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SAYYID ALI HUSAYN SISTANI: REVITALISING THE NAJAF MARJA'IYYA IN POST-2003 IRAQ

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*Religious scholars are neither angels nor infallible
Shiite religious scholar, al-Qatif, Saudi Arabia
(Saffar, 2018: 118, 286)*

Sistani as a supreme religious authority

Sistani, above all, is a Shia supreme religious authority, a *marja' al-taqlid*. The title, which means “point of reference for emulation”, developed during the 18th and 19th centuries and indicates the highest Shiite religious authority, above even Ayatollah. As the most knowledgeable among them, Shiite religious scholars have ever since deferred to the *marja' al-taqlid* in matters of jurisprudence. Other Shiite supreme religious authorities exist, as well as Sistani, above all in the best-known Shiite religious seminaries in Iran and Iraq. In Najaf alone there are at least four.

The *marja'* is usually a living religious authority who attracts students and lower rank scholars to his academic institution, as well as funds for his educational and charity activities from pious philanthropists. Sistani follows this centuries-old tradition. The wealth and depth of Sistani's academic achievements are evident in his many publications on matters of Islamic jurisprudence and its principles (*usul al-fiqh*), in his innova-

tive methodology for solving issues arising from conflicting *hadith*,¹ his studies on comparative *fiqh* and his reference to modern sciences and cultures. His distinguished circle of mentors and disciples has contributed to further enhancing his scholarly prestige.²

Beside his knowledge in matters of Islamic law (sharia) and jurisprudence, Sistani's authority is paramount for the millions of Shiites in Iraq and throughout the world. For them, he is the utmost point of reference, the source of emulation in

their quest for the correct implementation of God's command. His popularity can in fact be measured by the vast national and international network of religious, educational and charitable institutions that, financed by his followers' religious taxes (*khums* and *zakat*), donations and endowments, are administered in his name by trusted deputies and certified agents.

Abstract: This article is an in-depth portrait of Sayyid Ali Husayn Sistani as a supreme religious authority (*marja' al-taqlid*) in Shia Islam. It identifies his religious priorities in dealing with the post-2003 Iraqi state and examines his political interventions in the light of his traditional religious responsibilities as *marja'*. Sistani's engagement in shaping the relationship between religion and state is a promising and on-going attempt to bring together the high tradition of (Shiite) Islam with good governance in an unstable and highly fragmented Iraq. In fact, his advocacy for *al-hukm al-rashid* (the right, well-guided government) refers more frequently to the modern pillars of governance, such as rule of law, transparent and fair elections, inclusiveness and accountability than to classical religious teachings – and is markedly differentiated from the theocratic doctrine of *wilayat al-faqih* (the government of the jurist) in neighbouring Iran.

Key words Iraq, Sistani, Shi'ism-state relation, governance.

1. *Hadith* (plural *hawadith*) are the words and deeds of the Prophet and, for Twelver Shiites, of the twelve Imams as well, who are the legitimate spiritual and political successors of the Prophet. The *hawadith* are a fundamental source of Islamic law.
2. Sistani arrived in Najaf in 1951 as an Iranian-born Qom seminarist. He was 21 years old. In 1960 he obtained a license to exercise *ijtihad*, the scholar's personal effort to discern points of religious law. This license was a rare and extraordinary achievement as it was granted by two eminent scholars, Abu al-Qasim al-Khu'i (*marja' al-taqlid*) and Husayn al-Hilli.

Sistani's authority also stems from his evident piety. His dedication to the holy text and its long study tradition goes hand in hand with his simple lifestyle, his frugality, and even the humbleness of his house in old Najaf. It also stems from the determined way Sistani has displayed his independence from political powers. His peaceful heroism emerged most clearly between 2003 and 2005, the early years of the US occupation of the country (Cole, 2007: 70–71).

Many religious scholars have suffered and died over the centuries in the name of Islam and against tyranny.³ In this regard, Sistani's official biography gives few details on his struggle against Saddam Hussein's dictatorship (1979–2003). In Najaf, he witnessed the Ba'ath regime's harsh repression of the *hawza* (seminary) scholars and students suspected of siding with the enemy during the Iran–Iraq war (1980–88). He was arrested after the Shiite uprising in 1991 and subjected to brutal interrogations first in the Hotel al-Salama, then in al-Razaza military camp and finally in al-Radwaniya prison. Schools and the seminary were closed, academic publications halted, libraries destroyed. Consequently, the religious seminary lost most of its *'ulama* and students, as their number dropped from a reported 16,000 in 1968 to a mere 500 in 1991 (Al-Mu'min, 2020).⁴ In the following decade, Sistani withdrew from public life, thereby embracing the centuries-old quietist tradition that ultimately aims to protect Shi'ism and Shiites from repressive and unjust rulers.⁵ The *hawza* further declined as a leading academic and religious centre of Shi'ism.

Sistani's religious priorities: Najaf seminary (*hawza*) and the shrines (*'atabat*)

Najaf religious seminary and schools are adjacent to the Imam Ali shrine, the most venerated sanctuary and important pilgrimage destination in Shia Islam. For centuries,

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they have been prestigious centres of learning and attracted students in search of a deeper understanding of their faith and of authoritative certification of their diplomas and licenses. Shiite high tradition has been transmitted and rejuvenated by well-known scholars and preachers since the *hawza's* foundation in the 11th century CE. Schools, seminaries, libraries and publications further diffused Shi'ism across the world.

The financial independence of the *hawza* protected its religious status by making it impermeable to state interference. Donations, endowments and religious taxes paid directly to its scholars and highest religious authorities (*maraji'*, the plural of *marja'*) increased its fame and expanded its charitable networks inside and outside Iraq. The *hawza* thus survived the fall of empires, nomadic invasions and colonial mandate.

When Sistani's status as *marja'* started to develop in the early 1990s, the *hawza* was suffering from Saddam Hussein's policies of assassination, intimidation and isolation. The Ba'ath repression that followed the Shiite uprising in 1991 further drained its resources, made meagre by the arrest and deportation of its students and scholars, the absence of pilgrims to the Imam Ali shrine and the destruction of part of the Wadi al-Salam, the nearby cemetery where pious Shiites desire to be buried.

Sistani had had his status of *marja'* conferred by his mentor and *marja' al-taqlid*, Abu l-Qasim al-Khu'i, together with the directorate of the *hawza*. Upon al-Khu'i's death in 1992, Sistani also became the supervisor of his vast local and international network of religious endowments and charity organisations, which would over time help expand his financial resources and build his prestige among Shiites in Iraq and across the world. With Najaf in decline, it was in the flourishing Shiite seminary in Qom, Iran, where Sistani's popularity had grown since the mid-1990s with the help of his son-in-law, Javad al-Shahrastani, also his most senior representative and adviser (Rahimi, 2007: 4–8). According to Nasr, Sistani's moral guidance does not, however, seem to have attracted eminent Iranian clerics but rather a huge number of common Iranians, whose religious taxes and donations continued to pour into his Qom office and, after 2003, directly into his Najaf office as well. Sistani's reputation as a pious *marja'* would only grow further, as it contrasted with the perceived corruption of clerics in Iran (Nasr, 2006: 172, 221).

With the fall of the Ba'ath regime in spring 2003, the Najaf seminary could finally regain its pre-eminence as a pulsing heart of Shi'ism and the seat of its most popular religious authority. Financial resources have ever since flowed from Sistani's followers in Iraq, the Persian Gulf, the Levant, Africa, Europe, the Americas, the Indian sub-continent and Australia. In less than two decades, the seminaries' students and teachers have increased from 500 to 15,000. New schools, specialised institutes and academies have opened at which scholars deepen their theological and legal studies, revitalising the academic production of the seminary. *Hawza* branch-

3. The Shiite scholar Hasan al-Saffar affirms that religious scholars have the responsibility to at least advise, admonish and guide rulers, whether they are legitimate and just or not, because the well-being of the Muslim community depends on the ruler's decisions. He observes that many *'ulama* are hesitant to exercise this guiding role because they refuse to interfere in political affairs for fear of damaging their reputation or for lack of interest in the public good (Saffar, 2018: 244, 248–249).
4. Numbers of students and teachers at the *hawza* are not verifiable. According to Nakash (Nakash, 1994: 236–7, 254–60), the decline of the Najaf *hawza* as the religious centre of Shi'ism goes back to the mid-20th century when, for a combination of reasons such as the lack of local religious endowments and limited financial contributions, modern education, urbanisation and repressive government policies, the *hawza* lost its attractiveness. In 1957, fewer than 2,000 students were enrolled. In 1985, there were under 150 students, scholars and functionaries.
5. Shiite quietism is modelled upon the path of the Twelve Imams, the legitimate successors of the prophet Muhammad through Ali, his cousin and son-in-law. Only the Imams know the esoteric meanings of God's revelation transmitted by the Prophet to Ali and only they have the ultimate authority in the interpretation of the Qur'an. The Imams patiently endured persecution and intense suffering at the hands of tyrannical rulers, with the exception of Husayn, son of Ali, who fought in Karbala and was martyred to defend his people against the Umayyad army in 680 CE, and the Mahdi, who is in occultation and will return upon God's decree to restore justice on earth. This patient endurance is called *mazlumiya* (Momen, 1985: 236).

es have opened in Karbala, Kazimiya and other cities, adding 3,000 more scholars and students⁶

Sistani's growing network and worldwide popularity have increased the *hawza's* financial and intellectual resources, enhancing its academic and social prestige, managing its complex organisation and guaranteeing its centrality in the post-2003 Iraqi socio-political order.

The *hawza's* success is Sistani's success, the two reinforcing each other in the diffusion of Shi'ism and the strengthening of its community of believers. This is, after all, the primary responsibility of the *marja'*. Together with the specialised personnel (teachers, mosque imams, preachers, propagandists) trained by the Najaf religious academies and schools for the care of souls and the correct execution of religious duties and ritual performance, nearly 40 social and educational institutions have been directly founded and funded by Sistani in the Shiite religious centres of Iran and Iraq, namely in Najaf, Karbala, Qom and Mashhad.

According to Hamid al-Khaffaf (2019), his representative in Lebanon, the money Sistani spends in Iraq far exceeds the total revenue of the religious taxation of his Iraqi followers. This also explains the robust network of educational, social organisations and civic associations that he has developed throughout Iraq, in particular in the Shiite dominated areas of central and southern Iraq.

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[Sistani] does not have big savings, as some people divulge [...] It is worth mentioning that in the early stage of his course of action as *marja'*, His Eminence authorised his Iraqi followers to pay their legal [religious] obligations directly to the poor and not through him. This fatwa had important, blessed effects on the Iraqi street (al-Khaffaf, 2019).

Sistani's financial resources are not public. They are therefore difficult to estimate and no serious endeavour has been made in this regard. Reports about a presumed financial empire have been dismissed by his followers as baseless. Demands for public disclosure of the budget of his organisations or the allocation of religious taxes are usually brushed aside as political attempts to curtail his independence and limit his influence.

Religious scholars are neither angelic nor infallible, as the Saudi Shiite cleric Hassan al-Saffar declares (2018). However, a supreme *marja'* such as Sistani enjoys a great degree of inviolability among his followers and their emotions run high whenever his piety is questioned, directly or indirectly.

A recent controversy involving the US-funded Alhurra TV provides a good example of this.

In the programme Al-Hurra Tataharra, Alhurra TV aired a documentary on August 31st 2019 on alleged corruption of the Sunni and Shiite offices of religious endowment in Iraq. Among other things, it denounced the unprecedented political and economic power accumulated since 2003 by the secretaries general of the main Shiite shrines (*'atabat*) in Karbala – who are also Sistani's main representatives in Iraq – their investment projects and the lack of state control over them “as they have become more powerful than the state”.⁷

This was the first documentary of this kind and may be the last. Accusing it of unprofessionalism and bias, Iraq's Communication and Media Commission suspended the channel for three months and threatened more restrictive measures if “this offense is repeated”. The government, political parties and prominent figures all rejected the report. According to Reuters News Agency (2019), Al Hurra journalists received threats and intimidation. The report was circulated widely in social media and provoked a vast range of reactions among common Iraqis, who

had been protesting against state corruption intermittently since 2011. Religious figures and institutions had kept out of the fray until then.

Neither Sistani's office in Najaf nor the Office of Shiite Endowments in Baghdad publicly reacted to the Alhurra TV report. Instead, it was al-Khaffaf, Sistani's representative in Lebanon, who denied Sistani's responsibility for the shrines' activities. These activities, he said, are overseen by the independent Office of Shiite Endowments which, in turn, reports to the Presidency of the Council of Ministers. Al-Khaffaf (2019) went on to explain:

The truth is that the shrines [*al-'atabat al-muqaddasa*], and in particular in the holy Karbala, have undertaken sanitary, pedagogical, social, educational and occupational projects that are extremely important [as] they have contributed to alleviating the hardship of the citizens. They [also] have investment projects to support and expand charity activities. The institutions and organs subject to the religious *marja'iyya* have no surveillance over the activities of the shrines, which operate instead in full independence from him.

The Alhurra TV documentary has already been largely forgotten. It is however important to note that, despite the popular and political defence of Shiite religious entities, Khaffaf felt obliged to clarify the case in order to publicly reject media accusations, protect the *marja'iyya's* piety and highlight the multiple functions of the shrines as in-

6. There seem to be 40 mujtahid (*'ulama*) and 10 maraji'. However, a seminary's customary rule seems to limit the official number of maraji' to four, including the supreme *marja'*, Sistani. Al-Mu'min (2020)

7. The secretaries general of the al-Husayniya and al-Abbassiya shrines in Karbala, Abd al-Mahdi al-Karbala'i and Ahmad al-Safi are Sistani's representatives and close associates. Sistani himself conferred this position on them in 2003.

dependent Shiite institutions regulated by law. However, as we shall see below, the same law explains Sistani's role in shaping the governance of the shrines and ensuring his ultimate control over it.

The religious importance of the 'atabat lies in the belief that the Imams are buried there. They are therefore important places of pilgrimage (*ziyarat*) and of intense devotion among Twelver Shiites. The veneration of their Imams is in fact the central tenet of Shi'ism and the main doctrinal divergence from Sunnism. The Imams are the heirs of the Prophet Muhammad through Ali and Fatima, respectively cousin/son-in-law and daughter of the Prophet, and the transmitters of the esoteric meaning of the revelation that continued uninterrupted until the great occultation of the 12th Imam, Muhammad al-Mahdi, in 941 CE. Visiting their shrines is an act of devotion, rather than an obligation upon the faithful like the pilgrimage (*hajj*) to Mecca. The shrine cities in Iraq are Karbala, Najaf, al-Kazimiya and Samarra. Karbala and Najaf, the cities where Imam Husayn and his father Imam Ali are buried, are the most important. Places of collective memory and identity, the 'atabat have been attacked, destroyed, damaged or pillaged over the long history of persecution of the Shia. Shiite rites were frequently forbidden in these places by state authorities for fear that they could turn into calls for popular revolts, as in the case of the 'ashura commemorations.⁸ More recently, an al-Qaeda terror attack on the al-'Askariyyan shrine in Samarra on February 22nd 2006 sparked the first post-2003 Iraqi civil conflict.

All Shiites are called on to defend the shrines from attack.

In Syria, concerns over terrorist attacks against the Sayyida Zaynab shrine in Damascus gave the Lebanese Hezbollah the pretext to intervene in the Syrian civil war in 2011. The same might have occurred in Iraq as well had Sistani not intervened to take responsibility for their protection against ISIL threats.⁹

Protecting the 'atabat and the performance of the rituals associated with them is among Sistani's top priorities. To ensure that they do not fall prey to the state's interventions and that no one can ever sanction attacks or hostile activities against them, he played an important role in their institutionalisation, as requested in Article 10 of the Iraqi constitution.

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Article 10 recognises that "The holy shrines [*al-'atabat al-muqaddasa*] and sacred places in Iraq are religious and civilizational entities. It is the obligation of the state to assure and protect their sacrality and to guarantee the religious ceremonies to be there freely (performed)". With the 'atabat officially recognised as an integral part of Iraqi religious and cultural heritage, Shi'ism finds its place in the Iraqi constitution and its ultimate protector in the Iraqi state.

Law no. 19 (2005) on the administration of the 'atabat and *mazarat* (sacred places of visitation), further regulates their activities and puts them under the jurisdiction of the same laws that stipulate the financial monitoring of governmental organisations and agencies. It also creates the position of the secretary general of the shrines. Sistani's closest associates Abd al-Mahdi al-Karbala'i and Ahmad al-Safi respectively control the Imam Husayn and Imam Abbas shrines in Karbala (Khaffaf, 2019).

According to Hasan (Hasan, 2019: 11–13), the institutionalisation of the shrines is new in the history of Iraqi Shi'ism. So is the institutionalised role the *marja'iyya* plays in their governance, as per the 2012 law for the Office of Shiite Endowments (OSHE) whose main drafter, according to Hasan, was Sistani's office in Najaf. The paramount importance of the shrines in both Shi'ism and its religious establishment explains

Sistani's involvement in shaping their governance and his commitment to ensuring their protection by and from the state. In fact, the 2012 law stipulates that the prime minister names the president of the OSHE after consultation

with the *marja'*, who is also the final arbiter in the selection of the managers of the shrines and of the Shiite endowments. As religious institutions, the shrines benefit from state contributions to their operational costs and additional financial support from the OSHE budget. The latter, however, does not have authority over Shiite religious schools and seminaries (Harith, 2019: 11–13).

Sistani and the new Iraqi state

After the de-Ba'athification order from the US civil administration in May 2003, Sistani was the only figure who could command obedience and respect from the great majority of Shiites in the country. His words, whether fatwas, sermons or statements, could mobilise masses of believers. His opinions and judgements could align otherwise quarrelling and divided Shiite Islamist leaders towards a common good. Guardian of (Shiite) Islam and its supreme authority for Iraqi Shiites, Sistani thus became a powerful socio-political force able to help Iraq regain independence and sovereignty. A sovereign, independent Iraq would ultimately prove Iraqi Shi'ism's capacity to promote successful democratic and authentically Iraqi governance (*al-hukm al-rashid*), at least in theory. This would be Sistani's guiding principle.

During the US civil administration (2003–2004) he therefore demanded that general elections be held to form a constitu-

8. 'Ashura, on 10 Muharram, marks the death of the Prophet Muhammad's grandson, Imam Husayn, in Karbala in 680 CE during his military campaign against the Umayyad army, whose reign had in his eyes usurped the legitimate right of the Prophet's family to rule. The ritual is distinctively Shiite. Processions with lamentations and, in the most extreme cases, self-flagellation, reenact the Shiite community's trauma of that tragedy. For more details, see Nasr (2006), 30–51. 'Ashura processions historically also served to denounce political authorities. A notable example were the 'ashura commemorations in Najaf and Karbala in 1977, which turned into a Shiite uprising, known as the *Safar intifada* or the first Islamic revolution. They were banned during Saddam Hussein's regime (Alaaldin, 2017)

9. It is worth mentioning that ISIL threats against the Iraqi Shiite shrines prompted both Hasan Nasrallah, leader of the Lebanese Hezbollah, and Hassan Rouhani, the Iranian president, to declare their readiness to defend them in June 2014. Sistani's militias (PMFs) and the Iraqi army have since then been ensuring their protection from external interference and in support of the Iraqi-ness of their holy defence. In April 2020, Sistani's representatives al-Karbala'i and al-Safi transferred the administrative control of Sistani's PMFs to the prime minister's office, raising questions about their relationship with the PMFs' overall command structure.

tional committee that would decide the shape the new state should take and the principles that should govern it.¹⁰

The demographic weight of Iraqi Shiites, Sistani's prestige among them and the robust presence of Shiite Islamist parties, meant the election results were bound to make these parties the dominant players in the constitutional drafting process. It seems that Sistani, having reined in the mercurial Muqtada al-Sadr on several occasions, may have played a role in uniting the main Shiite Islamist parties SCIRI, Da'wa and the Sadrist under the United Iraqi Alliance (UIA).¹¹ The UIA thus won the elections on January 30th 2005, nominated their first prime minister and led the drafting of the new constitution. The constitutional referendum on October 15th 2005 generated massive popular support for the new charter with over 78% of the votes.

The Iraqi constitution was drafted in less than nine months, after the fall of a brutal 25-year dictatorship, under US occupation and with increasing political tensions and security concerns. Contrary to the expectations of many observers in the region and elsewhere, the constitution did not turn Iraq into an Islamic Republic or a Shia theocracy. Article 2 recognises Islam as the official religion of the state and a fundamental source of legislation and provides that no law can contradict the "settled rulings of Islam". Asserting the conformity of laws with the "settled rulings of Islam" is however the responsibility of the Federal Supreme Court, where the number and the role of the "experts of Islamic jurisprudence" are still debated. The court, as Hamoudi (2003: 692–693, 699–700) explains, has not been busy establishing the Islamic credentials of laws, as Article 2 of the constitution has not been a matter of concern among lawmakers.

Sistani did not take up the reins of the state. He did not demand the application of sharia law (shari'a) as its main obligation. Nor did he require government officials to be experts in Islamic law (*fiqh*). The new post-Ba'athist political system would thus be

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10. The election of the Transitional National Assembly (TNA) was Sistani's first political success. Contradicting the initial US approach of leaving Iraq to the Iraqis, Paul Bremer's civilian authority (May 2003–June 2004) engaged directly in state building. He decided to dismantle the Iraqi state and army, creating an institutional and security vacuum that led to a vicious cycle of terror and civil wars. Keen on keeping control of the state-building process, Bremer was against the election of the TNA, favouring the formation and co-opting of provincial caucuses instead. Sistani reacted against Bremer's approach by mobilising masses of people across the country and, with the mediation of the UN envoy Lakhdar Brahimi, finally managed to get the American administration to accept free and fair national elections by the end of January 2005. Once elected, the TNA appointed the Constitutional Committee. In a statement issued by his office on May 4th 2018, Sistani reconfirmed that his call for the January 2005 elections was and continues to be the right one. "Bayan maktab al-Sayyid hawla al-Intikhabat al-niyabiya fi l-'Iraq' amm 2018 17 Sha'ban 1439-05/04/2018" (Statement of Sayyid's Office on the Iraqi Parliamentary elections in 2018), al-bayanat al-sadira, (online), [accessed on 03/04/2020] <http://sistani.org>.

11. Visser (Visser, 2003: 19–20) rejects the suggestions of Sistani's role in the UIA's formation. According to him, Shiite Islamist parties instead sought Sistani's legitimisation, while he remained aloof from political manoeuvring.

neither theocratic nor secular, but one in which Islam was recognised as a source of law and identity for the majority of Iraqi citizens. It would require that the ruler – the now democratically elected government in Baghdad – establish and maintain order while being advised but not ruled by the *marja'iyya*. Sistani's moral guidance remained informal, with the ultimate objective of warding off despotism and injustice. Stemming from his attentive observation (*muraqaba*) of the political sphere, his advice may cross into direct intervention in politics when state authority and/or society cohesion are at risk of collapsing. This occurred in 2003–2005, 2006, 2014 and 2018–19.

Sistani defined the "right government" as follows:

All [political] parties have the national responsibility not to waste any opportunity to shape a common vision for the future of this people, about which their fathers dreamt and which has not yet been realised. This dream is a sovereign Iraq, governed by its sons, whose decisions are not taken with the participation of foreigners, and whose government, which stems from the will of its people, is a right government [*hukm rashid*] at the service of all its citizens with their different ethnicities and religions and provides for all of them a respectable and happy life, in honour and security.¹²

The state is no longer a dictator with a secular ideology to oppose. In reality, it is a Shiite-led elected government that sits in Baghdad alongside the political representatives of the other main components of Iraqi society, the Kurds and the Sunni Arabs. In this regard, Sistani does not check the Islamic credentials of the people's representatives, be they ministers or parliamentarians.

On the contrary, he ultimately calls on Iraqis to choose their electoral candidates on the basis of their qualities, skills and programmes and not according to regional, tribal and confessional allegiances. Sistani thus calls for a government of technocrats and not for an Islamic government.¹³

And yet, despite Sistani's guidance, order and stability in post-2003 Iraq are far from assured. Iraqi political fragmentation and regional rivalries worsened during the US military occupation of the country (2003–2011). Identity politics fostered sectarianism. Internal insurgency coupled with al-Qaeda terrorism first (2004–7) and ISIL's bloody military campaigns later (2014–17) repeatedly tore Iraqi society apart and deepened mistrust and division.

12. "Nass al-khutba al-thaniya allati alqaha mumaththil al-marja' iya al-diniya al-'uliya fadhilat al-'allama al-shaykh Ahmad al-Safi fi yawm 14 jumada al-awwal 1441/10 January 2020" (Text of the second part of the sermon given by the representative of the supreme religious *marja'iyya*, Excellency most erudite Shaykh Ahmad al-Safi) al-Tahdithat [Date accessed 04/04/2020], www.sistani.org

13. "Nass al-khutba al-thaniya allati alqaha mumaththil al-marja' iya al-diniya al-'uliya al-shaykh Abd al-Mahdi al-Karbala'i fi 23 rabi' al-akhar 1441/20 December 2019" (Text of the second part of the sermon given by the representative of the supreme religious *marja'iyya*, al-Shaykh Abd al-Mahdi al-Karbala'i) al-tahdithat, [Date accessed 10/04/2020] www.sistani.org

Sistani sought to avoid pouring oil on the fire of chaos and sectarian discord but to no avail. His statement delivered on February 22nd 2006 in the aftermath of al-Qaeda's terror attack on the al-'Askariyayn mausoleum in Samarra denounced the takfirists' plot to seed discord among Iraqis and hinted, for the first time, at the formation of Shiite militias to protect holy places.¹⁴

Five months later, when the civil war was ravaging the country, Sistani wrote a public letter in which he defended his own work on behalf of social peace from the very first days of the US occupation until:

the greatest tragedy, the explosion of the mausoleum of the two Imams, al-'Askariyayn, has led to the blind violence we witness everywhere in the country, in particular in our beloved Baghdad. Today, I repeat my call to all Iraqis of all sects and ethnicities to realise the gravity of the danger that threatens the future of the country [...] The current circumstances demand that all partners, in collaboration with the elected Iraqi government, take the decision to protect the sanctity of Iraqi blood [...] and to promote constructive dialogue to solve the crisis and the on-going divergences on the basis of equity, justice, equality of all in rights and duties, and shun power struggles and sectarian and ethnic domination.¹⁵

In his letter Sistani linked disunion with foreign interference; sectarianism with inequalities and injustice. To counter these negative trends, he calls for an all-inclusive national dialogue that would reaffirm the main principles of good governance, namely elections, inclusiveness, justice, equality, equity and the rule of law.

Iraq, though, achieved neither stability, unity or reconciliation. In 2014, when ISIL hordes started to conquer territory north of Baghdad and across the areas contested by Kurds and Arabs, the country had already been brutalised for years by terrorist attacks and engulfed in sectarianism, endemic corruption and social unrest. When Mosul fell under ISIL control on June 10th 2014, following the terrorists' capture of Ramadi and Falluja earlier that year, the country still lacked a functioning government after parliamentary elections on April 30th had failed to lead to a unifying leadership with a non-sectarian outlook and a pro-reform programme. The collapse of the Iraqi army during its short-lived attempt to

defend Mosul – the second-largest city in Iraq – sent the unmistakable signal that Baghdad and the rest of the country would soon surrender to the Islamic caliphate of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. Nuri al-Maliki, who was actively seeking a third term as prime minister, tried unsuccessfully to secure a parliamentary vote that would allow him to declare a state of emergency and assemble an army of volunteers.

Sistani and the defence of post-2003 Iraq

Sistani was silent for several years after demonstrations across the country in 2011 prompted his latest call for serious political changes and better socio-economic conditions. His communication with the government had officially shut down, as political parties and their leaders had proven unwilling to implement the necessary reforms to fight against corruption, reduce their own privileges and reform the public administration.¹⁶ Meanwhile, the civil war in neighbouring Syria, with the multiplication of armed opposition groups and the emerging threats of al-Qaeda and ISIL, also increased Iraqi insecurity and instability.

Three years later and just a few miles away from Baghdad, ISIL was now threatening to conquer the state Sistani had helped shape and bring the country under the sword of anti-Shiite Sunni radicalism and obscurantism. The weakness of the state to push back and defeat ISIL's army let Sistani to take the initiative. His words would thus help revert the course of history and assert his leadership once again. His Friday sermon on June 13th 2014, which was delivered by his representative in Karbala, Shaykh Abd al-Mahdi al-Karbala'i, gave Maliki's call for volunteers the legitimacy that parliament had denied it and made Sistani an exceptional force of mobilisation.

"Terrorists aim at conquering not only some governorates such as Ninawah and Salah al-Din but all the others, in particular Baghdad, holy Karbala and noble Najaf. They aim at all Iraqis in all areas. Therefore, all [Iraqis] and not a specific sect or group must repulse and defy them [...] The defence of our sons in the armed forces and security apparatuses is a holy defence".

Iraq and Iraqis face enormous dangers and challenges. Terrorists aim at conquering not only some governorates such as Ninawah and Salah al-Din but all the others, in particular Baghdad, holy Karbala and noble Najaf. They aim at all Iraqis in all areas. Therefore, all [Iraqis] and not a specific sect or group must repulse and defy them [...] The defence of our sons in the armed forces and security apparatuses is a holy defence.

To the armed forces: your goal and motivation are the defence of the holy places of Iraq, its unity, the security

14. "Bayan maktab samahat al-Sayyid hawla l-i'tida' al-athim ' ala maqam al-Imamayn al-' Askariyayn 23 Muharram 1427/22 February 2006", (Statement of H.E. al-Sayyid's office on the evil criminal attack against the sacred place of the two al-Askari Imams) al-bayanat al-sadira, [Date accessed 12.03.2020] www.sistani.org

15. "Risalat samahat al-Sayyid li l-sha' ab al-' Iraqi hawla l-fitna al-ta'ifiya 22 jumada al-thani 1427/19 July 2006" (Letter of H.E. al-Sayyid to the Iraqi people on sectarian civil strife) al-tahdithat [Date accessed 14.03.2020] www.sistani.org

16. "Bayan maktab samahat al-Sayyid hawla l-muzaharat yawm al-jum'a 22 rabi' al-awwal 1432/ 26 February 2011" (Statement of H.E. al-Sayyid's office on the demonstrations) al-bayanat al-sadira, [Date accessed 02.06.2020] www.sistani.org

of its citizens, the protection of all that is sacred from ravishing [...] The supreme religious *marja'iyya* [...] reaffirms that all those who die victims in the defence of the country, of its people and lands, are martyrs [...].

He decreed that:

The danger is such that this defence is a collective obligation for all citizens [...] All who can take up arms and fight against the terrorists to defend their country, its people and sacred places, must enrol voluntarily in the security forces.¹⁷

Obedying Sistani's fatwa on the obligatory defence against ISIL, tens of thousands of volunteers quickly enrolled. The main Shiite militias, the popular mobilisation forces (PMFs, or *al-hashd al-sha'abi* in Arabic) were thus born, along with other PMFs of all sects and ethnicities. Many Shiite militias turned to Iran for funds, training, equipment and coordination. Separately, in Najaf and Karbala, students and scholars from the *hawza* joined the fight in large numbers. The Partisans of the Marja'iyya, the Abbass Combat Division, the Imam Ali Combat Division and the Ali al-Akbar Brigade became known as Sistani's PMFs. Supported by the Iraqi Army, they were assigned to the security of the shrines – the 'atabat – and they remain there to this day.

Soon, the Iran-backed PMFs would take the upper hand and challenge the balance of forces on the ground, both militarily and politically, raising the strategic stakes in the national and international fight against ISIL. Sistani's fatwa, which sought to unite Iraqis under the leadership of the Iraqi state, instead unleashed forces that would prove difficult to contain and that would fragment Iraq even further.

Did he underestimate the power of the militias and their regional supporters? Did he overestimate the Baghdad government's capacity to lead the process? Or did the paramount danger of a radical Sunni caliphate 40 miles from Baghdad banish his concerns about sectarianism and sectarian militias?

Sistani was aware of the risk posed by the latter, as he felt compelled to clarify the non-sectarian nature of his fatwa in the following Friday's sermons and to reiterate his call on the caretaker government to organise, coordinate and control the PMFs, a near-impossible task given the Iraqi army's col-

17. "Nass ma urida fi khutba al-jum' li-mumaththil al-marja' iya al-diniya al-' uliya fi Karbala al-muqaddasa al-shaykh Abd al-Mahdi al-Karbala'i fi 14 sha'ban 1435/ 13 June 2014" (text of what was transmitted in the Friday sermon by the representative of the supreme religious marja'iyya, al-Shaykh Abd al-Mahdi al-Karbala'i, in the sacred Karbala), al-tahdithat, [Date accessed 13.04.2020] www.sistani.org

lapse and the state authority's decline. On June 20th, July 4th and July 11th, Sistani's representatives in Karbala persistently repeated that:

[Sistani's] appeal was addressed to all Iraqis since Daesh [ISIL] targets the sacred places of all Iraqis with no distinctions between faiths and theological doctrines"; "the religious *marja'iyya* appeals for enrolment in the official security forces and not to form unlawful armed forces"; "the *marja'iyya* is grateful to the security forces and the volunteers associated with them who are fighting against foreign terrorists for the defence of our country and of all components and sects of its people"; "Iraqis must unite and put aside divisions and contrasts. This is the reason we have asked politicians and media commentators to abstain from radical discourses"; "the respect for the constitution and its clauses must be the basis on which all [their] positions rest".¹⁸

Sistani's fatwa was perfectly in line with the religious function and duty of a *marja'*, and his extra-constitutionality was never questioned. The defence of the country against ISIL was a religiously sanctioned, binding duty for all Iraqis. It was the right path, according to God's will. In the absence of the Imam, the *marja' al-taqlid* has the duty to declare defensive jihad (Momen, 1985: 180, 190–191).

According to Sistani's sermons, legislation was instead urgently required to regulate the integration of the militias (PMFs) in the army and the security apparatuses so as to establish the authority of the state over them. After all, legislation is a function of the state and not of a *marja'*.

Neither a monolithic bloc nor, in fact, exclusively Shiite, the PMFs quickly became a military and political force and the Iran-backed PMFs emerged as

the most powerful among them. The law on the PMFs was passed by the Iraqi parliament on November 26th 2016. They became official paramilitary forces reporting directly to the prime minister but, de facto, independent from him. In fact, by the time this law passed, the Iran-backed PMFs had already become an indispensable, well-trained and highly moti-

18. "Nass ma urida bi-sha'n al-awda' al-rahina fi l-' Iraq fi khutba al-jum' allati alqaha al-' allama al-sayyid Ahmad al-Safi fi yawm 21 sha' ban 1435/20 June 2014" (Text of what was transmitted about Iraqi current circumstances in the Friday sermon given by the most erudite al-Sayyid Ahmad al-Safi); "Nass ma urida bi-sha'n al-awda' ar-rahina fi l-' Iraq fi khutba al-jum' allati alqaha fadilat al-' allama al-sayyid Ahmad al-Safi fi yawm 5 Ramadan 1435/4 July 2014" (text of what was transmitted in the Friday sermon given by the Excellency, the most erudite al-Sayyid Ahmad al-Safi about Iraqi current circumstances); "Nass ma urida bi-sha'n al-awda' ar-rahina fi l-' Iraq fi khutba al-jum' li-mumaththil al-marja' iya al-diniya al-' uliya fi Karbala al-muqaddasa fadhila al-' allama al-shaykh Abd al-Mahdi al-Karbala'i fi 12 Ramadan 1435/11 July 2014" (Text of what was transmitted about Iraqi current circumstances in the Friday sermon of the representative of the supreme religious marja'iyya, the Excellency most erudite al-Shaykh Abd al-Mahdi al-Karbala'i, in the sacred Karbala), al-tahdithat, [Date accessed May-June 2020] www.sistani.org

tivated ground force, and a year later, in the aftermath of the victory against ISIL in December 2017, they were ready to turn into a strong political party. Contrary to Sistani's fatwa, they soon spun beyond of the control of both state and religious authorities.

In his "sermon of victory" on December 12th 2017, Sistani's representative praised the June fatwa as the stimulator and the aggregator of all Iraq's best energy in the fight against ISIL. He paid tribute to the many fighters who obeyed his religious decree to defend Iraq and admonished whoever tried to utilise them for political gains:

Most Iraqis who participated in the collective defence (against ISIL) were not motivated by material gains. Instead, they answered the *marja'iyya's* call and fulfilled the religious and patriotic duty driven [only] by their love for Iraq and Iraqis [...] They enjoy enormous respect among all Iraqis and have an eminent position in many milieux beyond that of any party or political current. It is necessary to protect this eminent position and to avoid it being used for political purposes.¹⁹

Sistani could not, however, stop the Iran-backed PMFs' military and political rise, neither could the two government decrees issued first by Prime Minister Haydar al-Abadi in March 2018 and later by Prime Minister Adil Abd al-Mahdi in July 2019 rein them in. In a sermon to commemorate his June fatwa on collective defence, Sistani's representative denounced the petty, narrow interests of political parties and their unwillingness to fight against corruption and reform the public administration in the following terms:

After the victory against Daesh, the divergences between those who hold the power have resurfaced. The conflict is between the forces who want to preserve their positions and the other forces who distinguished themselves during the war against Daesh and who now strive to consolidate their presence and to achieve certain gains. The fierce struggle over posts and positions – including the ministries of defence and interior – and the supporting quota system continue to hinder the formation of the new government. The worsening corruption in the institutions of the state continues not to be met with effective clear measures to stop it and with the accountability of those involved in it. The heavy administrative bureaucracy,

the scarcity of job opportunities and the severe deficit of public services continue.²⁰

The victory over ISIL soon divided the different political forces more than it united them. Within the Shiite parties, the emergence of the Iran-backed PMFs as a new powerful political party under the banner of the al-Fath coalition altered the balance of power in Baghdad and increased Iranian influence at a time of mounting tensions between Iran and the United States, the two main external powers in Iraq.

Sistani has pragmatically avoided aligning himself with one or the other, knowing that both countries still have the capacity to impact Iraq's stability and sovereignty. Lacking a strong government and a robust military capable of confronting both internal and external threats, Iraq would have fallen into ISIL hands had it not been for the US-led international coalition against ISIL and the Iranian military's support. Sistani has cautiously remained aloof from the charged political debate around the presence of foreign troops in Iraq as a result of the ISIL menace — but has not concealed his concerns about Iraq becoming the arena for a US–Iran proxy war.²¹

Sistani is not an Iraqi national, nationality being irrelevant for such a supreme religious authority. His transnational religious role as *marja' al-taqlid* does not conflict with his

defence of the Iraqi state, as it is connected with the defence of Islam, its communities of believers and its territory. The balance between his national and translational role is furthermore made possible by his independence and that of the *hawza* in Najaf from the Iraqi state and by his general aloofness from political activism, his dramatic direct

interventions in politics being more the exception than the rule. His concept of governance (*al-hukm al-rashid*) does not translate into the Iranian-style "guardianship of the jurispudent" (*velayat-e faghih*). His moral guidance is in

Sistani's call for free elections, transparency and accountability, as well as his demands for public services and equal opportunities for all, makes him more an advocate for good governance than for theocracy.

19. "Khutba al-nasr min karbala al-muqaddasa li-mumaththil al-marja' iya al-diniya al-' uliya fadhilat al-' allama al-shaykh Abd al-Mahdi al-Karbala'i fi 26 rabi' al-awwal 1439/15 December 2017" (The Victory sermon of the representative of the supreme religious marja'iyya, Excellency the most erudite shaykh Abd al-Mahdi al-Karbala'i, from sacred Karbala), al-bayanat al-sadira, [Date accessed 06.06.2020] www.sistani.org,

20. "Nass al-khutba al-thaniya allati alqaha mumaththil al-marja' iya al-diniya al-' uliya fadhilat al-' allama al-sayyid Ahmad al-Safi fi 10 shawwal 1440/14 June 2019", (Text of the second part of the sermon given by the representative of the supreme religious marja'iyya, Excellency the most erudite Sayyid Ahmad al-Safi) al-tahdithat, [Date accessed 15.04.2020] www.sistani.org

21. US–Iran tensions dangerously escalated in Iraq at the end of 2019 when Kata'ib Hezbollah, among the powerful Iran-backed PMFs, became the target of US strikes after their repeated attacks on American military targets in the country. The US killing of General Qasem Soleimani, the commander of the Iranian elite al-Quds Force, and of Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the head of the Kata'ib and deputy head of the PMFs, on January 3rd 2020 at the Baghdad International Airport, was a dramatic violation of Iraq's sovereignty and a humiliating blow to the Iraqi government. Sistani, while condemning the American military strikes, seized the opportunity to remind the state of its own responsibility to deal with certain factions' illegal operations and to take the necessary measures to forbid them, so as to avoid foreign interference in its internal affairs. "Tasrih li masdar mas' ul fi maktab samahat al-Sayyid hawla al-i' tida' ala l-quwwat al-' iraqiya fi madinat al-Qa'im" (Statement by a responsible source in H.E. al-Sayyid' office on the attack against Iraqi forces in al-Qa'im), undated, at-tahdithat, www.sistani.org, "Nass al-khutba al-thaniya allati alqaha mumaththil al-marja' iya al-diniya al-' uliya fadhilat al-' allama al-shaykh ' Abd al-Mahdi al-Karbala'i fi 7 jumada' al-awwal 1441/3 January 2020" (Text of the second part of the sermon given by the representative of the supreme religious marja'iyya, Excellency the most erudite Shaykh Abd al-Mahdi al-Karbala'i), al-bayanat al-sadira, [date accessed March–June 2020] www.sistani.org,

fact closer to the “traditional” role of the Shiite religious *marja’iyya* than to the revolutionary concept of direct rule by the *’ulama*, as elaborated and applied by Ruhollah Khomeini in Iran (Martin, 2003: 105, 115–124). His call for free elections, transparency and accountability, as well as his demands for public services and equal opportunities for all, makes him more an advocate for good governance than for theocracy.

For Sistani, Iran’s strategic penetration of Iraq – building since the US invasion in March 2003 – does not imply that it should be given a free hand in the country’s security through proxy paramilitary groups and militias. He certainly fosters good Iran–Iraq neighbourly relations, on which depends the free flow of cultural and religious tourism and pilgrimages, but not at the expense of Iraq’s sovereignty.²² It is Iraq’s political and military fragmentation that ultimately paves the way to foreign interference, weakens the state and risks bringing chaos and instability, as Sistani frequently laments in his sermons.

Sistani returned forcefully to the urgent need to reform the institutions of the state in his statements on May 4th and September 9th 2018, just before the parliamentary elections on May 12th and during the government formation process. Intervening in the electoral process, he advised voters to choose candidates, in particular those who had previously held government positions, on the basis of their performance “in order not to fall into the trap of those who fail and are corrupt, those who have been tried or not”. Increasingly linking the ills of the country to its current political class, he dismissed all its leaders and called for a “new, competent, transparent, courageous and honest” prime minister who had held no previous government positions. Otherwise, “the *marja’iyya* will continue to boycott the government officials and will remain the voice of the deprived and the defender of their rights”.²³

Despite his frustration, Sistani did not call for the dismantlement of political parties or for civil disobedience. Even his boycott, although dramatically launched, was nothing new. What was new was his imposition of criteria for the eligi-

bility of government officials. His guidance role, as he later clarified, would allow this form of political intervention if it is dictated by the necessity to protect the public interest (*al-maslaha al-’amma*) and by deficiencies in government.²⁴ While condemning the misconduct of particular politicians, Sistani remained nonetheless committed to protecting the fundamental principles of the multi-party system and of elected constitutional government. Sistani thus took the risk of dismissing the old political class while inviting a new one who would apply principles of good governance such as honesty, transparency and competence to emerge through the ballot boxes.

A year later, calling for the government to step down and for a new political class to implement a radical process of reforms was not Sistani but hundreds of thousands of peaceful Iraqi protesters of all confessions, from Baghdad to Dhi Qar, al-Muthanna, Nasiriya and Basra. The demonstrations soon turned violent. Oil installations were attacked and disrupted in the south, political and government offices vandalised and hundreds of people were killed.

This time, Sistani’s return to the political scene was not to rally the Iraqis against a common enemy. Instead, his weekly sermons tried to walk the fine line between supporting people’s rights to peaceful demonstrations for political reforms,

jobs and services, and praising the efforts of state security forces to maintain order against the interference of thugs and militias. His words, however, seemed to have lost their appeal.²⁵

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Conclusion

The exceptional circumstances of post-2003 Iraq led to the revival of the Shiite supreme religious authority (*marja’iyya*) as well as the Najaf seminary (*hawza*) as authoritative pillars of the new Iraqi socio-political order. Sistani has been the leading force in this revival. His unmatched religious authority and influence over Iraqi Shiites strengthened Shiite organisations and restored their prestige in Iraq and across the world. State protection of Shiite worship and shrines has been recognised in the Iraqi constitution and Shiite organisations have been institutionalised and placed under his direct or indirect control.

Following the US-led invasion of the country and the collapse of the Iraqi state, Sistani stood out as the moral authority and uncontested leader of the Shiite majority; and yet,

22. Sistani met the Iranian president Hassan Rouhani for the first time in Najaf on March 14th 2019 at a time of “maximum US pressure” on Iran. The meeting, the first ever between an Iranian president and the Najaf *marja’iyya*, underlined not only the Iranian state’s official respect for Sistani but also the latter’s message of non-alignment with either American anti-Iranianism or Iranian anti-Americanism. In his short statement, Sistani thanked Iraqi friends for their help in the fight against ISIL and welcomed any step to strengthen Iraqi relations with its neighbours on the basis of their mutual interests and non-interference in each other’s affairs. “Istiqbal samahat al-Sayyid li-l-ra’is al-irani al-duktur Hasan al-Ruhani, 5 rajab 1440/12 March 2019” (H.E. al-Sayyid’s reception of the Iranian President, Dr. Hasan al-Ruhani) al-tahdithat, [date accessed 20.04.2020] www.sistani.org

23. *Bayan maktab Samahat al-Sayyid hawla l-intikhabat al-niyabiya fi l-’Iraq’ amm 2018*, al-Najaf al-Ashraf, 17 sha’ban 1439/4 May 2018 (Statement of H.E. al-Sayyid’s office on the parliamentary elections in Iraq in 2018), *Bayan* (Statement), 29 dhul hijjah 1439/9 September 2018, al-tahdithat, www.sistani.org, accessed March 2020

24. *Nass al-khutba al-thaniya allati alqaha mumaththil al-marja’iyya al-diniya al-’uliya fadhilat al-’allama al-shaykh Abd al-Mahdi al-Karbala’i fi 12 safar 1441/11/10/2019* (Text of the second part of the sermon given by the representative of the supreme religious *marja’iyya*, Excellency most erudite Shaykh Abd al-Mahdi al-Karbala’i), al-tahdithat, www.sistani.org, accessed April 2020

25. “Nass al-khutba al-thaniya allati alqaha mumaththil al-marja’iyya al-diniya al-’uliya fadhilat al-’allama al-sayyid Ahmad al-Safi fi yawm 2 rabi’ al-akhar 1441/29 november 2019 (Text of the second part of the sermon given by the representative of the supreme religious *marja’iyya*, Excellency most erudite Sayyid Ahmad al-Safi)” al-tahdithat, [Date accessed 02.05.2020] www.sistani.org

he did not take up the reins of power and did not impose a theocracy — in marked contrast, of course, to neighbouring Iran and its *wilayat al-faqih* theocratic system. Instead, Sistani carefully balanced aloofness and activism in politics with the aim of protecting the transnational sphere of religion from state interference and, ultimately, the state itself, responsible for providing order and stability for religion to thrive. Sistani thus “guided” the Iraqi state, as guarantor of the new socio-political order against the danger of chaos and disintegration, and of the (Shiite-led) government against tyranny. He has intervened publicly whenever that order has been at risk or on the verge of collapsing, appealing to the law of necessity and to the protection of the public interest. Sistani, after all, is and remains a traditional *marja'*, whose religious education and formation have been mainly shaped by the academic environment, the tradition of studies and the history of the Najaf *hawza* and of Iraq. However, his efforts to define *al-hukm al-rashid* in terms of constitutionalism, rule of law, multi-party system, free elections, transparency, accountability, equity, equality and inclusiveness, as well as his efforts to reconcile moral guidance and good governance while defining the boundaries of both religion and politics, deserve due consideration. So too does the contrast of this approach with other Islamist experiences in neighbouring countries over the last half-century, particularly post-revolutionary Iran.

After his actions in favour of a constitutional process sought to reunite Iraqis around a common vision of state and society, Sistani's exceptional interventions in politics have not always met with success. His advocacy for a fair, inclusive governance may indeed remain a dead letter: corruption, sectarianism, terrorism and armed militias continue to undermine post-Ba'ath state reforms. Sistani's dramatic call for popular mobilisation against ISIL hordes in 2014 – meant both to defeat the latter and to invigorate Iraqi nationalistic pride – instead became a powerful multiplier of armed groups (PMFs), including his own, and a vector of enhanced sectarianism. It thus unfortunately further weakened the state, as it quickly exposed Iraq to the growing power of Iran-backed militias. Today, the fast-destabilising tensions between the latter and the US may dangerously turn the country into the setting for a US–Iran proxy war.

Under the dramatic circumstances of post-2003 Iraq, Sistani's defence of the new Iraqi order has ultimately been pursued according to the moral values and virtues he embodies as *marja'iyya*. These have shown limitations, strength and weakness, success and failure. After all, religious scholars are neither angels nor infallible.

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