising was partly motivated by the disastrous defeat of the Iraqi army and their forced withdrawal from Kuwait. The different insurgency groups were clear evidence that the army was not at the top of its form, but they were convinced that they were supported by the United States and that the USA would help them expel Saddam from Iraq. A big part of the Shiite population in Iraq felt betrayed by George H. W. Bush's administration, that did not intervene in their favour and that transmitted a message to the Iraqis that there were other ways to end the bloodshed<sup>1</sup>.

In 2003, George W. Bush (the son of the previously mentioned) made the decision to get rid of Saddam after the United States had abandoned the Shiite and the Kurd opposition years ago. The abandonment by the United States to Iraq caused great frustration among the Shiite population towards the USA and still persists today. This explains the contradiction that, even if the Shiites ended up benefitting from the war much more than the Sunnites, they never trusted or will completely trust the United States again<sup>2</sup>.

After Saddam Hussein's defeat, the whole country's administration fell and it was the Shiites who took power, supported by the United States. Since the country's structure had to be reactivated practically from scratch, the possibility of a conflict was practically assured. During Saddam's regime, the Iraqi army was great in number and the United States decided to dismantle it, leaving many people unemployed in an impoverished country. These trained military resorted to insurgency, with strong ties to al-Qaeda. The United States then began collaborating with the Sunni population to end the al-Qaeda group, which ended up reduced to a low number.

When the United States finally withdrew from Iraq, the Shia government did not include

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<sup>1</sup> BBC News. "Flashback: the 1991 Iraqi revolt", BBC, 2007, available at [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle\\_east/2888989.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/2888989.stm). Date of access 15.12.18

<sup>2</sup> ARANGO, T. "A Long-Awaited Apology for Shiites, but the Wounds Run Deep", The New York Times, 2011, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/09/world/middleeast/iraqi-shiite-anger-at-united-states-remains-strong.html>. Date of access 16.01.19

Sunni militias in the country's security forces. Moreover, the Sunni tribes were victims of persecution and harassment, which led to the reactivation of the Sunni insurgency. In 2014, ISIS started a conquering movement and obtained a large part of the Iraq territory. Shiite religious leaders asked the people to take up arms, which promoted the uprising of new Shiite militias, partly funded by Iran.

It is the historical context of Iran and Iraq which has, to a large extent, shaped the relations between the two countries until the present day. Many of Iraq's militia leaders and politicians spent many years in exile in Iran during Hussein's regime. Therefore, Iran has benefited from these political, military and financial investments in Iraq, as, for example, Shiite militias have been institutionalized in Iraq's armed forces, thus causing a clear influence of Iran in Iraq.

The succession of Ayatollah Sistani could change the relationship between Islam and governance in the different states. This may not only occur in Iraq, where the majority of the population is Shiite, but also among the global Shiite community stretching from India to Iran, Lebanon and even more distant territories<sup>3</sup>. The process of electing the next leader falls on the majority of the faithful, since they are the ones who decide who to pay their religious taxes to, and on the other clerics who will grant him the validation. However, this is a slow process that could take approximately two to four years<sup>4</sup>.

The Shiite religious authority has exclusive competence to interpret Sharia (Islamic law), is the principal collector and administrator of religious taxes, manages religious educational and non-educational foundations (bonyads), and has a strong influence over the control of spiritual life in society by controlling liturgy, rites and religious ceremonies<sup>5</sup>.

To become a *marja*<sup>6</sup>, you must achieve a high level of social popularity through an

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<sup>3</sup> ARANGO, T. "Iran Presses for Official to Be Next Leader of Shiites", The New York Times, 2012, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/12/world/middleeast/iran-promotes-its-candidate-for-next-shiite-leader.html?mtrref=www.google.com&qwh=F7C4882F9C0D15AB2C6F0360BC4740DA&gwt=pay>. Date of access 16.01.19

<sup>4</sup> AL-KHOEI, H., "Post-Sistani Iraq, Iran and the Future of Shia Islam" War on the Rocks Texas, 2016, available at <https://warontherocks.com/2016/09/post-sistani-iraq-iran-and-the-future-of-shia-islam/>. Date of access 27.11.18

<sup>5</sup> NADER, A., THALER, D. E., & BOHANDY, S. R. "The Next Supreme Leader: Succession in the Islamic Republic of Iran". RAND National Defense Research Institute, 2011.

<sup>6</sup> A *marja* is a source of religious authority. In the Shiite religion, the *marjas* are highly recognized and respected Ayatollahs, usually Grand Ayatollahs, who are qualified and supported by the population to make

economic network. A *marja* is able to successfully organize a profitable network through his relationships with different authorities within the seminary and abroad. Apart from the theological differences between Shiite and Sunni Islam, the main distinction between them is the economic structure of the clerical establishment in each branch. A simple formulation of this distinction is that the Shiite administrative establishment benefits from the direct payment of religious taxes by the faithful, and is therefore economically independent from political power to a large extent, while the Sunnis receive religious income that is under government control.

The more than 200 000 Shiite clerics (almost 200 000 in Iran and 12 000 abroad) constitute an unstable network. Although most of them depend on religious income, the sources of this income vary: From the preaching commission and the commission to perform rituals (such as the religious marriage contract), which are paid by individuals and are free from the control of any authority, to the religious taxes that each devotee pays to his or her own *marja*.

### **Najaf and Qom**

The division between the regimes of Iran and Iraq as well as the different government positions are represented by the rivalry between the seminaries of Najaf (Iraq) and Qom (Iran).

For the Shiite population of Iraq, the main educational establishment is in Najaf (Iraq), not in Qom (Iran). But, when Saddam dismantled the Najaf seminary during his mandate, the only thing he achieved was to strengthen the Qom educational body and make this the most important seminary for the Shiites. In fact, as many Iraqi Shiite leaders had to take refuge in Iran, Iran was able to proclaim that Khomeini's doctrine was the one that dominated Shiism. Once Iraq was liberated, the balance of power was offset towards Najaf and Karbala at the expense of Qom. Moreover, after liberating themselves from Saddam's regime, the Iraqi Shia community demonstrated that it was not going to be subjected to Iran's dictates.

Any attempt by Iran to exercise authority in Iraq could cost Iran, and thus Qom, its prestige

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decisions within the framework of the Islamic religion, as well as to offer religious advice to their followers.

and influence in other Shiite communities in the Arab world. The resurgence of Najaf has not only challenged Qom, but has increased support for those forces in Iran against religious political authority<sup>7</sup>.

This is the key rivalry nowadays because the leadership of Sistani, the great leader of the Shiites, residing in Najaf, could end in the near future given his advanced age. Sistani opposes the theocratic Iranian regime that Khomeini initiated after the 1979 Islamic Revolution in which Shiite clerics gained political power. Sistani's ideas have served to unify Iraq after Saddam Hussein's regime.

However, while opposing political intervention by religious authorities, Sistani himself has intervened in times of crisis. For example, in 2005, Sistani forced the United States (with the support of the UN) to hold general elections; in 2014 he encouraged Iraqi citizens to prepare to fight ISIL forces; and in 2015, as a response to Iraqi movements against government corruption, Sistani contacted political leaders to warn them about the need for political reforms<sup>8</sup>.

In contemporary Shiism, the Ayatollah Sistani in Najaf is the *marja* who has the most followers, with at least 80 % of the Shiites in his favour. Even if the US invasion of Iraq played an important role in increasing his followers outside Iraq, its reputation as a *marja* started even before the death of his mentor, Abul-Qassem Khoi, in 1992. Under Saddam Hussein's regime, the Najaf seminary, which had existed for over a thousand years, fell into crisis under strong government pressure, prompting many Iranian and Iraqi clerics to immigrate to Iran<sup>9</sup>.

When Saddam was overthrown by the US-led international coalition, there was not a reliable political group or figure within Iraq. Ayatollah Sistani managed to attract international attention as someone who could potentially fill that void because as a *marja*, he had regular relations with Iran, both with individuals and the government, so he could handle Iraqi affairs with Iran. Moreover, as a Shiite religious authority, he could play the

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<sup>7</sup> EHTESHAMI, A. "Iran-Iraq Relations after Saddam", *The Washington Quarterly*, pp. 115-129, 2003.

<sup>8</sup> AL-KHOEI, H. "Post-Sistani Iraq, Iran and the Future of Shia Islam", *War on the Rocks Texas*, 2016, available at <https://warontherocks.com/2016/09/post-sistani-iraq-iran-and-the-future-of-shia-islam/>. Date of access 27.11.18

<sup>9</sup> KHALAJI, M. "The Last Marja: Sistani and the End of Traditional Religious Authority in Shiism", *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, Washington DC, 2006.

role of the representative within the Shiite community and be the point of consensus for the different political branches within this community. Furthermore, as a *marja* who during Saddam's regime had little opportunity to communicate with the Iraqi people, Sistani could easily be respected, even by Sunni clerics and tribal chiefs, and thus become the most reliable authority. Likewise, Sistani's ideas, both in the political and the religious spheres, were unknown to the public and the Western media. As a result of this, his ideas emphasized the fact that he believed in secularism and the separation of religious and political institutions, without following the model of Ayatollah Khomeini of the Islamic Republic of Iran in Iraq<sup>10</sup>.

However, Sistani argues that he has the right to fulfil his religious duty of commanding people to do well and prevent them from doing evil. He sees himself as absolutely legitimate in exerting any kind of pressure on the government, to impose what he believes is good from a religious perspective and to prevent what he considers bad. While he does not advocate a Khomeini-style Islamic government, he does intervene in order to maintain the country's Islamic legal framework and acts as a centre of gravity for the Shiite community in Iraq<sup>11</sup>.

### **Sistani and the differences between the regimes of Iran and Iraq**

Grand Ayatollah Sistani was born in Iran in 1930 and has focused on the study of Islam, first in the shrine of Qom (Iran), but then in the sacred city of Najaf for more than four decades, which has been the largest Shiite learning centre for a millennium. In addition, he is a specialist in *ijtihad*, a discipline that consists of applying the values of the Koran to contemporary everyday situations. These beliefs have made possible a commonality towards Western values in a way that had never been achieved before and that is inconceivable for Sunni fundamentalists.

It is also interesting to observe Sistani's position regarding the influence of religion in politics, which he opposes, thus being a supporter of the quietist current. He believes that clergy should not interfere with the government, but also that Iraqi Shiites need leadership from their clergy to develop the political infrastructure in which religion and politics occupy

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

different places. Sistani argues that no law should disagree with Islamic principles and he wants Islam to be recognized in law as the religion followed by the majority of Iraqis. However, he does not want to create a regime such as the Iranian one in Iraq. The way to achieve this is through pure democracy, not through that which was designed by the Americans to ensure that the Shiite majority did not outnumber the Sunni elite and the Kurds<sup>12</sup>.

A *marja's* wealth reinforces his popularity, and his popularity helps him increase his financial resources; and as the most followed *marja* in Iran and abroad, Sistani is the richest *marja* in the Shiite world. Moreover, because of his wealth, Sistani can pay higher monthly salaries to seminary students and clerics than any other *marja*<sup>13</sup>.

Whether the *marja* lives in Qom or Najaf, or even in other cities, he should have a main office in Qom, which is very important for his prestige and credit<sup>14</sup>. Currently, Sistani's office is Qom's largest and most important in terms of financial capacity and institutional ownership.

The religious rivalry between Iraqi and Iranian Shiites is based on differences between the apolitical quietist branch led by Grand Ayatollah Sistani and the beliefs of Ayatollah Khomeini who established an Islamic government.

The government foundations established by Khomeini in 1979 were based on his vision of the relationship between Islam and the state. He established the *velayat e faquih*<sup>15</sup> government in which he declared that there were no distinctions between the religious and political authorities in an Islamic state<sup>16</sup>. On the other hand, the quietist branch of

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<sup>12</sup> VALLELY, P. "Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani. The real face of power in Iraq", The Independent, 2004, available at <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/profiles/grand-ayatollah-ali-sistani-the-real-face-of-power-in-iraq-72394.html>. Date of access 20.03.19

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> KHALAJI, M. "The Last Marja: Sistani and the End of Traditional Religious Authority in Shiism", Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Washington DC, 2006.

<sup>15</sup> Velayat-e faqih, also known as Islamic Government, is a book written by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, which is considered the most influential document in supporting the theocratic government. This term is used to argue that a government should be run according to traditional Islamic laws. This doctrine was incorporated into the 1979 Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran after the Iranian Revolution when Ayatollah Khomeini proclaimed himself the Supreme Leader of Iran.

<sup>16</sup> SHEVLIN, N., "Velayat-e-faqih in the Constitution of Iran: The implementation of theocracy", Journal of Constitutional Law, pp. 358-382, 1998

Sistani argues that religion should not interfere in the affairs of the state and, therefore, there should be a separation between these powers and the religious authority should only act as a counsellor in moral matters, without intervening directly in political affairs.

In 1951, Sistani moved from the shrine of Qom to Najaf, and in 1992 he announced his intention to become a *marja*, but the clergy of Qom turned against him. Shahrestani, her daughter's husband, played an important role in showing the Iranian people, as well as the clerics, that Sistani was a great candidate to become a *marja*, which allowed him to reach that position. A very difficult part of Shahrestani's job, as the assistant and representative of Sistani, was to maintain the balance of power in the Qom seminary, not only between Sistani and other *marjas*, but also between Sistani and Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. Shahrestani made a great effort to depoliticize his activity and be neutral against various clerical and political tendencies. Sistani gained much of his power thanks to his popularity and his economic power.

### **Possible candidates to replace Sistani**

The great influence and power of Ayatollah Sistani comes mainly from his status as the *marja* followed by more than fifteen million Iraqi Shiites who see him as an example in every aspect of their lives. The Ayatollah's succession will depend on many factors, such as the preference for the quietist tradition established in Najaf or the theocracy preferred in Qom.

The problem involved with replacing an Ayatollah had never previously created a lot of problems; not because Sistani is a unique and irreplaceable leader, but because there are not many candidates who are as charismatic as Sistani and who are as influential as him. It will probably take quite some time to succeed Sistani, but what is clear is that this person must be someone with a great deal of training and specialized knowledge; and succeeding in conveying the charisma and trust that Sistani squandered for his Shiite followers all over the world.

Furthermore, there is no process as such for the selection of the next Ayatollah, but it must be those who are interested in doing so who devote a lot of time and effort in creating a great network of support.

### ***Ayatollah Shahroudi***

Hashemi Shahroudi would have been a good candidate for Sistani's succession. In fact, he was one of the most influential and most prepared candidates thanks to his campaign that was aimed at gaining followers. However, he passed away last December, leaving the issue of Sistani's succession to be more complicated than it already was. Ayatollah Hashemi Shahroudi was an Iranian-born cleric who was tortured by Saddam Hussein's regime because of his political activities. He returned to Iran after the Islamic Revolution and moved up the ranks since Khamenei came to power. Due to the advanced age of Grand Ayatollah Sistani, he intended to increase his presence among the Shiites in an attempt to replace Iraq's most powerful man when he passes away. This candidate was Iran's proposal, as the country intended to gain greater influence in Iraq. Thanks to Iran's funding, his representatives had been building a support network in Iraq for months, covering scholarships for students and distributing information through seminaries. Ayatollah Sistani is also of Iranian origin, but got support in Najaf because he was not involved in Iranian politics<sup>17</sup>.

Iran wants that one of its ayatollahs –such as Shahroudi, of Iraqi origin– replaces Sistani. This would give the country a very powerful platform to influence the Shiites in Iraq and the possibility of exporting the Islamic Revolution there, since Shahroudi is, like Khomeini, from the most fundamentalist Iranian school of thought. Iran is aware of the problem wherein Iraqi Shiites being loyal followers of Sistani, since the deep historical and theological differences mean that control of Iran is not assured.

Iran is carrying out a campaign that is the result of the great network of power and influence that the country has been building in recent years. Since ISIS took the city of Mosul in 2014 and proclaimed the Islamic Caliphate, Iran has intensified the distribution of millions of dollars to Iraqi clerics, politicians and tribal leaders to establish their own militias and further expand their influence in the territory. It seems that the Iranians, cautious not to provoke a direct confrontation with Sistani, are simply waiting for his death

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<sup>17</sup> ARANGO, T. "Iran Presses for Official to Be Next Leader of Shiites", The New York Times, 2012, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/12/world/middleeast/iran-promotes-its-candidate-for-next-shiite-leader.html?mtrref=www.google.com&qwh=F7C4882F9C0D15AB2C6F0360BC4740DA&gwt=pay>. Date of access 16.01.19

to proclaim the religious tutelage of the Shiite holy cities. If Shahroudi had assumed leadership in Najaf, Khomeini's work would have finally been accomplished<sup>18</sup>.

However, Najaf's senior officials are aware of Iran's intentions and see this possibility as unfeasible. Iran already expanded its influence in Iraq when it helped the Shiite government in Baghdad recover disputed areas with the Kurds<sup>19</sup>. In addition, a senior cleric in Najaf who sympathizes with Iran's interests would eliminate a rival for Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who claims to be the leader of Shiite Muslims worldwide. For a long time, Sistani has challenged Khamenei by the leadership of the global Shiite community, as he has millions of followers around the world<sup>20</sup>.

Like Khamenei, Shahroudi was a great defender of the Islamic Republic and its foundation under the principle of *velayat-e-faqih*, which made his position as Sistani's successor more complicated, since Sistani is of the quietist tradition. However, if Shahroudi had held either of these two positions, Khamenei would have ensured that his revolutionary ideals would have persisted.

Because there is no clear succession process, Shahroudi would have needed the support of a large number of ordinary Shiites, students and other clerics in order to replace Sistani<sup>21</sup>. After his death, the intense debate over who could replace Sistani became even more complicated, leaving few possibilities.

### ***Muqtada al-Sadr***

Muqtada al-Sadr is the Shiite cleric in Iraq who leads the Sadrist movement and has demonstrated an unparalleled ability to mobilize masses. Because of this, the influence of his father, Grand Ayatollah Mohammad Sadeq al-Sadr (prior to Sistani) and the

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<sup>18</sup> BLANCHE, E., "The battle for Iraq's soul - Najaf v Qom", The Arab Weekly, 2015, available at <https://thearabweekly.com/battle-iraqs-soul-najaf-v-qom>. Date of access 03.04.19

<sup>19</sup> ARANGO, T. "Iran Presses for Official to Be Next Leader of Shiites", The New York Times, 2012, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/12/world/middleeast/iran-promotes-its-candidate-for-next-shiite-leader.html?mtrref=www.google.com&qwh=F7C4882F9C0D15AB2C6F0360BC4740DA&gwt=pay>. Date of access 16.01.19

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> DEGHANPISHEH, B. "Iran vying for leadership of Shiites in Iraq", Reuters, 2017, available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-iraq-sistani/iran-vying-for-leadership-of-shiites-in-iraq-idUSKBN1D71V7?il=0>. Date of access 12.12.18

growing dissatisfaction in Iraq, al-Sadr has been presented as the greatest hope for Iraq to reduce Iran's presence and influence in the country.

Muqtada al-Sadr, of only 44 years of age (much younger than the rest of the candidates), since the US occupation of Iraq in 2003, positioned himself against US troops and used his father's network to fill the vacuum left by the state, approaching the poorer neighbourhoods of Baghdad and providing protection and social services to the lower Shiite class, in order to gain their gratitude and support.

He has also known how to approach the Sunnis, a group that feels marginalised in Iraq, with the aim of achieving reconciliation between the two branches of Islam. In order to emphasize his anti-Iranian vision, he has even visited leaders of the countries in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, the great opponents of Iran's influence and leadership in the region<sup>22</sup>.

Therefore, he presents himself as a possible candidate to defeat Iranian influence in Iraq. Nevertheless, his Mahdi Army has also participated in many of the conflicts that have been experienced in Iraq. In addition, not only did his organization receive support from Iran in the past, but he himself went into exile there for three years. The reason for his exile in Iran was that, with the aim of eliminating the US presence in Iraq, he promised in 2004 not to return to the country until all US troops had left<sup>23</sup>.

In recent years, just as his father did at the time and which led to his assassination under Saddam Hussein's regime, Muqtada has reappeared to support and empower the lower Shiite classes and promote resistance to Iran's interference in Iraqi affairs. Al-Sadr has sought to compete with Sistani for power and influence, just as his father did, but he has not gained the influence and support that would allow him to do so, but he may not need to do so once Sistani passes away.

After Sistani there may not be a predominant religious authority due to the weakening of the institutions and the different centres of power that have emerged within Shiism, which could affect the authority of Najaf. This could be an opportunity for Muqtada to fill the

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<sup>22</sup> ESPINOSA, A. "El triunfo en Irak del clérigo nacionalista chií Al Sadr inquieta a Teherán", El País, 2018, available at [https://elpais.com/internacional/2018/05/23/actualidad/1527091083\\_269147.html](https://elpais.com/internacional/2018/05/23/actualidad/1527091083_269147.html). Date of access 23.01.19

<sup>23</sup> CHULOV, M. "Moqtada al-Sar returns to Iraq after exile", The Guardian, 2011, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/jan/05/moqtada-al-sadr-returns-iraq>. Date of access 14.11.18

vacuum that Sistani will leave while securing Najaf's resistance to the Iraqi system of Islamic rule.

### ***Mohammed Sistani***

As previously mentioned, economic power is very important when choosing a new Grand Ayatollah. Following this argument, Mohammed Sistani could be a candidate for his father's succession. However, never before has a religious office been passed between relatives in the Shiite tradition<sup>24</sup>.

The Najaf office in Sistani is headed by his son Muhammad Reza Sistani, but observers believe that Muhammad Reza is not an important consultant for his father. He does his job as head of Ali Sistani's administration in Najaf, but on political issues, Muhammad Reza does not have much influence over his father. One of Sistani's main consultants in political affairs is Javad Shahrestani, his son-in-law, in Qom, but he is not considered a candidate for his succession<sup>25</sup> either.

### ***Other marjas in Najaf***

On the other hand, it is difficult to imagine that someone who is not from Najaf will take the place of Sistani once the differences between the various schools have been analysed. There are three other Ayatollahs in Najaf in addition to Sistani: Ayatollah Muhammed Saeed al-Hakim, Ayatollah Muhammed Ishaq al-Fayadh and Ayatollah Bashir Hussein al-Najafi.

Out of these three candidates, the person most likely to replace al-Sistani is Grand Ayatollah Muhammad Ishaq al-Fayadh, born in Afghanistan but residing in Najaf. He has been a friend of Sistani since the 1950s and has always been a great ally. Furthermore, Sistani's mentor, Ayatollah al-Khoei, recognized al-Fayadh as his most trusted student. For these reasons, al-Fayadh is a possible successor.

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<sup>24</sup> DEGHANPISHEH, B. "Iran vying for leadership of Shiites in Iraq", Reuters, 2017, available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-iraq-sistani/iran-vying-for-leadership-of-shiites-in-iraq-idUSKBN1D71V7?il=0>. Date of access 23.01.19

<sup>25</sup> RAHIMI, B. "Ayatollah Sistani and the Democratization of Post-Baathist Iraq", United States Institute of Peace, 2007.

If he does succeed Sistani, he is likely to be an opponent of U.S. interests and to be involved in the transition process. This is because he is of Afghan origin and felt displaced by US action in Afghanistan. Moreover, he will probably oppose the Sadrist movement, which still sees him as a foreign Afghan who should not have a voice in politics and Iraq.

On the other hand, Said Al-Hakim, of Iraqi origin, is also a possible candidate. It is true that he is older than the others (85 years), but being at the head of the Shiite courts he has quite a few possibilities, as these are the ones that manage all the Iraqi Shiite organizations<sup>26</sup>. Finally, Basheer Najafi is of Pakistani origin but has always resided in Najaf.

Although they each have their own ideas and personality, one thing they have in common is that they oppose a clerical government of *velayat al faqih*. However, the fact that these ayatollahs are approaching the age of 80 like Sistani creates even more uncertainty about what will happen when they die.

### ***Another possibility: the last marja?***

The politicization of Shiite authority has taken place, not only in Iraq, but throughout the Shiite world. Iran's supreme leadership has organized the traditional Shiite clerical establishment into a financial and political network. Even so, there is a moderate Shiite front. The change of the seminary from a religious educational institute that administered religious affairs to an integral fragment of an ideological arsenal of the Iranian fundamentalist government dates back to the start of the Iranian revolution<sup>27</sup>.

The politicization of the clerical network has gone beyond Iran. Sistani may be the last traditional Shiite authority, not only in Iraq, but throughout the Shiite world, which may lead to the reinforcement of the power and influence of the Iranian regime.

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<sup>26</sup> TAHA, Y. "Who Will Replace Sistani? Who Are The Most Prominent Individuals And Ayatollahs That Wish To Bring Najaf Under Their Control? Among The Iraqi Religious Authorities Who Are Committed To The Principle Of 'Guardianship Of The Islamic Jurist'?", Kurdistan Conflict and Crisis Research Center (KCCRC), 2018, available at <http://www.kurdistancc.com/EN/details.aspx?jimare=1050>. Date of access 16.12.18

<sup>27</sup> Khalaji, M. (2006). *The Last Marja: Sistani and the End of Traditional Religious Authority in Shiism*. Washington DC: Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

By eliminating the *marja*, the Iranian regime would eliminate any possibility of political change and thus limit the West's influence on Iran's controversial issues.

The fact that Sistani could be the last *mojtahed*<sup>28</sup> to reach such popularity and influence is not accidental, as in Iran, the process of becoming a *marja* has been gradually subjected to government control and oversight. The Najaf seminary is in such a difficult situation that it will be helpless for the next decades. The intellectual output of the seminary, if any, is centralized in Iran, and even if Iraq were to achieve stability, the seminary would not be able to carry out dynamic intellectual activities such as advanced courses or publications<sup>29</sup>.

In Shiism, a *marja* has no power or right to name his successor but dies without handing over his political and social influence or his economic wealth to anyone. Following Sistani's leadership, a kind of polarization will take place in which future *mojtaheds* will be forced to adapt to new circumstances; either they will officially join the political power structure and lose their independence, or they will try to be apolitical and deal with personal states and the collective rituals of religiosity.

In the new epoch, a *mojtahed* that does not belong to any government would only have limited financial resources. As the power is where the money is, being depoliticized would mean accepting the limitation of financial resources and their effect on popularity and social effect. Therefore, both groups, state *mojtaheds* and nongovernmental ones, are denying themselves of the resources to increase their social popularity. Iranian clerical networks in Iran and abroad would become fundamentally political instead of religious networks.

## Conclusions

The religious institution that Sistani has been creating in Najaf is a large network of schools and clerics that prides itself on its political and financial independence from any centre of power and is based on traditional and orthodox values of Shiite Islam.

No matter how hard Iran tries, it will probably not change it, but it will continue to try to

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<sup>28</sup> It is said of someone who is a scholar of Islam, a specialist in religious law, qualified to express opinions about the law and to interpret it, also known as jurists.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

influence global Shiism in pursuit of its own interests, although it is not known to what extent it will do so, since not even Saddam Hussein during the Iran-Iraq war got Najaf to take a pro-government stance.

Sistani's succession is seen as a possibility, both by Iran, by the international community, by other states in the region, by other movements, etc., to impose their ideas and interests in order to gain control.

It is not possible to know with certainty what will happen in Iraq with Sistani's passing, but it is possible to affirm that the country's situation will take different courses depending on the candidate who gets the support of all those who, at the moment, follow Sistani.

Due to the concern of the Iraqi Shiites, as well as many other actors, that Iran exerts more influence in the country, Muqtada al-Sadr shows him to be a firm candidate as a future *marja* and successor of Sistani.

This candidate would satisfy Iraq's thought of reducing Iran's influence on its affairs. However, it would have the opposite effect on Iran, as its intentions to consolidate the Shiite religion and establish the Qom shrine as the main seminary would be affected by this new candidate. If Muqtada al-Sadr were actually to be the next Shiite leader, new questions would have to be considered: What are his influences? What would his allies be in the power of Iraq? Given his origins, how would the countries of the Levant react? And what about the international community?

In the event that Sistani was the last *marja* and in the absence of a large *marja* in Iraq, like Sistani, any other *mojtahed* would have a small community of followers in the country without the opportunity to expand its network outside Iraq. In an era of politicization of the religious network and economic weakness of the independent *mojtaheds*, Khamenei's influence in Iraq is likely to increase<sup>30</sup>.

With financial support to the religious establishment in Najaf and other Shiite areas, Khamenei would enlarge the Shiite network in Iraq and would try to benefit from the absence of a powerful *marja* to expand it and connect it to a large global network. Religious authority in Iraq would stay independent of the Iraqi government and without any desire to be involved in government decision-making, except in times of crisis.

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

However, because the Najaf seminary is not economically and intellectually strong, it would still be overshadowed by the Qom seminary. So if Najaf wants to endure, it must collaborate closely with Qom, which would mean working with an establishment that is already under government control. Therefore, in the absence of a religious authority, the short-term winner is Iran's Supreme Leader. With the end of Sistani, Khamenei could be the leader of the Shiite network in the region<sup>31</sup>.

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<sup>31</sup> KHALAJI, M. "The Last Marja: Sistani and the End of Traditional Religious Authority in Shiism", Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2006.