

Religious Authority in Iraq and the Election

by [Mehdi Khalaji \(/experts/mehdi-khalaji\)](/experts/mehdi-khalaji)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Mehdi Khalaji \(/experts/mehdi-khalaji\)](/experts/mehdi-khalaji)

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



Brief Analysis

Ayatollah Ali Sistani has played a very important political role in postwar Iraq as the most influential jurist in the Shiite world. However, as Iraq approaches legislative elections, Sistani seems to be reducing his political activity.

Iraq's Shia Establishment

While Sistani is the highest ranking Shiite jurist in Iraq, he consults with and takes into consideration the views of his colleagues, who in turn largely refrain from speaking out on their own to preserve a mostly unified voice for the clerical establishment. In particular, there are three other sources of imitation (marjas) who are nearly as distinguished in Iraq as Sistani:

* Ayatollah Mohammad Said Hakim comes from well-known family in Iraq and is a descendent of an influential marja of the twentieth century. The image of Ayatollah Hakim, who leads 5 percent of Iraqi Shiite worshipers, has been damaged in Iraq by the reputation of other members of his family, who have veered far from religious piety and asceticism in pursuit of political power and economic success.

* Ayatollah Mohammad Ishaq Fayyadh, originally an Afghan, is one the most prominent disciples of the late and much revered Ayatollah Abol Qassim Khoi. According to the tradition of the seminary, marjas should be either Iranian or Iraqi; other nationalities do not have a social chance to attract Shiite worshipers as a marja. Only this tradition can explain why a well-educated jurist like Fayyadh cannot be the center of Shiite attention, although academically he may be on the highest level.

* Ayatollah Sheikh Bashir Al-Najafi, a Pakistani, was also a disciple of Ayatollah Khoi. Despite his eagerness to be politically active, he has very little influence on the Shiite community in Iraq.

Sistani and Qom

In the absence of a serious rival inside Iraq, Sistani's only real competition comes from the marjas of Qom, Iran. After the liberation of Iraq, Qom's marjas were delighted at the prospect of a center of Shia learning free from political enforcement; some have expressed their willingness to immigrate to Najaf after Iraq is stabilized. For this reason, most of the traditional Shiite clerics in Qom have been ambivalent about Sistani's periodic interventions in the turbulent politics of Iraq. On the one hand, the clerics were happy to see that a traditional cleric can play an

important role in the task of rebuilding Iraq, which has become the preoccupation of the most powerful countries of the world. Furthermore, the great nations of the world seemed to be in his debt, which the marjas of Qom saw as proof that even in the modern world, Shiite clerics still wield influence. On the other hand, the traditionalist faction of clerics, which suffered from the exaggerated politicization of the seminary after Iran's Islamic Revolution, became concerned that in Iraq, as in Iran, religion would become subordinate to political power.

Another reason some traditionalist clerics in Qom gave when expressing their concerns in Sistani's office in Qom about Sistani's interference in Iraqi politics was their concern about their social prestige. Their position is very much a social one. If Sistani continues to play an important role in politics, then other high-ranking clerics cannot hope to build their own religious authority in Najaf. There is very strong competition between high-ranking clerics to attract followers within the Shiite community, because he with the most followers is the most successful economically, socially, and politically. The concerns about Sistani were focused on the fact that he can use the political circumstances for his religious propaganda and possibly even acquire political power to overwhelm and outshine others.

Sistani and Tehran

Sistani has other reasons than his concern about his religious reputation in the Shiite world for distancing himself from Iraqi politics. Sistani has a critical relationship with the Iranian religious government. Sistani relies on several hundred million dollars in annual income that comes from his followers in Iran, where he has vast assets. To pursue his work as a marja, he must avoid conflict with the clerical bureaucracy in Iran.

On the other hand, the Islamic Republic expects Sistani's political positions to be in accordance with the official and unofficial ambitions of Tehran in Iraq. Sistani is acutely sensitive to the danger that his public image would be tarnished if he were seen as bending to Iranian government pressure. Tehran has put much effort into influencing Sistani, even purchasing land and buildings around his home in Najaf. In recent interviews, some of his representatives in Persian Gulf countries, who wish to remain anonymous, say that Sistani has not felt secure for the last two years. The caution of Sistani's political statements flows in no small part from this fearfulness.

Sistani and Baghdad

Sistani deliberately makes it hard to know what on his mind. He does not accept journalists' requests for interviews; indeed, Sistani issues written statements only about twice a year. He mostly communicates with others through his son Mohammad Reza Sistani or through assistants and clerics. Most of the statements attributed to him are in fact made by those who claim to speak for him; if any of his intermediaries causes a problem, others will deny that Sistani made such a statement. Sistani is a very silent marja; it is rarely clear how authentically informed are those who claim to be reporting his views. Despite the widely repeated statement attributed to Sistani -- published in leading Western newspapers -- that he urged people not to vote for secular or small parties, Sheikh Abdel Mahdi Karbalai, Sistani's representative in Karbala, emphasized on December 11 that Sistani has avoided saying anything about the December 15 elections. Karbalai specifically denied that Sistani had said people should not vote for secular or small parties.

Sistani and his loyalists have announced repeatedly that his interference in politics is due only to the critical nature of the situation and that as soon as political order is restored in Iraq, he will retreat from politics. At the same time, interviews with his close associates suggest that Sistani believes that a jurist has the right to govern the Shiite community unless he lacks power, the people refuse him, or the conditions oppose him -- as he believes conditions now do in Iraq.

Though Sistani supported the unified Shiite list in the January elections for the transitional national assembly, Sistani has confined himself this time to saying that people should vote. He has not expressed support for any

particular candidates. The other three marjas, have in consensus with Sistani announced their impartiality toward the next election. The son of Ayatollah Mohammad Said Hakim has said that all four marjas do not support any electoral list and that they are unanimously silent about candidates. He explicitly expressed his concern about rumors and asked people do not believing anything attributed to the grand marjas except when a statement is issued over their own signatures.

The deep divide between secular and religious Shiite groups means that Sistani cannot have a determinative religious voice in today's Iraq. The recent incident in which former prime minister Iyad Allawi, who is leading a secular nationalist party into the parliamentary elections, was attacked at the shrine of Imam Ali in Najaf shows that the religious militias behind the attack fear the electoral victory of "secular" Shiites -- that is, politicians who generally respect traditional values but who have no dependence on Iran.

According to representatives of Sistani in the Middle East interviewed recently, Sistani would view with favor the victory of secularist Shiites like Allawi; Sistani is concerned about Tehran's influence in Iraq. In particular, he is worried that the history of the Islamic Republic of Iran shows that when faced with a choice between political interests and religious values, Iranian leaders have always chosen the former -- and he does not want to see a similar subordination of religion to politics in Iraq.

The upcoming elections can be considered a major turning point for Sistani; he will likely shy away from political activities, at least for a while. However, he will continue to use his social influence to pursue his interests in the political arena.

◆ Mehdi Khaliji is a visiting fellow at The Washington Institute.

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