

The Last Marja:

Sistani and the End of Traditional Religious Authority in Shiism

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Mehdi Khalaji, a Qom-trained Shiite theologian, was the Libitzky Family Fellow at The Washington Institute.



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Iraqi Shiite cleric Ali Hussein al-Sistani has achieved tremendous popularity in recent years, becoming the greatest marja, or independent religious authority, in the Shiite world. But how does his influence compare to that of Iran's Supreme Leader, who can draw upon the considerable resources of the Iranian state?

In this Washington Institute Policy Focus, Mehdi Khalaji offers an in-depth look at the current state of Shiite leadership. Drawing in part from his theological training in the seminaries of Qom, Iran, he traces the gradual marginalization of the seminary system in Iran and Iraq -- the former through political monopolization by the ayatollahs, the latter through direct suppression at the hands of Saddam Hussein. By undermining the traditional sources of independent religious authority in the heart of the Shiite world, he argues, the Iranian regime has succeeded in its goal of dominating Shiite religious, political, and social networks both inside and outside Iran. He goes on to explore what this dramatic shift in Shiite authority means for Western interests and U.S. policy.

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