Shiite Clergy's Silence toward Syrian Crisis

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Articles & Testimony

In times of conflict, being impartial does not necessarily translate into neutrality; silence in such circumstances may signify taking a side. This is indeed the Shi'ite clergy's narrative about the violence in Syria.

The number of Muslims who have lost their lives during the course of last two years of crackdowns in Syria greatly exceeds the number of Arabs killed by Israel in the last thirty years. Thousands of Muslims are killed by an Alawite government backed by the ayatollah-led Islamic Republic of Iran.

The clergy's silence doubtlessly helps Bashar Al-Assad justify his aggressive policy toward his opponents. Yet the position of the clerics is not explained simply by the proximity of the Iranian and Syrian regimes. To understand the former's posture one needs to comprehend the internal politics of the Shi'a clergy -- especially the dynamic between the two main seminaries at Qom and Najaf -- which are complicated by history, politics, and geography. These tensions have been building since the fall of the Ottoman Empire, and were exacerbated by the rise of the Islamic Republic in Iran in 1979. In this context, the silence of the Shi'a clergy towards the violence perpetrated by an Alawite against his (predominately Sunni) citizens is merely another symptom of a system that encourages silence from the clerics unless they are under direct attack.

THE SIMPLE BUSINESS OF AYATOLLAH SISTANI

In one of her first visits to her father after the downfall of Saddam Hussein, the daughter of Ayatollah Ali Sistani asked why her father did not purchase an air conditioner for his house during the summer. "When I see [that] all residents of Najaf are able to afford buying an air conditioner for their homes, I will buy one for myself," her father replied. Sistani receives millions of dollars annually from his followers worldwide in the name of religious taxation. He owns a great deal of property -- dozens of madrassas, libraries, seminary campuses, religious centers, and so on -- in Iraq, Iran, Lebanon, and Europe. In comparison to Catholic authorities who live in luxury residences and follow highly sophisticated protocol, Sistani's simple life is astonishing; however, he is not the mastermind behind his

lifestyle. In Shi'ism, if a man wants to become a jurist with many followers -- or an ayatollah -- he should prove his piety and disinterest in worldly pleasures and passions. On the other hand, he must create a broad network of people and institutions to collect revenue. People do not give money to a greedy person; as such, the divine man should live a pious, simple life.

But being pious and disinterested in living a luxurious lifestyle does not necessarily mean that the jurist should not take the issue of power seriously. Historically, Shi'ite jurists were able to collect money from people and run their own institutions only when they established very sophisticated relations with the political rulers. Not only is it their stance toward the political authorities that shape their attitudes and even influence their religious views about social and political affairs, but it also represents the internal power struggle among various ayatollahs.

When Sistani was trying to assert his religious authority (marjaiya) in Iran in the early 1990s, the Qom clergy was not welcoming at first. Their ambition was to totally transfer the Shi'ite authority from Iraq to Iran and end several decades of rivalry between Najaf and Qom after the death of Ayatollah Abul Qassim Khoi. But two things prevented them from imposing serious obstacles to Sistani's project in Iran. First, Sistani was the wealthiest ayatollah in the Shi'ite world -- and he had not become rich by relying on government support. He also had the broadest network of representatives and followers worldwide, whom he inherited from Khoi, his late mentor. Ayatollahs in Qom either had a small circle of followers and were consequently not as financially well off as Sistani, or they were indebted to the Islamic Republic for their social and financial strength. Second, the clergy in Qom and clerical rulers in Tehran realized that it was impossible to convince the entire Shi'ite community to deflect their attention from Najaf after Khoi. They found themselves incapable of being attractive in the eyes of Arab Shi'ites and other non-Iranian Shi'ites, who are not necessarily fond of the Islamic Republic. The situation involving Sistani in Najaf was still much more appealing for the traditional members of the Shi'ite community.

For Sistani to run a large office in Qom (headed by his son-in-law, Javad Shahrestani) -- along with dozens of other institutions there and in other cities -- he needed to prove that he was a threat to neither the Islamic Republic nor its supreme leader, Ayatollah Khamenei. His associates promised government officials that Sistani's projects and activities in Iran would be limited to providing financial assistance to seminarians and similar services such as libraries. But this was the minimum that could satisfy the Iranian government. Ayatollah Khamenei expected Sistani's network outside Iran and Iraq -- especially in countries like Lebanon that are of the highest strategic value to the Islamic Republic -- to be available to him whenever he deemed necessary. Such a deal could have been very beneficial for both parties; without Khamenei's consent, Sistani would lose his Iranian support, and without Sistani's network outside Iran, Khamenei would limit himself to his own political network and deprive himself from the religious network that is more useful in traditional milieus.

This deal became much more significant after the collapse of the Ba'ath in Iraq in 2003, which opened the way for the Islamic Republic to expand its activities there. Despite Western misinterpretations of Sistani as a man who theologically opposes the notion of velayat-e faqih (political leadership of an ayatollah), Sistani has proven to be harmless in opposition to the Islamic Republic over the last nine years: he has never spoken or acted in a manner that could be interpreted as a challenge to the republic. Sistani's policy to calm tensions in Iraq was universally useful, but despite his official declarations asserting that he does not intervene in domestic political affairs he has been very supportive of the Da'wa Party and its political ambitions, although this has decreased over the last two years. His ideal of an Iraqi government has rarely conflicted with that of the Islamic Republic. "Quietist," a description of the ayatollah used by the Western media, was misleading. Instead, Sistani's pragmatism enabled him to have strong relations with various Shi'ite groups, the Iraqi government, and the Islamic Republic in order to continue his business: being a marja.

There are several ways Sistani could justify his relations with the Islamic Republic. First, he could argue that he

believes in the traditional view embedded in Shi'ite jurisprudence that the sultan of a Shi'ite territory should be supported as long as he protects the interests of the Shi'ite community. Many have questioned Khamenei's religious credentials, but there is no doubt that he heads the government of the most important Shi'ite country in the world. Any attempt to undermine Khamenei's authority as a de facto sultan of a Shi'ite country is religiously "illegal." Second, the Islamic Republic is providing exclusive financial, social and political benefits to the Shi'ite clergy. This positive form of discrimination has been internalized in the constitution, and has made the Shi'ite clerical establishment the wealthiest it has ever been. Weakening such a government would affect the clerics, deepen the tension between various factions, tarnish the clergy's reputation amongst its followers -- and discourage them from trusting the clergy, paying their religious taxes, or agreeing on religious affairs. Third, criticizing the Islamic Republic would strengthen its critics. There are two main forces that could challenge the Islamic Republic's status quo: the democratic movement and the military elite. Both alternatives to the republic are anti-clerical. In the minds of the clerics, the current government in Tehran should remain so long as there is no potential replacement for the Islamic Republic that would provide the same advantages to the Shi'ite clergy. Fourth, the decline of the power of the Islamic Republic would affect the power equation in the region against the Shi'ite community. The Islamic Republic was very successful in tying itself up with the fate of Shi'ite clergy and community.

VELAYAT-E FAQIH IN NAJAF AND QOM

In recent years, especially after the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, Western media tried to distinguish between the Najaf school of Shi'ite jurisprudence and the Qom school of thought. According to them, the Najaf school tends to take a quietist stance toward politics mostly because clerics there do not believe in velayat-e faqih, so they have no aspiration to take over political power. They declare that in Qom, clerics in the tradition of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini believe that an ayatollah (a Shi'ite jurist) has not only a religious right but a duty to lead the government, and thereby give it Shi'ite legitimacy. According to Khomeini, Muslims should rise up in the face of corrupt, Westernized governance; by handing government over to Shi'ite authority or to Islamists, a maximum effort to implement Shari'a is made. For Khomeini, the government was the practical philosophy of Islamic jurisprudence, but Shari'a becomes meaningless and prophetic law-making becomes futile without governing rule. Therefore, taking political power is an essential element of being Muslim. Being indifferent toward politics is a deviation from Islam and a Western plot to colonize the minds and spirits of Muslims, according to Khomeini. No one in the history of mankind has insulted Shi'ite clergymen who opposed his political views as much as Khomeini; he labeled them backward, pro-American, ignorant, stupid, and said they had "colonized minds."

But Ayatollah Sistani's clergy in Najaf -- at least in the narrative of Western media -- do not believe in the theory of velayat-e faqih and do not share Khomeini's political ideas. They hold that a proper government does not need to be religiously legitimate, but rather that a secular government can also be acceptable if it does not explicitly violate Islamic law. What Western media did not take into consideration is history, both of the Qom seminary and of that in Najaf. Both seminaries have become involved in politics whenever they felt such involvement was harmless to the clerical establishment or useful in strengthening its authority. Iraqi Shi'ite clerics who lived under the Ottoman Empire until the early 20th century were extremely involved in Iranian politics. They were divided over supporting the monarchy or the constitutional movement, and each camp played an important role in shaping developments in Iran. During the 18th century, a fatwa issued by Mirzaye Shirazi that banned tobacco in order to force the Qajari king to refrain from giving the trade monopoly to a British company was a spectacular power maneuver that revealed that the Shi'ite clerics' social power base can be used for political purposes.

After the fall of the Ottoman Empire, Shi'ite clerics in Iraq played a significant role in mobilizing people against foreign forces. Under Saddam Hussein, they became more cautious due to Saddam's uncompromising and aggressive attitude, but they did not completely abandon political activity. On the other hand, the Qom seminary was very careful not to get involved in politics in its first two decades in early 20th century. Sheikh Abdul Karim Haeri

Yazdi, the founder of the current seminary in Qom, was very concerned about Reza Shah's anti-clerical agenda. The shah had forced a new discipline on clerics, leading many to leave their careers and become either businessmen or government employees. Reza Shah was also imitating Atatürk's model of authoritative modernization, and they were both Westernizing their societies and cultures. Among many issues that upset the clergy was Reza Shah's anti-hijab agenda, which was enforced by police and often led to violent incidents. Haeri was among those who did not dare to oppose Reza Shah's anti-clerical and anti-Islamic policies because the clergy was not in a strong position at the time -- meaning opposition to the government could have potentially crippled the clerical establishment. When Haeri was asked by his students why he was not publically criticizing Reza Shah's anti-hijab initiative, his response was that they had "a higher priority, which is safeguarding the survival of the Qom seminary."

One can safely conclude that there is little theological difference between Najaf seminary and Qom seminary. When it comes to Shi'ite jurists' right to intervene in politics, the determinative parameters are social and political conditions. In response to a question posed on his website, Ayatollah Sistani states that the Shi'ite jurist is allowed to lead the community if conditions allow. Consequently, the fundamental difference between Sistani and Khomeini might not be their different views on relations between politics and religion, but the historical and geographic circumstances that shape them.

RUNNING A MODERN CLERGY

Clerics have generally been reluctant to publicly oppose or criticize the Islamic Republic, which may help to explain why they have not spoken out against the Iranian-supported Syrian president, Bashar Al-Assad. To begin with, the supreme leader -- although himself a jurist -- was declared to be a jurist unlike any other. To enforce his rule within the hierocracy, the supreme leader is able to exert his authority through a range of coercive instruments -- including, most notoriously, through a body known as the "Special Court of Clerics" (Dadgah-e Vizheh-ye Rowhaniyat). This special court operates under the direct supervision of the supreme leader, and it does not follow the juridical procedures and laws of the rest of the country.

Since its establishment, the court has become well-known for its brutal and humiliating treatment of clerics of all ranks. Ayatollah Shariatmadari was one of many "tried" in this court. He was accused of being involved in a military coup to overthrow the Iranian government and assassinate Khomeini, when in fact his real "crime" was attempting to challenge Khomeini's legitimacy as a ruling jurist. His dossier was closed after many of his followers and relatives were arrested or executed, and Shariatmadari himself was paraded on state television as making a "confession" and begging for Khomeini's pardon.

In addition to the court, the Islamic Republic has developed a range of other mechanisms for enforcing its rule within the clerical establishment. Among other things, the Islamic Republic claimed direct responsibility for the day-to-day management of clerical institutions, and this fundamentally altered the clergy's access to financial resources. The Islamic government confiscated much of the property that had belonged to Iran's traditional religious authorities. In turn, this property was placed under the control of the supreme leader. For example, Dar al-Tabligh (the House of Islamic Propaganda), which was owned by Ayatollah Shariatmadari, became a base for Daftar-e Tablighat-e Eslami-e Qom (the Office for Islamic Propaganda), the head of which is appointed by the supreme leader.

In more recent times, Khamenei's office has spearheaded the computerization of the management of the clerical institutions, which has helped the supreme leader establish even more control over the clergy's financial resources and dealings. Before Khamenei, every marja had his own financial section where subordinate clerics registered to receive their salaries. But under Khamenei's financial system, all payments from marjas to clerics, or from one religious institution to another, first have to pass through a centralized office run by the Center for the Management of Qomi Seminaries. These payments therefore ultimately require approval from the supreme leader's representatives. The Center for the Management of Qomi Seminaries also maintains a comprehensive database of

the marjas' properties, assets, and income. The supreme leader utilizes this data to manage the marjas' financial activities.

Even Ayatollah Sistani -- the preeminent marja of Najaf, who has always enjoyed considerable autonomy from the Iranian hierocracy, and who represents a more traditional Shi'ism -- cannot operate his office or manage his religious–financial network within Iran (and in some cases in other countries in the Middle East such as Lebanon and Syria) without cooperating with the Iranian government.

Before the revolution, ordinary clerics were financially dependent on marjas. Today, however, most clerics also receive financial support through institutions run by the state and by the supreme leader. In order to demonstrate his financial and religious supremacy, Ayatollah Khamenei pays salaries to clerics much higher than the amount paid by the marjas. While most marjas supposedly rely on religious taxes, the supreme leader presides over the wealthiest and most profitable economic institutions in Iran, such as the Oppressed Foundation, the Imam Reza Shrine, and affiliated companies. Today, religious marjas together provide only a small percentage of the clerics' financial needs. By contrast, the government -- and Khamenei himself -- are primarily in charge of financial issues in Shi'ite seminaries, especially in Iran. As such, the economic role and authority of the marja has been systematically reduced, just as the Islamic Republic's authority and power over Shi'ite financial networks has been enhanced.

Moreover, since its establishment the Islamic Republic has created an entirely new network of institutions -- seminaries, research institutes, community centers, and libraries -- whose principal purpose is the propagation of an ideology favored by the republic. The government actively uses this influence to promote ideas beneficial to its goals while at the same time sidelining those ideas and religious teachings that are not. This has ultimately allowed the Islamic Republic to dominate the intellectual life of Iran's clerical establishment. This has been the case especially since the deaths of the Grand Ayatollahs Abul Qassem Khoei, Mohammad Reza Golpayegani, and Shahab Al-Din Marashi Najafi, all eminent scholars who opposed many aspects of Khomeini's agenda. Following their deaths, the traditional centers of religious authority that operated as a religious and political check on the newly-formed hierocracy went into steep decline, and a younger generation of clerics reared by Khomeini's republic has come to occupy positions of great religious and political influence.

For clerics who are on the Iranian government's payroll, life is full of special privileges and perks. The government underwrites a hefty budget for religious institutions, making today's Iranian clerical establishment the wealthiest of any period in history. Well-connected clerics and marjas favored by the Islamic Republic are involved in lucrative business deals, receive exclusive governmental benefits, and can borrow large amounts of money from banks without sufficient guarantees for repayment. Even more, many charities in Iran owned by marjas, and high-ranking clerics are doing business through corrupt dealings with the government.

The Khomeinist doctrine of velayat-e faqih requires that all clerics be subject to the orders of the supreme leader and jurist -- just as any other Shi'ite worshiper would be. This doctrine is premised on the view that the ruling jurist is the heir of the Prophet Muhammad and the representative of the infallible Hidden Imam, and benefits from all of their divine authorities. The supreme leader thus has the authority over matters beyond the Shari'a and the country's constitution, granting him -- at least in principle, though there are always limits to this in practice -- enormous powers over society in general and the hierocracy in particular. According to Khomeini, expediency and government interest overrule all Islamic laws, and this justified the ruling jurist's authority over matters beyond Shari'a or the constitution. In this vein, some have claimed, for instance, that marjas cannot use religious taxes without the approval of the ruling jurist. It has additionally been argued that "fatwas by marjas that deal with public issues can come into practice only after the approval of the ruling jurist."

Within the Islamic Republic, what an individual jurist believes or the quality of his scholarship is of little significance; what matters most is how, within the structure of the hierocracy, the ruling jurist chooses to define his

relationship to other individual jurists. In other words, jurists do not deal with the supreme leader and his office as a fellow or even as a superior member of a religious community, but instead as the head of an expansive military–economic–political corporation.

There are abundant rewards for members of this corporation in good standing. The very constitution of the Islamic Republic is based on a series of discriminations in favor of clerics. For instance, the head of the government, the head of the judiciary, all the members of the Assembly of Experts, the six members of the Guardian Council, the Minister of Intelligence, and several other positions must be mujtahid or jurists. A secular democratic government that removes all discrimination, including policies that favor clerics, would not be an ideal government for the overwhelming majority of jurists and clerics, whether they like the existing political system or not. What the Iranian people might consider an ideal alternative to the current system is not so idyllic for the majority of clerics. The Islamic Republic has systematically sought to deprive clerics of their independence and tarnished their reputations. Despite this fact, the Islamic Republic of Iran is still widely viewed as the most favorable government for clerics in the history of Islam.

CONFLICT BY OTHER MEANS

In order to understand the Shi'ite clergy's mindset, it is extremely important to recognize its priorities. These often crystallize in their reactions to certain events. For instance, if one examines the incidents to which the ayatollahs in Qom have reacted in recent years, their intellectual and religious sensitivities can be understood. They have strongly opposed Iran's approval of an international convention that eliminates all forms of discrimination against women, preventing the Iranian parliament from adopting it. When the reformist parliament wanted to include Sunni MPs in their leadership in 2001, the ayatollahs objected because (according to them) Iran is a Shi'ite country and Sunnis should not hold any leadership role in it. When President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad expressed his willingness to allow women to attend sports arenas to watch football games, clerics once again publically criticized him for undermining Islamic law and underestimating the danger of men and women being together in such places. But when Ayatollah Khamenei publically announced that the government would not tolerate demonstrations against election results in 2009, and police and Basij militia consequently cracked down on pacifist demonstrators in the streets -- prompting even the government to admit that a number of male demonstrators were raped in prisons -- clerics in Qom kept silent. Clerics who claim they support the Palestinian cause, because Palestinians are Muslims and they have a religious duty to advocate the rights of all Muslims in the world, did not utter a word when the Chinese government killed more than 150 Muslims in China in 2009, strictly because doing so may have threatened Iran's relationship with the Chinese government.

The Syrian crisis is another example of such silence, and should not come as a surprise to anyone who followed the record of the clerics' sensitivities. The Shi'ite clergy, as a religious-economic organization, does not break any boundaries set by the Islamic Republic of Iran. Any individual cleric who crosses the red line is aggressively exposed, if he lives inside Iran -- or marginalized, if he lives outside it. The heavy specter of Ayatollah Khamenei overwhelms the Shi'ite community throughout the Middle East. Beyond that fact, the clergy does not care about things that do not directly threaten or strengthen it. In his diaries, Sadeq Tabatabi (the brother-in-law of Ayatollah Khomeini's son, Ahmad Khomeini) recalls his trip to Najaf when Khomeini was there in exile. In a conversation with him, Khomeini complained about the Najaf clerics' indifference toward Israel and their conflict with Palestinians. Khomeini said when he asked clerics to react to this issue, they questioned why they should react to something that is not their business. Israel would not attack Iraq or Najaf: so why would they be concerned about it?

The Islamic Republic's utilization of an array of both coercive instruments to punish anti-government tendencies as well as incentives and other perks to encourage and reward pro-goverment behavior -- not to mention the clerical establishment's own desire for self-preservation and well-being -- helps to explain why a great majority of Iranian

Shi'ite clerics have, on balance, kept silent not only about the government's violence against peaceful demonstrators following the 12 June 2009 presidential elections, but also the Syrian government's violence against thousands of its Muslim citizens. This is worthwhile to mention that Shi'ite clergy is sacrificing its reputation for material benefits and jeopardizing its image as a group of pious individuals who care most for well-being of Muslims.

Explanation of the Shi'ite clergy's silence toward such grave issues would not be complete without mentioning their reluctance to adopt modern, liberal legal concepts such as "justice," "citizenship," or "human rights." In the absence of such understanding, the cleric's perception of politics is rather tribal. They view the Shi'ite community as their tribe and provide them with all sorts of rights to defend their supremacy whenever and wherever they can. Such an outdated perception will likely cause them to gradually lose their influence over younger generations of Shi'ites, who are as eager to live under a liberal democratic government as most others in the world. By averting their eyes from the violence imposed by brutal governments in Iran and Syria, the clergy is only able to indirectly reinforce the Shi'ite desire to have a secular government in countries like Iran, which has been exposed to a Shi'ite-run government for quite some time.

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