

SHIITE NATIONALISM? SISTANI, PRESENT IN ABSENCE



Protesters wave the Iraqi flag and pictures of Ali al-Sistani in a demonstration of support to the Prime Minister on Tahrir Square in Baghdad. ©AP

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The recent decision by Ayatollah Sistani to restrict his level of political expression cannot be interpreted as a return to "traditional quietism" on the part of the Shiite religious leadership. It instead reflects a tactical shift by the Iraqi marja'iyya, in a context of fragmentation of Shiite political authority.

On the 13th June 2014, several days after Mosul was taken by the organisation that would subsequently proclaim itself Islamic State, the guardian of the mausoleum of Imam Husayn in Karbala, Abd al-Mahdi al-Karbala'i, gave his Friday sermon. As is customary, the second part of the sermon, broadcast live on national television, consisted of a political communiqué from the man that al-Karbala'i represents: Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, based in the holy Iraqi city of Najaf. In his sermon, the representative of the Ayatollah called on Iraqis to take up arms to defend their threatened nation – thus giving his religious blessing to a process of reorganising Shiite armed groups that had just been initiated by then Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki². Over the following weeks, a considerable mobilisation took place: eighteen months later, it had assembled more than one hundred thousand fighters, of whom the overwhelming majority were Shiite, divided into around forty militias. This fundamental episode in

the recent history of Iraq underlined the importance of the man who, since the fall of Saddam Husayn in 2003, has established himself as a central element of Iraqi political life.

On the 5th February 2016, during the same Friday sermon, Sistani's second representative, Ahmad al-Safi, announced the end of the weekly political sermon³. The reorientation seems minor; yet it was more than sufficient for the press to proclaim Sistani's withdrawal from political life and the return of the *marja'iyya* ("religious leadership") to its "traditional quietism", amidst an avalanche of commentary⁴. The fact is that Sistani's standpoints not only dictate the tempo of Iraqi political life, but have also been at the root of its most significant changes of direction since 2003. Sistani was born in 1930 in Mashhad in Iran, went to study in Najaf at the age of twenty-one, and moved there permanently in 1961; upon the death of his mentor Abu al-Qasim al-Khu'i in 1992, he became the most respected figure of the Shiite *marja'iyya*. While his political activity, which differs markedly from the model used in Iran, constitutes a subject of perplexity for many people, a study of its principal characteristics

³ "It has become customary, every Friday during the second sermon, to read a text representing the views and opinions of the highest religious authority concerning Iraqi affairs; however, it has been decided that, for the time being, this will no longer be done weekly but rather according to how things develop and to what circumstances dictate." (Translated by the author). Second sermon of Friday prayers conducted by Sayyed Ahmad al-Sâfi le 25 Rabî' al-Thâ-nî 1437 (A.H.) / 5th February 2016 (A.D.), 5th February 2016, <http://imamhussain.org/fri/4764vie.html>

⁴ See for example <http://www.al-madapaper.net/ar/ViewPrintedIssue.aspx?PageID=18578&IssueID=1962>; <http://www.m.ahewar.org/s.asp?aid=503995&r=0&cid=0&u=&i=0&q=>; <http://www.alitthad.com/07022016/>

¹ <http://bit.ly/25dD8ho>

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cYDEWRSNuwl> (all of the electronic sources cited were available on the 11th February 2016).

shows that this recent decision is in reality eminently political, and through a tactical shift, aligns itself with the role of clerical authority in the Iraqi political landscape.

SISTANI, FROM THE GUARANTOR OF THE TRANSITION TO THE “FATHER OF THE NATION”

Contrary to their counterparts in the Sunni world, the Shiite religious authorities have historically established a relative degree of independence vis-à-vis temporal power. This state of affairs can be partly explained by doctrinal elements⁵. The Shiite clerical institutions in their current configuration were formed during the 18th and 19th centuries in the holy cities of latter-day Iraq: a body of religious scholars authorised to pass judgements from whom believers choose the one whose opinions they will follow – in religious terms, but also, as the case may be, on matters linked to socio-political issues. The prestige of these scholars can be measured by their integrity and by the sobriety of their style of life, by the number of their students, by the importance of their publications, and by the amount of people that follow their legal opinions and that pay them a specific revenue. In this highly structured organisation where each adherent chooses a religious reference, clerics

5 Upon the death of Muhammad in 632, the issue of his successor at the head of the community of believers proved divisive. Some considered that the succession should fall to a man from the prophet's bloodline: 'Ali, son-in-law and first cousin of Mohammed, and his descendants united around those that would come to be called Shiites (in Arabic *shī'at* 'Ali, "followers of 'Ali"); others, faithful to the tradition of the election of the leader, favoured Abu Bakr, one of the prophet's closest companions. In 680, the death of Husayn, son of 'Ali, at Karbala sealed the Shiites' historical defeat in the face of the Sunni Umayyad dynasty. In 941, the Twelfth and last Imam (descendants of Muhammad who assumed the leadership of the Shiites) went into "Occultation", in accordance with tradition; as Shiite eschatology predicts, his return among men will mark the end of time and the advent of a reign of peace and justice. Deprived of its Imam, who ensured the mediation between men and the celestial world by making the esoteric meaning of the divine message intelligible, the Shiite community henceforth lived between the dissimulation of their faith and the acceptance of the temporal power of the Sunni caliphs. Throughout the centuries following the Occultation of the Twelfth Imam, temporal power theoretically remained reserved for him, and hence forbidden to whomever else, while spiritual guidance was attributed to the 'ulama, religious scholars. As it transpired, the 'ulama progressively appropriated the temporal prerogatives of the Imam.

“emerge” as the most followed and respected: they form the *marja'iyya*. The positions of its members oscillate between a “quietist” position, which resists any interference in the political field, and a commitment to public affairs whose most total expression was incarnated in 1979 with Khomeini's accession to power in Iran, with his ideology of *wilāyat al-faqīh*, which confers absolute political authority on the cleric-jurist.

In the aftermath of the First World War the establishment of the mandate in Iraq was accompanied by a violent marginalisation of Shiite 'ulama, which had played an important part in the 1920 Revolt against the British. Constrained to strict withdrawal from the political sphere or to exile in Iran, Iraqi clerics only regained their voice at the end of the 1950s, during a period of intense politicisation. Saddam Husayn's accession to power put a definitive end to their activity; the remaining 'ulama in Iraq were reduced to silence, with the exception of those that the regime sought to co-opt to establish a measure of religious legitimacy.

In bringing to power parties from the Shiite majority for the first time in Iraq's history, the fall of Saddam also marked the return of clerics to the Iraqi political field. Very rapidly, Sistani, who was up to that point considered as a representative of the quietist tradition of al-Khu'i, and who had spent the majority of Saddam's rule in a quasi-surveilled residence, established himself as the leading figure of the transition. He asked the representatives of the international coalition, who intended to appoint a body tasked with drafting the new Constitution, to revise their timetable by demanding rapid national elections for a Constituent Assembly⁶. In October 2004, his written response to an anonymous question (one of his preferred means of political expression), enjoining Iraqis to register on the electoral roll, was interpreted as a religious obligation to vote. By and large, Sistani intervened in the majority of the debates of national interest, from the number of terms of the Prime Minister to budgetary issues.

At the same time, he refused, however, to take on any institutionalised role. Everything happened as though Sistani, having assumed the role of arbitrator, only intervened when the future of the country was at stake, refusing to meddle in daily political practices and partisan quarrels. This overhanging position, supposed to establish national

6 "Istiftā' hawla āfīyyat tachkīl al-majlis al-dustūrī" [Consultation regarding the mechanisms to form a Constituent Assembly], 26th June 2003, in Al-Khaffāf, Hāmid, Al-nusūs al-sādīra 'an samāhat al-sayyid al-sistānī fī-l-mas'ala al-'irāqīyya [Texts published by His Excellency Sayyid al-Sistani on the Iraqi question], Dār al-mu'arrīkh al-'arabī, Beirut, 2015, p.428

legitimacy, thrived thanks to Sistani's personality and his modes of expression: he seldom appeared (perhaps also to avoid making an Iranian accent heard), and only addressed his flock through the medium of communiqués or his representatives. More profoundly, it also conveyed an act of distancing himself from the Iranian model of *wilāyat al-faqīh*. Contrary to his mentor al-Khu'i, who was a fierce opponent of Khomeinist ideology, Sistani did not reject it, but interpreted it in a new fashion: if the *faqīh* has a political role to play, it is that of guardian and guide, outside of any executing authority: "His Excellency the Sayyed is not seeking a post of power or authority and deems it to be necessary that the *'ulama* keep their distance from positions of responsibility in the administration or the executive"⁷.

Sistani posed as a champion of an Iraqi nationalism, transcending denominational affiliation. His call to arms in June 2014, even though he condemned the actions of unconstitutional armed groups, took care to place itself within a certain legalism: the call is addressed to the whole of the Iraqi population, to defend the nation to make up for the regular army, which lacked manpower. Although the clergy does not play a role in military operations, and in spite of the internal rivalries within Shiite groups, every militia unit referred to the "*jihād fatwa*" to justify its commitment. Sistani is undoubtedly the tutelary figure of the mobilisation, taking on a role often described by an analogy of a father figure⁸; his portrait was extremely present at the front lines until he forbade its use in order to avoid confirming the perception of a denominational mobilisation⁹.

7 As'ilat saḥīfat al-wāshington pūst [Questions from the Washington Post], undated, available at <http://www.sistani.org/arabic/archive/252/>

8 Interviews with members of different militias and leading Shiite religious figures in Kirkuk and Basra, March and June 2015.

9 This effort to construct a non-denominational nationalist image was also reflected in a complex stance regarding Iran, which embodies Sistani's interpretation of the *wilāyat al-faqīh*. In November 2014, Sistani denounced a false communiqué that suggested his support for Iranian command of certain militias in Iraq. In December 2015, as opposition to the Turkish presence in the north of the country was mounting – and at a time when Tehran's influence appeared across the Iraqi and international media – Sistani, using ambiguous wording, demanded that "Iraq's neighbouring countries, and all others, respect Iraqi sovereignty, and refrain from sending their forces into Iraqi territory without the agreement of the central government or conforming to the laws in effect in the country."

WILL THE SISTANIST "MODEL" PROVE LASTING?

In the summer of 2015, following repeated electricity blackouts, social protest had spread to every major city. Sistani expressed himself at that time not only to relay the demonstrators' demands, but also to amplify them, by attributing the chaotic nature of public services to corruption at all levels of the administration. The Prime Minister Hayder al-Abadi immediately proposed a body of reforms "in response to the sincere calls of the wise *marja'iyya*"¹⁰; the demonstrations subsequently aligned themselves behind him, creating a window of opportunity that is now closed: for more than six months, Sistani increased his remonstrances towards the government, which showed itself incapable of implementing the promised reforms.

It was in this context that the declaration of the 5th February occurred. In view of Sistani's involvement in Iraqi affairs over more than ten years, the decision to close one of the principal channels of his political expression is by no means a rupture: noting the lack of effect of his remonstrances, he simply chose to manifest his discontentment while avoiding exhausting the value of his political expression, which would be at risk of being discredited by repeating itself without being met with political decisions. Ultimately, it could even be a sign that Sistani wishes to see the Prime Minister remain in power in order to undertake the eagerly awaited reforms. Without presupposing specific consequences of this decision, it can already be noted that on the 9th February the Prime Minister announced a forthcoming government reshuffle.

This *modus operandi*, however, has its limitations: the fact that it was necessary to reach a decision such as putting a stop to the *khutba siyâssiyya* ("political sermon") is undoubtedly a sign of this. Sistani's overhanging political stance is a double-edged sword: it also limits his ability to influence political debate by other means than recommending general orientations. In the context of the fragmentation of political authority with which Iraq is well acquainted, Sistani's own political authority may end up being reduced to a simple capacity for religious sanction, which would nonetheless prove effective with regard to an extremely conservative society for whom the religious viewpoint remains indispensable, yet which is in danger of becoming ever more cosmetic. The emergence, particularly

10 <http://100iraqithoughts.com/2015/08/10/full-text-of-prime-minister-abadis-proposed-reform-agenda/>

during the extreme periods of milicisation such as in 2006-2008 or today, of new charismatic figures, both nationalist and sectarian, associating other resources of legitimacy with a certain religious authority (albeit weaker), contributes to this weakening of the monopoly of the traditional *marja'iyya* regarding the religious sanction of political affairs. This threat to the political authority of the clerical sphere can already be perceived within the militias which, while demonstrating their respect for the religious figure that Sistani is, proffer their political allegiance elsewhere. As such, Sistani today seems to have assumed the status of an authority of last resort, but solely of last resort: at the top of a pyramid whose lower echelons he is unable to control.

Observers of the *marja'iyya* have been wondering for several years about the ability of the model of the relationship to power developed by Sistani to survive its architect, who is elderly and in frail health. While he has constructed an original relationship to the political field, something akin to an "Iraqi style" *wilayat al-faqih*, it appears that beyond even the question of the association of this model with Sistani, contemporary socio-political dynamics at work in Iraq are already on the verge of undermining this fragile equilibrium.