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IRAN AND IRAQ'S HOLY SHRINES: HOW KARBALA'S SHRINES TRANSFORMED FROM RELIGIOUS TO SECULAR INSTITUTIONS?

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The holy shrines in Iraq have evolved structurally. While they carry strong religious missions, their administrators extend authority over society even though they are required to avoid worldly goals. Often administrators of shrines hold clout, and govern cities on an almost hereditary basis. As such, they are subjected to political, religious and social trends within their communities. Since Iraq's invasion in 2003, Iraq's shrines have functioned mostly as secular institutions by taking part in economic and commercial transactions to cater for ordinary Iraqis and to cushion their socio-economic difficulties. Although shrines shun political pressures, by their economic clout they have gained considerable political stature and expanded their public outreach.

The study is focused on three key questions. How did the administration of shrines evolve before the US occupation in 2003? what has Iran's experience been in helping administer Iraqi shrines ; and, how have the holy shrines in Iraq evolved post-2003?

Across history, holy shrines in Iraq have acted as a bridge between the state and religion. In other words, they have never been independent, nor have they had their own clout and influence in public life. They also have not performed activities that could be portrayed as worldly such as trade or commerce. Such activities had not been carried under the name of the holy shrines despite them being carried out by their administrators, as a result of the positions they hold.⁽¹⁾

The chiefs of the holy shrines have always been hand picked by the government for a long time. This was the case under the Safavid and Ottoman dynasties as they clashed in Iraq. The chiefs were appointed by the endorsement of social forces and notables, that had religious clout and spiritual authority. They were placed as heads of the shrines, and they administered them in a clear religious manner: serving the shrine and ensuring its survival, representing the state in its dealing with the public, regulating the affairs of visitors, and spending the resources of the shrine. The families who took over the supervision of the shrines influenced them in a one way or another. Some of these ways were legal, whereas, others involved an abuse of power and breach of trust. This dilemma continued in Iraq until 2003.

After the US occupation of Iraq, the situation changed, and many factors began to affect the role of the holy shrines in public life. Some of these factors were related to the effective role played by clerics in Najaf in shaping and administering public life post-2003. They were influenced by Iran's experience after the 1979 revolution, especially the institutionalization of the Razavi shrine in Mashhad, where it expanded its social role as well as its political, religious and even commercial roles. The most landmark experience is that of the two shrines in Karbala.⁽²⁾ This is because of several factors; some of them were pure accident. And others were related to the desire of Najaf's top religious authority not to dominate the Alawi holy shrines because of their high religious symbolism compared to the other shrines.

The study discusses this experience, particularly if Iran's *Velayat-e Faqih* has had any influence, and whether it has influenced Iraq's traditional religious authority or what might be called the '*Najaf Line*' that historically refuted *Velayat-e Faqih*. This issue has not been studied before, but the researcher has discussed it in another study related to the evolution of the jurist's position in Najaf but not as an imitation of the Iranian case or whether the Iranians have played a major part in developing Najaf's jurists and their positions.

Also, the study is not assessing whether the experiment carried out on the research sample was negative or positive. The study does not aim to expose the religious affiliations involved. Its aim is mainly to capture the evolution of the way in which holy shrines are managed in Iraq as a replication of the evolution of the Razavi shrine in Iran following its revolution.

Here it should be noted the study depended, especially in its third topic, on personal observations. As many of the elements of the were not addressed before, the researcher depended on personal observations and direct field experience.

First: the administration of the holy shrines in Iraq

The administration of the holy shrines is concerned with how to administer their affairs. The term administrator is given to those who are responsible for administering the affairs of the shrine. Historically, this mission is one of the most important jobs in Najaf. It was granted traditionally to the head of the descendants of the prophet or placed under his guardianship in case he was unable to take over the shrine himself.

One of the most ancient narratives is that the first building in Najaf was built by the Muslim Caliph Harun Rashid on the graveyard of Imam Ali. There were some small buildings in the area before it. They included the box placed by Dawood bin Ali, the uncle of the two Abbasid Caliphs

Abu 'Abbās 'Abdu'llāh Ibn Mohammad Saffām and Abu Ja'far Abdallah Ibn Muhammad Mansur on the graveyard. Despite reports that Rashid appointed servants with a fixed grant, no details are available about those who took over.⁽³⁾

In any case, the oldest narrative mentioned that certain families took over the administration of the Alawi holy shrines dating back to the fifth Hijri century. The Shahryar clan took over the holy shrines. A century earlier, the Tahan clan assumed the same role before the Shahryar clan. They continued until the end of the sixth Hijri century only for their remembrance to fade away gradually.⁽⁴⁾

In addition, Ibn Battuta, who visited Najaf after performing the Hajj in 1325, mentions that the city was rich, and he admired the architecture, cleanliness, organization and its markets. He also praised its people, noting that it enjoyed complete independence from the central government. It was ruled by the head of the prophet's descendants who had a luminous stature and he was ranked among the senior princes when he went on a trip. He had his own flags and ceremonial drums. The drums were always beaten at the doorstep of his residence in the mornings and evenings. He ruled the city, and none but him was authorized to oversee this role. No liabilities were paid to the Sultan or any other entity. The city had no collectors for tolls or liabilities. The tomb had a dome placed on it, and at its doorstep, the doorkeepers, heads of the prophet's descendants and *Aghas* took permission for visitors to enter the holy shrines.⁽⁵⁾

Most of the heads of the prophet's descendants belonged to the *Kamuna* clan from the very beginning of that era, since the last days of the Abbasid dynasty. They were handed down the administration from Sharif Murtaza, Agha Alamolhoda. He also assigned them to administering the affairs of the pilgrimage. When Ismail Safavi occupied Baghdad in 914 AH, the head of the prophet's descendants *Mohammad Kamuna* took over the holy shrines in Iraq along with the administration of the prophet's descendants and the rule in Najaf until he died in the Battle of *Chaldiran* between the Safavids and Ottomans, which took place in 921 AH. In the following years, the *Kamuna* clan played a role in preventing war between the two parties under the Ottoman Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent.⁽⁶⁾

It is noted that the position of the head of the prophet's descendants was dominated by the *Kamuna* clan. This position did not change when the Ottomans occupied Iraq after the Safavids. They maintained the same status under any sultan or any nation that annexed Iraq.

Dr. Emad Abdul-Salam Raouf, an Iraqi academic said that the Ashraf Syndicate ruled Najaf in an absolute manner without the intervention of the central government, adding the head of the prophet's descendants taking over the affairs of the pilgrims required the presence of armed forces to protect them.⁽⁷⁾ The importance of this syndicate increased to the point its head was known as 'the governor of the Central Euphrates in Iraq'. The holder of this position was also responsible for the judiciary. It survived the ten Hassani and Husseini dynasties. The central government always deemed it enough, when one of those mentioned above was appointed as head of the prophet descendants' entity, to approve this appointment and send a decree endorsing it. It also used to send official garments of the new appointee, flags and drums as it was usually done in Iraq. But the government sometimes intervened to choose a certain candidate for this post in Iraq.⁽⁸⁾

At times, after the family in charge faced a disastrous situation following the outbreak of the white plague in Iraq, which led to the death of most of the men there, minors were the last hope. Mullah Youssef Yazizi cared for those minors, letting minors in that clan to take over the Alawi shrines and rule the city on behalf of the clan until they reached the age of maturity. But he forged closer ties with the Ottomans after the decline in the Safavid expansionism in Iraq. He managed to administer the shrines and rule the city despite his dispute with the top cleric in Najaf, Jafar Jannahi Najafi, an issue which had other consequences thereafter.⁽⁹⁾

Ibn Battuta observed that the head of the prophet's descendants in the city, echoing the views

of the researcher who belonged to the last family of the shrine's chief before a change in the entire system there, had most of the clout there at the expense of the shrine's chief. He always ruled the city independently of the central government.⁽¹⁰⁾

It seems that the position of the prophet's descendants head did not change and his clout over the shrine's administration remained unchanged until the above-mentioned clerics took over the shrine's administration later in the 12th century after they were given the authority to rule the city when they took over the administration of the shrines. They had their own military force, prisons, and a law for hereditary rule. Their appointment was approved by the aldermen in Baghdad.⁽¹¹⁾

Later in the Ottoman era, under Malali, the administrators of the shrines acted as a link between the government, people and the religious class. When the relationship between the two sides became tense, clerics always prevailed over the shrines' administrators affiliated with Malali. For example, after the riots that the city witnessed in the 17th century and it being conquered several times with Mullah Mahmoud accused of collaborating with the enemies, the city formed armed groups under the command of cleric Jafar Jannahi. They were made up of the youth. After securing the city, an incident took place. He dispatched the commander of these armed groups, Abbas Haddad, to bring Mullah Mahmoud from his palace in Rahba. A clash took place, in which Mullah Mahmoud lost his life. The companions of Jannahi were angered by the incident and sought revenge. They were commanded by Mullah Mohammad Taher. This animosity continued until the demise of Jannahi seven months after Mullah Mahmoud's death in 1229 AH. Mullah Taher annoyed Jannahi's son, Sheikh Moussa. He expelled him from Najaf. Shortly thereafter, Mullah Taher was killed at the doorstep of Imam 'Ali Holy Shrine by one of Sheikh Moussa's backers.⁽¹²⁾

The incidents that followed the death of the two men and the large-scale conflict between the backers of both led the Ottomans to seize the opportunity in Najaf. They sent expeditions to quell the riots. Although the Malali family was brought back to its post as the administrators of the shrine, it was never able to survive as administrators. This happened especially after the Ottoman law on states in 1868 AD. This law made Najaf ruled by a governor appointed by Baghdad's alderman. When the dynasty of Malali's tenure ended, figures from the Rafee clan took over as administrators of the shrines through mediation from leaders loyal to Jannahi. In the beginning, Reza Rafee took over as administrator on behalf of Mohammad ibn Sheikh Jafar. He then took over the post in his own name through the mediation of the aforesaid cleric.⁽¹³⁾

Under Sultan Abdulhamid II, the Rafee clan was deprived of the post. The two positions were separated until forming the Iraqi government. At this point, the Rafee clan was restored to the position.

Reza Rafee took over as the head of the prophet's descendants and the administrator of the Alawi holy shrine. This came following riots stirred by Sheikh Mohammad ibn Sheikh Ali bin Sheikh Jafar. His dynasty continued to rule until his son Javad Rafee took over in 1285 AH. He retained both positions for over 46 years. After the post of the shrine's administration was assumed by two from the same dynasty, the two positions were separated during the tenure of the latter of the two; Ahmad Rafee. He held the post of the shrine administrator until 1334 AH, while Hadi bin Jawad bin Reza Rafee took over as the head of the prophet's descendants.⁽¹⁴⁾

We shall notice that the rise and consolidation of the post of shrine administrator coincided with the growing power of both the Safavid and Ottoman empires and their vying to rule Iraq alternately. The administrator was always from a religious family with religious clout. Then the post was handed down on a hereditary basis to his children and grandchildren in case the dynasty was not replaced for political reasons such as a regime change. The clearer example is that of Javad Rafee Kalidar. He was a cleric who was appointed as administrator of the holy shrine by the end of the 19th century. His family retained the position on a hereditary basis until

2003 when the last administrator of the shrine among his offspring was killed.⁽¹⁵⁾

During the long tenure of the Kalidar dynasty as administrators of the shrine, it played a balanced role between the government, society, and clerics. Some of its administrators' participated in the government such as Haider Kalidar himself who was a member of the Iraqi National Council. He was also a Baathist. His cousin Miqdad Kalidar was killed in 1991 after the Iraqi army entered Najaf after the incidents of 1991. He was killed by mistake because the officers knew nothing about him and his ties with the government.⁽¹⁶⁾

The brief review we introduced about the history of shrines in Iraq and especially Najaf indicates that this administrative post, despite being of a religious nature, its occupier always has performed political roles most of the time. This political role is equivalent to a provincial government working under the auspice of the central government during the period which witnessed an increasing role for the shrine's administrator versus a diminishing one for the head of the prophet's descendants. The administrator acted as a mediator between the social forces in the religious cities and the religious forces and the central government. But he carried out all these missions based on his religious status. The worldly activities were practiced based on permission from the central government. In the event of a clash with the religious class, the administrators have always been unseated. The post was always transferred to other dynasties. Even though the administrators took advantage of their positions by hoarding up riches, as it was the case with Malali, there are no clear details explaining how far the increase in their wealth was related to the rise in the wealth of the shrine as an institution. It was a matter of an abuse of power and breach of trust.

On the other side, the issue of independence of these clans, for both posts, when it comes to ruling the holy city and the central Euphrates, should not be looked at as if it was something comfortable for both the Safavid and Ottoman empires. If such independence happened, it was out of both empires' desire to consolidate their presence through respecting the religious authority of those who occupied the posts in the ambit of the conflict between the two empires. Therefore, we noticed that when the Ottoman empire consolidated its presence in Iraq, it was keen to diminish the powers of the shrine administrators and heads of prophet's descendants by issuing Provincial Laws. Furthermore, it deliberately worked to curb religious and political clout in Najaf. First, it annexed the city to Baghdad as a district whose commissioner was appointed by the alderman of Baghdad. Also, the Ottomans made Najaf a district subject to the legal authority of Karbala which had no political clout matching that of Najaf.⁽¹⁷⁾

When the power of the central government increased, the administrator's power necessarily decreased, as it was the case with their position before the establishment of the modern Iraqi state. In the run-up to the US invasion in 2003, the role of the administrator was confined to running the affairs of the shrine and acting as a link between the government and clerics. At times, the relation between the two sides turned sour, the administrators of shrines and the religious class, always inclined to side with the government. Of course, things have changed post-2003 because of the major changes that happened. Thus, the study will approach the issue later after it has cast light on the experience of administering the Razavi shrine in Iran after the Islamic revolution.

The Ottomans obliterated the independence of Najaf and made it a district that was legally annexed to Karbala. The prime aim of the Ottomans was to damage the remaining independence of Najaf after they weakened the post of the shrine administrator and the head of the prophet's descendants, giving a higher clout to Karbala which was always considered an administrative unit affiliated to Baghdad.⁽¹⁸⁾

This is backed up by what Baghdad's governor Abdel-Karim Nader Pasha did. He established a directorate connected to Baghdad's endowments to be tasked with running the affairs of the shrines in Najaf and Karbala. The endowments always generated significant funds. And the

move came to curb the influence of Shiite clerics and Iran which is the top backer for them in Karbala.⁽¹⁹⁾

At this point, the history of the holy shrines in Iraq has been clarified. Also, this part dealt with the way the administrators took over and their position when it comes to assuming political and religious powers. Hence, we will move on to the other part of the study: the Iranian experience.

The Imam Reza Shrine

We are not too much concerned with tracing the administrative history of the Imam Reza Shrine before the Islamic revolution where Imam Ali Ibn Mousa Reza rests. He is the eighth Shiite Infallible Imam. This shrine did not suffer the contradictions witnessed by its peers in Iraq during the dispute between the Safavid and Ottoman empires. However, the turning point when it comes to the philosophy of administering the Imam Reza shrine happened after the revolution.

Earlier in 1979, promptly in February, the late Supreme Leader of Iran, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini appointed cleric Abbas Vaez Tabasi as the supervisor over the Imam Reza shrine. It was among the first decrees he issued. In April 1980, he issued a decree to appoint him as the administrator of the Imam Reza shrine. This appointment was not a spur of the moment decision. It rather depended on a vast record for Tabasi in Khomeini's camp. He had early activities in opposing the Shah in 1956.⁽²⁰⁾

In the decree Khomeini issued, there was a remarkable paragraph stating “no institution in the Islamic Republic, such as Jihad Bina’ organization, the Ministry of Guidance or the ordinary people had the right to interfere in endowment affairs and the other affairs related to the holy shrines.” This clause granted Tabasi wide-ranging powers to regulate the affairs of the shrine without facing pressure from any government institution.⁽²¹⁾

Tabasi continued to administer the Imam Reza shrine with full powers until he died in 2016. He was succeeded by Ibrahim Raisi, an issue that should not be skipped without further discussion.

Although Raisi's age did not allow him to play an active role against the Shah as Tabasi did, he was involved in the pre-revolutionary activity. In fact, his rise to prominence, as is described on the shrine's site, was linked to Ayatollah Syed Mohammed Hossein Beheshti choosing him along with other young religious students in administrative work in an urgent manner, carrying out an ideological educational role and confronting Marxist organizations. He was the first director of the first entity tasked with promoting virtue and fighting vice in the country. He then started working in the judicial institution until he received the post of “Assistant Attorney General of the Revolutionary Prosecution” in Tehran in 1985.⁽²²⁾

The period in which Raisi worked in the judiciary until he was appointed to the post was literally years of revolutionary horror. Sadiq Khalkhali, the top judge, quashed thousands of Iranians. He possessed massive powers through which he upheld sentences without hesitation. Raisi worked with Khalkhali during this bloody era. This indicates how far he has been involved with the political system. And this biography may have played a role in his failure to win the presidential elections in Iran.⁽²³⁾ Raisi competing for the presidency despite him being responsible for the Razavi shrine was a complete fiasco because of his heinous record. He worked in the judiciary and prosecution in the 1980s. This post of Assistant Attorney General was a reward for him serving the regime and defending it, which opened the door for him to assume more important positions with excessive power as well as controlling financial resources with full independence from the government. The occupier of this post should have a track record of unmitigated loyalty to the ruling political system and its founding basis.⁽²⁴⁾

In any case, the era of Tabasi as an administrator of the Imam Reza shrine, as it is described on its website, saw accomplishments that surpass all that was made under his predecessors. Before Raisi took over, there was nothing in the shrine but a library that contained no more than 50,000

books, a museum, and a section for cultural affairs. Today, according to the shrine's statements the shrine has the following extensions and activities:⁽²⁵⁾

- 1- The Razavi hospital.
- 2- Imam Reza University founded in 1999.
- 3- The Supreme Cultural Council.
- 4- Islamic Cooperative on Public Relations & Media.
- 5- The Razavi Economic Organization: it is the massive economic arm of the shrine. It was founded in 2003 to regulate the work of firms that are affiliated with various administrations. It has a wide array of firms that cover different sectors. Each sector includes a big number of firms. For example, the food sector possesses 12 firms. Also, there are firms working for the mineral, textile, and wood industries, as well as, for the publishing and printing industry. In addition, there are firms with activities in the areas of services, construction, healthcare, finance, and insurance. The Razavi institution for Medicine, Healthcare and Medical Equipment has stakes in 44 firms and contributes to another 60 firms with varying degree.
- 6- Physical Education Foundation, an integrated sports city.
- 7- Islamic Research Complex.
- 8- Library and Museum Foundation and Documentation Center at the shrine. It includes a large collection of libraries and specialized centers and publishes specialized journals.
- 9- The shrine's museums: they are three museums.⁽²⁶⁾

It is obvious that these extensions and activities do not constitute part of the duties of a religious shrine. They represent the functions of the state in the public sphere rather than a religious administration, especially under broad and unrestricted powers, tax exemption, and the government's non-interference in any of its matters, giving it a special status that may in some way resemble the status of the Vatican.

These are the key features of the Razavi shrine. They are enough to forecast its impact on the administration of shrines in Iraq.

Third: the holy shrines in Iraq after 2003

Above all, it is important to notice that the most outstanding example which appeared to the researcher on the experience of institutionalizing the shrines' activities in Iraq and their evolution to perform a worldly secular mission is clear in the case of the shrines' activities in Karbala. However, the other shrines in Najaf and Kazemeya simulated the same role. But it was not as successful as that performed in Karbala. Therefore, the study will focus on the two shrines of Karbala particularly.

On the other side, the evolution of the two shrines' work and their institutionalization, which the study suggests was a repeat of the evolution of the Razavi shrine, was closely connected to the office of Ayatollah Ali Sistani and the institutions working under his authority in both Iraq and Iran.

Why are the two shrines located in Karbala, not Najaf?

Before moving on, the study seeks to focus on the two shrines' activities in Karbala as a reflection of the institutionalization of the Razavi shrine in Mashhad, and we should not miss the point that their activities were related to their supervision by Ayatollah Ali Sistani. The role of the secretary general of the two shrines was consolidated as they are his representatives who convey his vision to the people through Friday prayer. Also, they are the only two, along with two others, who Sistani issued an authorization to assume office. It was directly endorsed by three other clerics; Mohammad Saeed Hakim, Ishaq Fayadh, and Bashir Najafi earlier in 2003.⁽²⁷⁾ Yet it should be noted that most of the details that will be raised in this research were witnessed by the researcher himself. He also spoke to people working in the two shrines. They had first-hand knowledge of

what has been going on in the religious establishment in Najaf. Back to the question which was the title of the study, if we attempt to trace the reasons behind choosing the two shrines in Karbala to be the voice of Sistani, we will find the matter was not linked to a profound ideological pretext but circumstances imposed by certain realities.

After 2003, one saw the rapid rise of Moqtada Sadr, as well as, Mohammad Baqir Hakim going to Najaf and taking the Imam 'Ali Holy Shrine as a platform for Friday prayer. He then was killed and Sadruddin Qabanji took his place. Then clashes took place between the supporters of Qabanji and Sadr while the latter was wresting control over the city in 2005.⁽²⁸⁾ After that, skirmishes took place during the Sadrists' war in Najaf. The clashes happened between the Sadrists and those responsible for the Imam 'Ali Holy Shrine whose secretary general at the time was Mohammad Reza Gharifi, this was before Sistani prevented all parties from performing prayer in the shrine, neither Friday nor collective. This was because he gave prior permission to his representative in Karbala Abdel-Mahdi Karbalai to lead Friday prayer there, and this was preceded by him being authorized, along with Ahmad Safi, Sistani's representative and two other men to run the affairs of the shrine by the top four clerics in Najaf through a document sealed by all of them.⁽²⁹⁾ Karbalai established prayer in both shrines during the war of *Jaish Mahdi* with the US forces. All eyes have been on Karbalai as a deputy for Sistani. He survived an assassination attempt in 2004.⁽³⁰⁾ Out of these circumstances where accidents were the rule, the stature of the two shrines in Karbala started to be consolidated on the lines of the Najaf and the Alawi shrine.

Sistani's foundation and the two shrines

On all measures, Sistani's office had been unable to simulate any institutional experience inside Iraq before 2003, while his deputy Jawad Shahrestani benefited from the institutionalization of clerics inspired by *Velayat-e Faqih* in Iran.⁽³¹⁾ In the beginning, he founded *Ahl Al Bait* Foundation to revitalize its heritage. He then expanded his activities, establishing a wide array of active institutions, including the Center for Ideological Research, the Astronomical Research Center, the Mustapha Foundation, the Imam Ali Foundation, the Bayt Information Center, the Rafid Network, and others.⁽³²⁾

After 2003, the experiences related to institutionalization started to be simulated in Najaf. Shahrestani opened offshoots for several of his institutions in Iraq in Kazemeya, Najaf, and Karbala. Institutional work started to be commonplace in Najaf, with Mohammad Said Hakim establishing the *Hikma* [Wisdom] Foundation and Bashir Najafi starting the Anwar Foundation and others.⁽³³⁾ When the activities of the two shrines of Karbala expanded the development in the city began. This development seemed to be a result of the two secretary generals' involvement with politics and public life directly. It appeared to be a repeat of Sistani's interference in politics. This was clear in his interference in the elections and the writing of the Iraqi constitution in 2005.⁽³⁴⁾

The study inclines to conclude that although the evolution of the two shrines' work is related to adapting to challenges and society's demand to forge a relationship with the Marja; it reflects two important factors:

First: Shiites' ascent to power in Iraq

This required dealing with the state through a perspective of friendship and loyalty, not animosity, estrangement, and disengagement that marked the relationship between the Shiite establishment and the state before this.

Second: The Iranian influences

The Iranian's experience represented in transforming the Razavi shrine into an institution and is considered a holding company rather than being a religious institution. It has the religious clout that surpasses that of the Mashhad governor.

Based on this, the evolution in the work of the two shrines coincided with the approach shown by the two successive secretary generals of the Imam 'Ali Holy Shrine in Najaf towards Iran's work at the shrine. Gharifi, for example, did not allow any Iranian or non-Iranian donor to work in the shrine. He always asked them to deliver their donations and leave the place peacefully. When he decided to undergo the first expansion of the shrine, despite vandalizing historical landmarks, he brought Dr. Saher Qaisi, Professor of Abbasid architecture at the Faculty of Architecture at the University of Nahrain and assigned him to carry out the design of the shrine's expansion. The man was a Sunni.^[35]

This line of administration continued during the tenure of Mahdi Hosseini who succeeded Gharifi. But the one who succeeded Hosseini, Sheikh Diyaa Zainuddin, cooperated with the Iranian firm *Kawthar* to carry out the new expansion. This marked the beginning of the Iranians' having a foothold in the Alawi shrine. This came after the two shrines in Karbala made great strides in institutionalization and cooperation with the Iranians and the Iraqi government, with the secretary-generals of the two shrines coming to the fore.^[36] On the other side, the two shrines, for their part, competed. It was evident the Abbas Mosque focused its efforts on commercial aspects: farms, importing, contracting projects, telecommunications', and public universities. In the meantime, the Hussein shrine focused its efforts on cultural activities: schools, study centers, books and journals, research conferences, and multi-dimensional relations with universities.^[37] At this point, the study cannot determine the extent of Sistani, his son or his office's intervention in the work of the two shrines. But some guidelines could be inferred based on some incidents.

After 2003, the former head of the Center for Ideological Research, Sheikh Faris Hassoun (who died in a car accident in Qom, kin of Qabanji, of Turkish origin from a family that resided in Najaf, was born in Najaf and emigrated to Iran). He opened a library at every holy shrine in Iraq. Among those shrines was the Alawi shrine's library, which was opened with the direct permission of Sistani.^[38]

The library was chaired by Hashim Milani, a cleric from a well-known religious family. He was the nephew of Sadruddin Qabanji. Prior to 2003, he worked in the investigation section of the Jawad Shahristani Foundation and then at the Center for Ideological Research. His financial connections were with Sistani's office, not the shrine.^[39]

After Diyaa Zainuddin took over the secretariat general of the shrine, he wanted control over the library. He tied the library's wages to that of the shrine to pave the way for himself to control the library. The move was rejected by Milani. He complained about this to Sistani, so he quitted the shrine. Since he left office, things worsened, with the book exhibition becoming more extreme and exclusive.^[40] But Milani did not stay for a long time without work. The Abbas Mosque set up the Islamic Center for Strategic Studies, with its headquarters located in Najaf. Milani was appointed as its chairman. He has an ostentatious building in one of the upscale districts in Najaf named Khanana. The center issues several magazines including *Isrighrab*, *Occidentalism*, as well as another magazine dedicated to translated collections of the most important Shiite books worldwide. It issues a journal that tackles satellite channels and another one on orientalism, also they have a website.^[41]

From the foregoing, we can conclude Sistani's office does not tend to meddle in the affairs of the shrine in Najaf because of its high symbolism. Moreover, he curbed the aspirations of his men not to anger the other clerics. His office also excluded Nizar Hablolmatin after Hakim insisted that he should be removed from office as a secretary general of the Alawi shrine. On the other hand, he focuses all his efforts on the two shrines and all the men who are loyal to Sistani's office in one way or another in the two shrines. Whoever is angered in Najaf is appeased in Karbala and Milani is a case in point.^[42] In fact, the work of the center headed by Milani is worth noting. It is a new development of the *Marja'yya's* relationship with its audience in the intellectual aspects.

The Islamic Center for Strategic Studies differs in its work from the traditional role played by Islamic centers, which deal specifically with Islamic doctrinal arguments. They work on refuting all the questions raised on doubtful matters, especially among Islamic sects in the first place. They refute these claims using Islamic mechanisms. Milani's center expanded its activities to include studying the affairs of orientalists. Its Beirut branch follows up all that is written in foreign sources on Shiism and Shiites. Furthermore, the center engages with issues related to Occidentalism, refuting all the claims using the same mechanisms used by orientalists when criticizing Islam, a matter which the Shiite establishment in Najaf was not familiar with.⁽⁴³⁾ All in all, the evolution of the two shrines' work, the unlimited support they receive from Sistani, their complicated relationship with the Iraqi state, the Iranians and society indicates in some sense that Sistani has readapted his role. From one angle, he wrestled control over the institution according to its traditional mechanisms. He then barred the seminary from direct intervention in public life. He also threw weight behind the two shrines and their deceptive method of management followed by the two secretaries-generals within their deep-seated and complicated relationship.⁽⁴⁴⁾ This does not mean that there are no questions being raised about the way the two shrines work. And that there is a part of their activity which is counterproductive.

The negative repercussions of the two shrines' activities

The expansion of the two shrines' work, their role in public life, and in regulating the public affairs in Karbala, led the Shiite society to welcome and laud their activities and services offered for visitors. They provided jobs in projects whether in Karbala or in the other provinces. But this does not mean that this expansion did not have any negative repercussions. There is a feeling that none can stand up to the two shrines' activities and their secretary generals; Ahmad Safi in the Abbas Mosque and Abdel-Mahdi Karbalai in the Husseini shrine.⁽⁴⁵⁾

We can build on the observation that the institutions in Karbala have become more dependent on the resources of the two shrines. They resort to the shrines in solving their problems or resort to them for aid. The two shrines have their own platform at one of the Iraqi ports. Eyewitnesses say that the hindrances facing any shipments entering Iraq through the port, because of corruption and bureaucracy, are never faced by the two shrines.⁽⁴⁶⁾

Also, the two shrines have had a harsh attitude towards the Iraqi government. One of the most remarkable examples appears when the head of the shrine Ahmad Safi blasted the government in 2016 for failing to transport visitors in a proper way. Another example is when the Husseini shrine's decision to finance the establishment of Karbala airport. It said the move was taken as the government failed to make good on its promises. The issue of the airport needs focus to study the unplanned economic behavior of the shrine. The shrine is financing an airport from which Najaf airport is only an hour away.⁽⁴⁷⁾

Moreover, several employees at the two shrines said that there is a cutthroat contest between the two. The Abbas Mosque bought a telecommunication firm. Following this step, in response, the Husseini shrine established a cell phone network of its own. There are also variations in the wages paid at the two shrines for the same posts among other issues.⁽⁴⁸⁾

Yet there are investment projects in the fields that affect the neediest such as Kafeel hospital, its fees are too hefty. This has raised questions about the resources of the two shrines and how they spend them, given the collective awareness of the people that this money belongs to the Muslims. And it should be channeled to care for them for free or at low cost. The shrines possess a large fleet of cars and vehicles, which dwarfs the role of public transportation, as well as, a tourist firm that transports visitors to shrines, alternative firms cannot compete. Also, private universities, private schools, and a massive printing house tasked with printing all the government contracts at high costs.⁽⁴⁹⁾

It seems these unlimited financial capabilities are not overseen by Sistani's office. This

could be seen in the hardship it faces after it squandered colossal money on the Popular Mobilization Forces and the families of the martyrs. This comes considering the two shrines' ambiguous role in offering this support. Perhaps the only clear thing about this issue is the donation funds proven in the records of the two shrines.⁽⁵⁰⁾

Overall, the two clerics' connections with the *Marja'yya*, considering their growing influence, and their limitless ability to behave independently, will have negative repercussions on the *Marja'yya* itself from the one hand and on the Iraqi state on the other hand.

The *Marja'yya* will bear the brunt of all that is said about corruption in the two shrines and the extravagance and pompousness surrounding their bosses. At the same time, for those who have no observations on the performance of the two shrines and *Marja'yya*, religious holiness bars them from criticizing these entities. Considering the services provided by the two shrines, the hosting of visitors, the cities being developed, the independent decision-making and investment will improve the already hostile image towards the state.

Conclusion

In the above-mentioned explanation, we observed the work of the holy shrines in Iraq has evolved through different historical stages, with the shrines and their administrators performing complicated roles governed by timing and place, which determines their movement.

In the past, the administrator seized the opportunity that loomed when the entity responsible for the prophet's descendants weakened to hoarded up money and consolidated power, capitalizing on the sacredness of its religious post and his ability to make tradeoffs. At the time being, the administrator has turned out to be an officer with a clout within a bigger institution. He now has no room to hoard money by abusing his power. He also has no chance to pass down the position to his offspring as it was the case before.

The shrines moved from the state of being un-institutionalized religious entities to acquiring an institutional nature within a bigger complicated body which is in tune with the ruling regime's vision and the experience of the Iranian shrines, as well as, their increasing intervention in religion and politics in Iraq, or in other words harmony between the religious establishment and the regime, along with expanding its outreach in public life.

As a result, the shrines in Iraq started to carry out secular and worldly activities. They have massive economic activity, and large institutions working at multiple levels that are not confined to performing the work of religious shrines. They constitute a platform through which Sistani proclaims his political positions. The shrines are the Mecca of politicians who seek to deliver their political message and positions to Sistani.

Even though some of these missions indicate that there are connections to its work in the past. They should be a link between politics, religion, and society. Its evolution to a more institutional work no longer includes families, which took over the administration of the shrines; a role that shows the structural change that has happened to them, which made them closer in function to a modern institution of the state.

In its closing part, the study does not claim it is fully acquainted with the issue. Its aim was to present the researchers' interest in this evolution to cast more light on it since it is an important link in the apparatus of the state and the nature of the internal structure in shaping Iraq's political consensus.

Appendix of the institutions affiliated with Abbas Mosque

I	Institution
1	Holy Quran Institute
2	Kafeel Radio
3	Abbas Mosque library
4	Kafeel Nursery
5	Kafeel College
6	Abbas Combat Division-working under command of PMU directorate
7	African Studies Center
8	Kafeel Museum
9	Religious Affairs Department
10	Kafeel Institute
11	Islamic Center for Strategic Studies
12	Aqida [doctrine] Channel
13	Kafeel specialized hospital
14	Torath Anbia [Prophet's heritage] Institute
15	Mechanisms' Investment Division
16	Kafeel Company for General Investments
17	Education and High Education Department
18	Language Education Unit
19	Joud Company for Agriculture & Industry Technology
20	Kafeel Dynamic Center for Physical Therapy and Rehabilitation
21	Intravenous Infusion Factory

Endnotes

- (1) The administrator is the one who is responsible for running the affairs of the shrine. It is called Kalindar in Persian. It is attributed to the last family that took over the post in Iraq Kalindar, from Rafee, the notable Alawites.
- (2) It refers to the tomb of Imam Hussein and his brother Abbas in Karbala.
- (3) Salah Mahdi Fartousi, *Shrine and Tomb of Imam Ali* (The Imam 'Ali Holy Shrine in Najaf: London, 2010), 130. Also, see: Mohammad Javad Nour Uddin Fakhr Uddin, *The history of Najaf until the End of the Abbasid Period*, (Najaf: Alamain Institute for Postgraduate, 2005) 222-226.
- (4) Nour and Uddin, *The History of Najaf until the end of the Abbasid period*, 408,414.
- (5) Salah Fartousi, 213.
- (6) Mohammad Saeed Traihi, "Kamouna: Najaf's Prophet's Descendants Association Heads, Notables, Pilgrim Officials in the Middle Ages," in *Houses and Iraqi Leaders* ed. Mohammad Saeed Traih, *Najafi* (Netherlands: Najaf Academy nd.) 440- 444.
- (7) Emad Abdel-Salam Raouf, "Najaf in the Mughal and Ottoman Eras", in *Houses and Iraqi Leaders* ed. Mohammad Saeed Traih, *Najafi* (Netherlands: Najaf Academy nd.), 479.
- (8) Ibid.
- (9) Mohammad Saeed Traihi, "Najaf's prophet's descendants association heads," 447-449.
- (10) Ibid.
- (11) Raouf, *Najaf in the Mughal and Ottoman Eras*, 491-492. He mentioned that Malali is a family that hails from the Antara tribe in Najd. But Jaafar Baqir Mahboubeh asserts that the grandparent of the family is Mullah Abdullah Yazdi. See: Jaafar Baqir Mahboubeh, *Najaf's past and present*, (Beirut. Dar Adwa, E2, 2009); 383. It is likely that the family claimed that it hailed from Najd to forge ties with the Arab tribes surrounding the city. They also claimed to be Sunni to forge stronger ties with the Ottomans since those of Najd did not use the term Mullah. The claims of the family came to forge closer ties with the Ottomans, and this was clear in the insinuations added by Mahboubeh in his book.
- (12) Mahboubeh, 2009, 332-334.
- (13) Raouf, *Najaf in the Mughal and Ottoman Eras*, 494.
- (14) Raouf, *Najaf in the Mughal and Ottoman Eras*, 266.
- (15) Maysoun Abu Alhob, " Report on Secrets of Shrine Administrator and Story of Hairdar's Hadra," Radio Free Iraq, 27 August 2004, accessed 16 December 2019, shorturl.at/pRU78.
- (16) Ibid.
- (17) Raouf, *Najaf in the Mughal and Ottoman Eras*, 495.
- (18) Dilak Qaya, Hazem Said, *Karbala in the Ottoman Archive* (The Arab Dar Musawaat, 2008), 276.
- (19) Ibid, 287.
- (20) "The Biography of Abbas Vaez Tabasi: the Position of the Razavi shrine," *Astan Quds Razavi*, 4 April 2016, accessed 1 August 2018, <https://is.gd/kBUC6n>.
- (21) Ibid., 278.
- (22) "Riasi's Biography," *Astan Quds Razavi*, 24 May 2016, accessed 1 August 2018, <https://is.gd/QXU7LG>.
- (23) Sadiq Khalkhali took over as head of the interim revolutionary courts. He had assumed the role for two years until abolishing these courts. He then headed the anti-drug body. Assuming the two offices, Khalkhali executed hundreds without hesitation, including the Iranian premier under the Shah Amir Abbas Huida and SAVAK administrator Nematallah Nasserii.
- (24) "Ibrahim Raisi," *Al-Jazeera*, 17 July 2018, accessed 1 August 2018, <https://is.gd/umOhnf>.
- (25) "Definition of the Shrine's Role," *Astan Quds Razavi*, 5 September 2017, accessed 1 August 2018, <https://is.gd/v7hyL8>.
- (26) "Definition of the Economic Institution," *Astan Quds Razavi*, Accessed 1 August 2018 <https://is.gd/8cRwWR>.
- (27) Ahmad Hamid, "Shiite Marji'yah: Crisis Al Sistani Successor," *Middle East Online*, 15 June 2018, accessed 13 December 2018, <http://cutt.us/lNi2X>.
- (28) After fighters within Jaish Mahdi laid down arms and withdrew from Najaf. The area surrounding Sadr's office was demolished from Buraq corner in front of Haidari Narthex, except the office itself. It was an irrational step or an attempt to ease tensions by the then-premier Ayad Allawi. The office remained closed for weeks. It was opened, triggering angry protests by Najaf residents who chanted slogans against Sadr. They protested to the opening of the office. On that day, three protesters were killed. During bidding farewell to those killed in the protests, secretary general of the shrine Mohammad Reza Gharifi closed the doors of the Narthex. Protesters stormed the office and circled it instead of the shrine of the imam. This incident was witnessed by the researcher.
- (29) The researcher is an eyewitness.
- (30) "9 killed in an attempt to assassinate Sistani's deputy in Karbala," *Al-Jazeera*, 20 July 2018, 1 August 2018, <https://is.gd/uXEJNG>.
- (31) Ahmad Alsaidi, " The Procurator General of the Supreme Marji'yah Al Sayed Jawad Al Shahersta Appraises the

Activities of Al Dalil Institution in Spreading the Doctrine and Knowledge," *Aldaleel*, March 9 2017, accessed 13 December 2018, <http://cutt.us/MkoRR>.

(32) "The Centers and Institutions of Sistani's Office," *Sistani*, accessed 1 August 2018, <https://www.sistani.org/arabic/institute/>

(33) Ahmad Alsaidi, "The Procurator General of the Supreme."

(34) Ali Abdul-Hadi Maamouri, *National Security Policy in Iraq* (Beirut: Arab Science House, Publishers, 2016), 230.

(35) The researcher witnessed these incidents himself.

(36) The researcher witnessed these incidents himself.

(37) The researcher witnessed these incidents himself.

(38) A Letter sent to Al Sistani, *Hadrayah*, 29 September 2004, accessed 16 December 2018, shorturl.at/dioZ7.

(39) The researcher is an eyewitness.

(40) The researcher is an eyewitness.

(41) The researcher is an eyewitness.

(42) The researcher is an eyewitness.

(43) The researcher is an eyewitness.

(44) The researcher is an eyewitness.

(45) The researcher is an eyewitness.

(46) The researcher is an eyewitness.

(47) "The establishment of an airport in Karbala to facilitate the arrival of visitors," *Al-Jazeera*, 21 July 2018, accessed 1 August 2018, <https://is.gd/p0mWfS>.

(48) Interviews with officers of the two shrines.

(49) The researcher's personal observations.

(50) The researcher's personal observations.