

Study

The Shiite House: The Position of Religious Elite on the Iraqi and Lebanese Protests



KARRAR ALTAIE

RASANA H

المعهد الدولي للدراسات الإيرانية

INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR IRANIAN STUDIES

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The Iraqi and Lebanese uprisings reflected the inherent philosophical and juristic dispute between the Shiite religious Marjays. These disputes are between the taqlidians and the reformists, as well as Najaf and Iran.

The reformists whose roots can be traced back to Ayatollah Naini, the theorist of constitutionalism, aspire for a civil state with genuine freedoms and popular sovereignty; They deal with the actual homeland and its borders. In contrast, the fundamentalists of the Iranian religious elite view the constitutional approach with suspicion. They favor the anti-constitutional *Almostabedah* current led by Fazlollah Nouri. However, they are pragmatic in what they favour.

The disputes between the two currents are historical at the philosophical and juristic levels. There are disputes regarding the role of governance in jurisprudence as well as disputes regarding various other political issues. One current seeks to establish a modern civil state that governs on the basis of laws stipulated in the constitution and through the use of institutions. The other believes that it is necessary to establish a religious state acting on behalf of the Infallible Imam until he appears.

There is another serious dispute between the fundamentalist activists and the reformists (i.e. between the Taqlids themselves). The Taqlid activists who are Iranian religious loyalists view the Najafi Taqlids with suspicion. They consider them as a negative element that opposes the sincere expression of the Husseiniya revolution. This dispute can be traced back to Ayatollah Muhsin al-Hakim and Khomeini while he was in Najaf.

However, the relationship between all of these currents is not only limited to doctrinal thought and convictions, but there are also networks of political and economic interests and influence that have been established. These interests have become an influential determinant of the relationship between these currents.

If the Najaf supreme authority does not believe in the Guardianship of the Jurist, nor political action in the absence of the Infallible Imam, it does express its opinion on pivotal events in Iraq. It is not usually concerned about issuing statements on what's happening outside Iraq. This however contradicts the Iranian religious elite that believes in the Guardianship of the Jurist and its centrality since it is perceived as an integral part of the Shiite doctrine. Iran's supreme leader dominates all other jurists. The Najaf Marjaya also does not believe in the Guardianship of the Jurist, the Shura Council of Jurists, or in any theory that defines its powers or divides it.

This firm belief of the religious elite's *loyalists* [who believe in the Velayat-e Faqih, i.e. the Jurist Guardianship] has motivated them to view Iraqi Shiites, the Lebanese, and local Shiite groups as subjects of the supreme leader. It deals with them in the same manner that it does with Iranian society in the framework of guardianship. Revolution, hegemony, expansion and sectarianism are priorities for the loyalists.

Therefore, we found deep divergence between the Shiite religious elites regarding the October uprisings or revolutions in Iraq and Lebanon. The Iranians did not pay attention to the suffering of the people; therefore, as usu-

al, they attributed the whole matter to conspiracy theories and external elements responsible for fueling all the demonstrations that threaten their interests, security and borders. However, local jurists from among the reformists and taqlidis supported these demonstrations because they were spontaneous. These demonstrations were triggered by elite corruption, and Iranian domination in these two countries.

In this study, we seek to clarify the positions of the clergy as well as the scholars of the seminaries on the October uprisings in Iraq and Lebanon, and the impact of these positions on the relationship between the Shiite sect and the Iranian religious elite.

Introduction: The Roots of the Uprisings

On October 1, 2019, the uprising in Iraq, which was considered the biggest since the US invasion of 2003, erupted against corruption, unemployment, and Iranian hegemony. They were concentrated in Baghdad and the central and southern cities of Iraq with a high Shiite density. The demonstrators chanted slogans against Iran and the supreme leader, such as: “Iran out out.” They also burned pictures of Khomeini and Khamenei and some pro-Iranian leaders.¹

The demonstrations extended to central Shiite capitals such as Najaf and Karbala, and agitated the public against Iran and the supreme leader. On October 28, security forces broke up a sit-in protest in Karbala, one of the central Shiite capitals, killing at least 14, and wounding more than 100 protestors.² On November 3, Shiite demonstrators attempted to storm the Iranian consulate in Karbala. They

burnt the Iranian flag and images of the supreme leader and chanted slogans against Iranian hegemony.³

The crisis dates back before October 2019. In September 2018, for example, large demonstrations erupted in Basra city against water pollution and corruption, and the lack of water in the city due to the Iranian policy towards Iraq of building dams and thus preventing the flow of water to Iraqi lands. The demonstrators burned the Iranian consulate in Basra, and raised slogans denouncing Iran.⁴ In addition, protests were held in June 2019.⁵ In August and September 2019, hundreds of Master's degree and PhD graduates protested in front of the Iraqi government in the center of Baghdad. The security forces suppressed them and broke up their sit-in by force, and the Supreme Marjaya condemned the use of force against the protesters at the time. A fact-finding committee was formed to investigate the reasons and dimensions of the use of force against the protesters.⁶

At that time, the protesters nor their demands were seriously dealt with since the government bet on the factor of time and the demonstrations fading away. Remarkably, chants against Iran were reiterated in most of these waves of protest that erupted mainly in Shiite cities, or in areas of high Shiite density. However, demonstrations held in 2013 in cities with a high concentration of Sunnis did not include chants against Iran.

On the Lebanese level, another significant uprising erupted on Thursday evening, October 17, 2019, against the government, corruption and the introduction of new taxes. Just two days after the outbreak of the demonstra-

tions, Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah gave a speech on Saturday October 19. Nasrallah's speech rejected all the demands of the demonstrators, particularly: the formation of a technocratic government, or the holding of new parliamentary elections. Hassan Nasrallah clearly threatened to mobilise his supporters against the protesters. He said: "You will find us all on the streets and changing all the equations."⁷ The Lebanese army issued an official statement after Nasrallah's speech, siding with the demonstrators, and confirming its solidarity with their demands.⁸

In response to Nasrallah's threats, thousands of protesters took to the streets in defiance. They chanted against him, condemning him as one of the corrupt figures.⁹ It is noteworthy that the city of Nabatieh in southern Lebanon, which has a large Shiite population and is affiliated with Hezbollah, witnessed massive demonstrations. This indicates the fragility of the popular incubators of Hezbollah, which it has sought to increase in recent years.¹⁰

I- The Position of the Iranian Religious Elites Towards the Iraqi and Lebanese Uprisings

Initially, the Iranian position regarding the Iraqi and Lebanese demonstrations diverged. On the one hand, it adopted a hostile and firm position against the Iraqi demonstrations, and a calmer disposition towards the Lebanese demonstrations on the other hand. As both uprisings continued, the Iranian official position, represented by the highest religious and political authority Ali Khamenei, was sharper and more negative, as the uprisings threatened to limit Iranian sectarian and political influence in the region, particularly if the main goals of the two upris-

ings- rejecting sectarianism and quotas, and building a modern civil state- succeeded.

1- The Position of the Supreme Leader: Jurisprudence of Blood

In the beginning of the first wave of the Iraqi demonstrations on October 1, 2019, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, in an official tweet, said: “The enemies are seeking to drive a wedge between Iraq and Iran, to no avail.”¹¹ He completely disregarded the more than 100 martyrs who died during the first wave of demonstrations. This raises deep questions about the jurisprudence of blood of the ruling religious elite. If we review the religious and juristic sayings of these elites, we will find that bloodshed is justified and legitimized in the framework of preserving the Islamic state and the Guardianship of the Jurist.

Ayatollah Misbah Yazdi¹² believes that the use of force is mandatory to maintain the Islamic government, even if it has been rejected by more than half of the people. He said : “A number is not a standard for maintaining the government. Rather, the standard is when a number of followers of the Imam, peace be upon him, or the legitimate state of the jurist provide support for maintaining the government. Sometimes the percentages of these groups constitute 90 percent, 50 percent, or 40 percent of the people. He is the guardian jurist, who is commanded to maintain the Islamic government. As long as there is a person who can maintain the Islamic government, he is obligated to maintain it. A number has no value any more.¹³ The government must remain, even if it has only 10 percent of supporters, in any form and by any means.¹⁴ If the Islamic goals can be achieved only through violence, then it be-

comes necessary.¹⁵

In addition, extrajudicial killings must be implemented without reference to the court,¹⁶ in order to protect the Islamic values of the state.¹⁷ This can enable the guardian jurist to take over the state. He therefore has the power to choose who has the right to live in the land or otherwise. Every Iranian living on Iranian territory must believe in the Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist. According to Yazdi, "If you want to live in this country, you must accept the Islamic state even if it uses power against you. Whoever opposes the Islamic state is condemned and should be fought, even if only one person is left in this country."¹⁸

If this reflects the ideology of the Iranian ruling religious elite towards the sanctity of the people inside Iran, it is clear that this position is even more brutal against protesters who threaten the influence of the Guardianship of the Jurist in the region.

After the second wave of protests on October 25 which left over 60 people dead and more than 2,000 wounded, on Wednesday October 30, 2019, the Iranian supreme leader commented on the demonstrations in Iraq and Lebanon during the graduation ceremony of cadets held at Khatam al-Anbia Air Defense University. He said, "The rightful demands of the people can be met through the legal channels in their countries."¹⁹ He added, "The biggest blow that enemies can strike against any country is to take away its security, which they started in some countries of the region. I recommend those who care about Iraq and Lebanon to address the riots and insecurity inflicted by America, the Zionist entity and some Western countries via the

money of some reactionary countries.”²⁰

Despite the Iranian supreme leader’s use of the word “riots” in his recorded speech which is available on his official website, and after the outrage expressed by Iraqis over the use of this word, a member of the Assembly of Experts Sheikh Abbas al Kaabi denied the supreme leader’s use of this word: “His Eminence did not use the word (riots) in describing peaceful demonstrations and protests in Lebanon and Iraq. He even stated that people’s demands are rightful. Improving living conditions, fighting corruption, and ensuring justice are among the most important duties of the state and one of the most important rights of the people. His Eminence also indicated that public demands can be met through existing legal frameworks.”²¹

However, the words of the supreme leader were clear and unequivocal. To further understand the dimensions of his speech and his intent, all his statements need to be comprehended as well as those of the Iranian religious, political and military elites related to the Iraqi and Lebanese uprisings.

2- The Position of the Head of the Judiciary

Commenting on the first wave of the Iraqi uprising, Hojjat al-Islam²² Ibrahim Raisi, head of the judiciary and the most prominent candidate to succeed Khamenei, said that these demonstrations were an American-Saudi sedition, to cause chaos and prevent Iraqis from participating in the Arbaeen pilgrimage. The same speech was repeated by Yahya Rahim Safavi, the supreme leader’s military adviser, and a number of Iranian officials.²³

To discuss the Arbaeen pilgrimage within the context of

the protests is an attempt to sectarianize the issue, provoke sectarianism, and remind protesters in Shiite majority communities of their sect, as well as to highlight the risks threatening the Shiite sect and community, because of these demonstrations!

3- The Position of the Friday Imam of Tehran

On October 4, 2019 – the first Friday following the first wave of Iraqi protests – Ayatollah Emami-Kashan, Friday Imam of Tehran, commenting on the demonstrations, stated: “The enemy pays attention to the Arbaeen pilgrimage and Iraq and creates trouble because the issue of Arbaeen is tough on them. What is tough on the enemy is that more or less than 20 million people head to Karbala. The reason for this opposition is that Hussein’s banner calls for martyrdom and steadfastness. This banner awakens nations to stand against oppression. It includes ‘we will never accept, humiliation.’ All the groups that participate in the Arbaeen pilgrimage embody those that will never accept humiliation, and the enemy does not want to see that. With the help of God, the issues and problems that have emerged will be resolved, and the masses will participate in the 40th march.”²⁴

There are important nuances that must be comprehended in this sermon, most importantly: the Friday Imam of Tehran drew a link between the demonstrations of Iraq and espionage for a foreign country, as if the Iraqi people were not protesting against living conditions and political corruption. He also drew a link between the demonstrations and the Arbaeen pilgrimage, provoking sectarian sentiments.

The most significant contradiction in the Imam of Tehran's Friday sermon was his talk of martyrdom and steadfastness, and the Shiite slogan of "we will never accept humiliation" in the context of the Iraqi demonstrations. He used the Shiite slogan to describe Iranians who will not accept humiliation from Iraqi protesters by accusing the Iraqis of working as agents of world oppressors.²⁵ Apparently, this slogan is used by the Iranian religious elite against its sectarian and political opponents only. Ironically, if this slogan is used against it, the religious elite would never accept this, as it is only used in accordance with the exigencies of the Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist based on its Khomeinist style!

Kashani believes that martyrs who follow the way of God have the true life. He said, "Those who follow the path of the martyrs and confront problems and enemies have a true life."²⁶ However, the Iraqi revolutionaries do not deserve this real life! Despite this contradiction, it represents the doctrine of the Iranian religious elite, which monopolizes religion, doctrine and the 1979 revolution. It is the only one that can decide which regime can be opposed, or not, because it speaks on behalf of the Infallible Imam. Through this way the Iranian religious elite entrenched the principle of infallibility of the deputy of the Infallible Imam, even though it is not permitted juristically.

On Friday, October 11, 2019, the Friday Imam of Tehran, Ahmad Khatami, delivered a speech during the Friday sermon, saying, "The enemies of the Iranian people took advantage of the wave of protests in Iraq. The enemies of the Iranian people aimed to achieve four goals through

these demonstrations: The first goal was to make the Arbaeen pilgrimage irrelevant, through the spread of fear and terror among the people to stop them going to this pilgrimage, but they failed to achieve this. The second was to disunite the Iranian and Iraqi people. The third goal was to target the axis of the resistance. The fourth was to take revenge against some Iraqi officials who stood against the illegal demands of the Zionist entity and America.”²⁷

Khatami attributed these demonstrations to three sides. The first side is represented by America, Britain and Israel. He said that the Zionist entity described the Iraqi demonstrators as Iraqi *revolutionaries*. According to Khatami, this description of the demonstrators would distort their image and undermine their demands.

The second side is represented by some Arab countries, according to Khatami’s speech; these protests are the result of the chaos caused by some reactionary Arab countries. These countries seek to spread unrest and chaos in the world! Some elements of the Baathists are the third side responsible for wreaking havoc in Iraq.²⁸

After the second wave of Iraqi protests on October 25, 2019, Ayatollah Movahedi-Kermani delivered a Friday sermon in Tehran²⁹ on November 1, saying: “The point that I should clarify about the Iraqi protests is the influence of some of the aberrant marjas as we call them English Shi’a. Especially, they committed crimes in Karbala, Basra and Amarah. The Iraqi people must keep themselves away from them.”³⁰ These attempts aimed to sectarianize the conflict again by accusing the Shirazis of being behind the uprising. However, he never acknowledged the thousands

of martyrs and the injured demonstrators!

Movahedi-Kermani concluded his sermon with prayers: “We ask The Mighty and Majestic to end this strife quickly and for the Lebanese and Iraqi people to taste unity quickly.”³¹ We note here the use of the word ‘sedition’ used by the Iranian religious establishment to describe everything that threatens their interests, while using the words ‘revolution’ and ‘uprising’ to describe movements that serve their strategic goals.

The common denominators in all the Tehran Friday sermons regarding the Iraqi and Lebanese demonstrations throughout the months of October and November can be summarized as follows:

1. The demonstrations are caused by the West, America, and Arab countries.
2. They lead to chaos and sedition.
3. They are agitated by some elements of the Baathists.
4. They target the resistant axis.
5. They are stirred by the English Shiite.

Finally, the position of the clergy does not differ significantly from the Iranian diplomatic line adopted by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in its official statements,³² and in the statements of security officials. According to one of the commanders of the special units of the Iranian police, these demonstrations are designed to weaken the resistance front in the region, which is the greatest achievement of the Islamic Republic.³³

II- The Iranian Ways of Dealing With the Two Uprisings

After Khamenei's speech and the negative responses from the political and religious elites regarding the Iraq demonstrations, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) also got involved in this matter. According to a Reuters report, senior IRGC officers with experience in containing civil unrest met during the protests with Iraqi security officials, and Iranian advisers warned that if the demonstrations continued, they would undermine the government.³⁴ Therefore, there was a deliberate intention to kill the demonstrators as was stated by Haider al-Abadi, the former Iraqi Prime Minister, who is undoubtedly familiar with what is going on inside the Iraqi state.³⁵ Apparently, Iranian experts made their recommendations early on from the first day of the Iraqi uprising. Therefore, the demonstrations were dealt with using several means which were used previously in response to the December 2017 protests in Iran. These included the following:

1- Sniping and Direct Killing

The death toll in the first wave of demonstrations in Iraq at the beginning of October was over 100 with nearly 4,000 demonstrators wounded, some of whom were in critical condition.³⁶ In the second wave of Iraqi demonstrations that erupted on October 25, more than 60 protesters were killed and over 2,000 were injured.³⁷ In addition, dozens were killed and injured in between the two waves, and after the second wave, in Karbala, Najaf, Baghdad, and the central cities.³⁸

The Iraqi government has officially denied that its security forces faced the protesters with live bullets, and stat-

ed that it will launch a full investigation into the killing of the demonstrators. This supports the Reuters report that the snipers who participated in the killing of the protesters are affiliated to militias under the umbrella of the guardian jurist rather than the regular security forces,³⁹ particularly in the massacre witnessed during the first wave of the uprising.

2- Preventing Access to the Internet and Curfews

The Iraqi government blocked internet access across the country and imposed a curfew on Thursday, October 3, 2019, in fear of further demonstrations on Friday, October 4.⁴⁰ However, thousands of demonstrators broke the curfew and took to the squares where they demonstrate, thereby rendering the government's measures ineffective.⁴¹ Curfews were imposed repeatedly throughout the uprising but the government's efforts to prevent the demonstrations failed again. None of these measures were effective in preventing the revolutionaries from demonstrating in almost all Iraqi cities. The voices of the demonstrators resonated across the country.

3- Bloodbaths

The demonstrations in Iraq turned into bloodbaths, according to Amnesty International reports. The demonstrators were intimidated and threatened, both physically and psychologically, with prosecution, arrest, dismissal from government jobs, kidnapping, and other extrajudicial acts.⁴²

4- With Regard to the Lebanese Uprising

Hezbollah's militias assaulted the demonstrators. In addition, the demonstrators were accused of espionage and

treason by the media and those loyal to Hezbollah.⁴³

This treatment toward the Iraqi and Lebanese uprisings, especially the Iraqi demonstrations, by the Iran-backed militias and Iranian military advisers, according to Reuters, is in complete alignment with the religious and ideological rhetoric of the ruling elite in Iran, and its vision of the position of the guardian of the jurist, elections and popular sovereignty. This is illustrated above in the words of Mesbah Yazdi and others, which describe the position taken towards the demonstrators, despite their affiliation with the Shiite sect.

III- The Position of the Religious Marjaya in Najaf

The position of Najaf diverged from that of Tehran increasingly. However, it is noticed that the strongest statement was issued by Najaf after the demonstrators were accused of espionage by the Iranian leader Ali Khamenei. Ayatollah Sistani – in what was considered a response to Iranian interference – said: “No party or regional or international actor has the right to confiscate the will of the Iraqis,”⁴⁴ in reference to Khamenei’s accusations of espionage. and the need for legal methods to be pursued.

On the same day that Sistani said these words which warned of external interference leading to the will of the Iraqis being usurped, the Friday Imam of Tehran said that Iraq was exposed to a conspiracy!

If we consider the sequence of events, we find that the position of the Supreme Marjaya in Najaf is firm and clear towards supporting the demonstrations. At the same time, the marjaya in Najaf is not a solid institution, and it cannot engage with the Iranians in an open clash that could lead to consequences, such as confrontation with militias on

the ground.

On Friday, October 4, after the events witnessed in the first wave of protests, it was stated in the Friday sermon of the Supreme Marjaya: “Things must be rectified before it is too late.” Regarding the violence, it mentioned: “There are unacceptable and condemned attacks against peaceful demonstrators and the security forces. The government must change its approach when dealing with the country’s problems. The government should fulfill its duties, do its best to improve public services, provide job opportunities for the unemployed, end favoritism in public jobs, and complete the cases of those who are charged with corruption and bring them to justice.”⁴⁵

On Friday, October 11, Sheikh Abdul-Mahdi Al-Karbalai, the representative of Ayatollah Sayyid Ali al-Sistani, said during the Friday sermon in Karbala that “the government and its security services are responsible for the great bloodshed that was spilt in the demonstrations in the past days,” He set a two-week deadline for the authorities to announce the results of their investigations.⁴⁶

In the Friday sermon on October 25, when the second wave of the uprising broke out, the Marjaya stated: “The real reform, and the desired change for the management of the country, should be demanded through peaceful means. Corruption should be fought, and the privileges of senior officials should be abolished. The report of the investigation committee regarding the previous demonstrations did not achieve the expected goal, nor did it reveal the facts. Accordingly, we call for forming an independent judicial body to follow up the demonstrations, limit arms

to the state, enact a new electoral law, and challenge external interference in the affairs of the country vigorously.”⁴⁷

Although the Marjaya called for a resolute approach to address external interference, the Iranian supreme leader spoke on Iraqi affairs in a speech on Wednesday, October 30. According to his official website, he “recommended those who are keen on the two countries to address the riots run by America and the Zionist entity.”⁴⁸

In the first Friday sermon of November, the Supreme Marjaya reiterated its advice to the state not to use violence against the demonstrators, and not to send its security forces to confront the young. Also, the Supreme Marjaya implicitly denounced Iranian interference – especially the statements of the supreme leader who described the events in Iraq as riots. The Marjaya stated: “The religious marjaya reiterates its well-known position on condemning ill-treatment against peaceful demonstrators and all kinds of unjustified violence, and holding necessarily those responsible to account. It also calls upon the relevant authorities on not involving any combat forces in dealing with sit-ins and peaceful demonstrations, for fear of further violence. Respecting the will of Iraqis to define the political and administrative regime of their country by conducting a public referendum on the Constitution and periodic elections to the House of Representatives is the principle that the religious marjaya committed to and reiterated since the regime changed over. Today, it affirms that reform is an imperative necessity – as has been discussed more than one time. However, necessary reform in this regard is also mandated to the Iraqi people’s choice with all its communities throughout the country. No per-

son, group or party with a specific orientation or any regional or international party has the right to confiscate the will of the Iraqis and impose his opinion on them.”⁴⁹

The position of the other marjayas did not differ from Sistani’s. The representative of Ayatollah Najafi said: “Our position with regard to the demonstrations in Iraq and the Iraqi government and the challenges facing Iraq is similar to what was presented through the Friday sermons held at the Imam Husayn Shrine. Najaf has always identified the mistakes in the Iraqi state, drew the attention of its officials to these mistakes and revealed the need to find appropriate solutions to them. It is imperative to find appropriate solutions to these problems and provide a decent life for Iraqi citizens.”⁵⁰

A statement from the Iraqi religious authority on Saturday, November 9, 2019 denied what was reported in the media about an agreement between the marjaya and political forces to keep the government of Abdul-Mahdi in power and end the ongoing protests. The statement stressed that the position of the religious marjaya towards the popular protests, as well as its relationship and dealings with them was what was announced clearly in the Friday sermons. “I have informed all of those that contacted me in this regard. All of what has been associated with our position otherwise is for political exploitation by some parties and is baseless.”⁵¹

A statement of the marjaya was issued on Monday, November 11, 2019 after Ayatollah Sistani received Mrs. Jenin Hennes Blachart, Head of the United Nations Mission in Iraq (UNAMI). It included the marjaya’s reiteration

of the people's right to protest, and that the protesters will not return to their homes until their demands are met. In addition, it called for an end to external interference. Ayatollah Sistani concluded: "The situation cannot remain as it was before the recent protests."⁵²

We note that the marjaya reiterated its rejection of external interference and the right of the people to demonstrate peacefully. This was because the marjaya felt embarrassed in front of the people as the dead and injured were very large in number. This put the marjaya in confrontation with the demonstrators who called for a fatwa from the marjaya to protect them from the oppression of the security forces and the pro-Iranian militias.

The most important points that the Supreme Marjaya focused on in all Friday sermons:

- Preventing foreign parties from interfering in Iraqi affairs.
- Forming independent judicial committees to investigate the protests.
- Rejecting violence against protesters, and vice versa.
- Limiting the bearing of weapons to the state.
- Fulfilling the legitimate demands of the protestors.

We did not find any terms related to conspiracy, espionage, riots, British Shiism, and Zionist-American plots as cited in the speeches and statements of Iranian religious elites. However, the position of the Najaf Supreme Marjaya is not expected to go further than denunciations and the issuance of statements, as was the case in previous events such as the demonstrations in Basra that were met with

live bullets⁵³ and other demonstrations in which the marjaya resorted only to statements and denunciations. This is because Iraq's religious marjaya has spiritual authority over the Iraqi political arena, i.e., it does not have power over Iraqi public affairs like that of the Velayat-e Faqih in Iran. It is not one of the solid state institutions that can challenge some of the armed militias affiliated with Iran. Therefore, the marjaya always calls for restricting arms to the state. In addition, there is also the intermingling of some interests and influence of the clergy, which threatens the networks of economic and political interests as a whole if there are fundamental changes in the core of the Iraqi constitution and patterns of the relationship between jurists and politicians that have been established in the period from 2003 onwards.

In this context, the Iranian government's decision to stop religious trips to Shiite religious shrines in Iraq appeared to be a disciplinary action against Najaf for its supportive position of the demonstrators.

Iranian television quoted from a source in the Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's office, saying that "security is not available at the present time for Iranian visitors to come over."⁵⁴ This may be part of a message to the supreme marjaya that ongoing demonstrations will decrease the income of religious sites in Najaf and Karbala. The economic situation of the Iraqi religious marjaya was also affected, because the financial resources of the Shiite shrines in Najaf and Karbala depend mainly on the numbers of Iranian tourists. This event had happened before when Raza Khan (1878-1944) came to power in Iran in 1925 and prevented Iranians from visiting Najaf and Kar-

bala. He therefore stopped financial support for the Najaf Hawza, which caused great suffering to religious scholars and made it difficult to fund Hawza schools and students as well as existing projects belonging to the marjaya. The Shah set conditions to agree to reimbursing the money, including the identity of the people on who the money would be spent. Isfahani and Mirza Al-Naini complained about not receiving funds and legal entitlements from Iran. They stated that what they received in funds was from Afghanistan and Zanzibar. There was a clear destabilization in the financial situation that resulted in a significant number of Hawza students leaving the seminary. When Nasir al-Din Shah (1831-1896) visited Najaf, Mirza Al-Shirazi refused to meet him. The rest of the Najaf scholars welcomed him, and their relationship with Al-Shirazi became strained because of his tough position on the Shah. The Najaf scholars were afraid to tackle the economic consequences stemming from the Shah's policies because of Al-Shirazi's position.⁵⁵

According to one Shiite thinker: "The economy of Najaf and its central image in Iraq and Iran, and its distinction from other cities under the Ottoman authority, were largely the outcome of such visits carried out by prominent leaders and people. A quick reading of the history of the holy cities is enough to discover that important urban projects were established there as a result of the visits of leaders of this type, especially from the kings and princes of Iran."⁵⁶

In any case, the Iranian decision to prevent Iranian visitors from traveling to Iraq's Shiite shrines sends a message to the Supreme Marjaya in Najaf, and to dignitaries,

merchants and officials in Najaf and Karbala. It reflects implicit recognition of the demonstrations and their effectiveness, as well as how far they spread. It includes recognition that Iranian presence and influence are being targeted even in the heart of Shiite capitals.

IV- Independent and Reformist Clergy

There are a large number of clerics who are neither affiliated with the Najaf Marjaya nor are they totally affiliated with the Iranian state. They supported the demonstrations, and some of them participated in them. The Lebanese cleric Sheikh Yasser Auda, one of the reformist clerics and students of Hussein Fadlallah, announced his solidarity from the first day of the Lebanese and Iraqi demonstrations and participated himself in the Lebanese uprising on October 17, 2019.⁵⁷

In the first uprising of Iraqis on October 1, 2019, Sheikh Yasser Auda said: “Does the Hussein government loot? Is the Hussein government a thief? Does the Hussein government kill people in cold blood?”⁵⁸ His statement was a reference to the widespread corruption of the Iraqi government.

After a number of demonstrators were subjected to harassment and violence in Lebanon, Auda said: Peace to all young people rising up, they are free men of Lebanon. I tell them: Keep going, no matter how great the pressure is - and the threat is great - so that at least your children do not curse you as our children did because we were followers of our communities’ leaders. I stand by the youth even if they are secular, Christian, Druze, Alevi, or Sunni, and no matter what they are I will stay with them because every

human has his own rights even if he is an infidel. This is what we have learned from Imam Ali.⁵⁹

Sheikh Yasir Auda responded to one of the jurists of Velayat-e Faqih who forbade “the burial of the uprising’s martyrs who were killed by the security forces in Muslim graves because they are apostates of the Islamic state.”⁶⁰ The intended Islamic state here - according to the loyalists - is Iran. He also denounced the image distortion and the religious devaluation to which protesters were subjected to by saying, “I am an agent for the poor and I am an agent for vulnerable persons.”⁶¹

Religious marja Sheikh Mohammad al-Yaqoobi, leader of the Fadhila Party, announced his support for the demonstrations in a statement and said: “I believe that one of the most valuable outcomes achieved by the rising of the conscious youth, of the liberation uprising, is the restoration of the national identity that sectarians had corrupted and their agents had taken away until they wasted our hope to revive it and forced many of the sons of the nations to emigrate, leaving their families, memories and eyes focused on those behind them.” He rejected the use of violence against the demonstrators by saying: “Insisting on the policy of repression and the use of violence does not help, but it will lead the country and people over the edge and you cannot defeat young people who look for death and take bullets with bare breasts.”⁶² Although al-Yaqoobi is affiliated with the elite of the Iraqi government, his statement confirms that the demonstrators forced the Iraqi religious establishment to announce their support. This confirms that the demonstrations are of a national consensus, and the religious marjaya within Iraq, did not accuse the dem-

onstrators of espionage. They were accused by marjayas outside of Iraq.

One of the reformist Iraqi clerics who supported the demonstrations was Sheikh Meethaq al-Aeser, who stood for the rights of the protesters and criticized the Iranian handling of the Iraqi uprising. He argued with them depending on the statements of Khomeini and his companions of the revolution, and listed some of Khomeini's texts that he was delivering to his followers during the Iranian revolution calling on them to strike and demonstrate and halt public life.

Kamal al-Haydari is a marja who supported the demonstrations and demanded the dismissal of the government. In one of his lessons, he said : "It is with great regret that the Iraqi people experienced another ordeal equally serious to the previous one. A corrupt class dominated political, economic and social conditions, leading the nation to a state of despair and frustration in the homeland. I have repeatedly warned in the past years of the widespread corruption in the ruling class with all its branches, communities, currents and parties. Corruption has become a phenomena in the public life of the country facing no religious or legal deterrence. The demonstrations that erupted and that will break out are only a natural reaction to this corruption. We declare our complete support of the demands of the protesters in eliminating this ruling class. We call upon the Iraqi people to restrain any corrupt party that has participated in the corruption -of all its communities and marjayas- and to participate in the wave of demonstrations and not to waste the rightful demands of the protesters."⁶³

Another supporter is the cleric Muhammad Hassan Al-Amin, who has supported the demonstrations in Lebanon and Iraq. He also declared that a civil state has become a popular demand for all.⁶⁴

Among those who attacked the Iranian leader and accused him of being behind the suppression of the Iraqi and Lebanese people is Sheikh Subhi al-Tufayli,⁶⁵ who accused Iran of sabotaging Iraq and Lebanon.⁶⁶

Taqi al-Modarresi is another supporter of the demonstrations since day one.⁶⁷ He called upon the clergy to advise the government and stand by the people.⁶⁸ He reiterated his support for the demonstrations following the recent violent events.⁶⁹ There were dozens of Shiite imams and clerics who participated in the demonstrations in Lebanon and Iraq and against the Iranian hegemony and the ruling elites.⁷⁰

There are broad Shiite currents that supported the demonstrators and criticized Iranian intervention, such as the Shirazi movement. The religious marjaya of Sadiq Al-Shirazi, the leader of the Shirazis, issued a statement saying, "It is unfortunate that this Iraq has become a grave of the dead and wounded. In this ongoing and painful tragedy, I am recommending everyone to strive to end these massacres which are a shameful incident in history. I also recommend the government, the army, the police and the security forces to make room for peaceful demonstrations of any kind, and to speed up the process of fulfilling the demands of the honorable demonstrators and not to harass them, as what Amir al-Mu'minin, peace be upon him, used to do during his great, fair and virtuous government.

I also recommend the proud, oppressed, and persistent Iraqi people - who have suffered for the last several decades through unjust governments and from injustice and tyranny - to commit themselves to peaceful demonstrations and certainly not to allow those who discredit them to infiltrate their ranks."⁷¹

We conclude that the ruling Iranian religious elite is the only one who looks at the demonstrations as a conspiracy and espionage. The Iranian elite also believes that the demonstrations are funded by international and regional powers. But most of the traditional and reformist local religious elites are aware of the demands of the youth and the new generation particularly for democracy, a civil state, and social justice. Iran, however, has the power on the ground which significantly outweighs that of the religious elites and local hawza that oppose Iranian hegemony.

V- Implications and Dimensions

There are several indications that can be gleaned from the Iraqi and Lebanese uprisings, the most important of which are:

1. The Incubators of Taqlid and Rebellion Against the Guardian Jurist

Velayat-e Faqih has faced deep rebellions within the structure of Shiite societies in recent years, indicating that there are fundamental changes evolving in the structure of the Shiite fabric, collective mind, and historical memory towards the Iranian religious elite and its underlying thesis. The transformations in the Iranian religious arena — led by all Iranians; women and men, the young and

old following the 1979 revolution — have become quite noticeable. They were not confined to one place so that one could claim that the problem is spatial or temporal, but rather the scope of these transformations expanded to include those in positions of influence and the Iranian homeland itself. Those rebellions began from inside Iran as individual or factional opposition movements, until they were established as public demands that have clear, political, economic and social features.

The structure of the collapsing Taqlid can be reviewed internally and externally as follows.

A- The Collapse of the Taqlid Structure Internally:

The Iranian religious elite has been facing massive waves of protest inside Iran which have been going on for years, the last of which took place last year. In January 2018, protesters burned Hawzas and attacked homes of clerics. In reference to the public anger regarding the repression, corruption and theft, Ayatollah Ghiyasuddin Taha Mohammadi said, “During the uprising, 60 offices belonging to Friday imams were attacked in most Iranian cities.”⁷² In another wave of protests in August 2018, the homes of the clergy were attacked, stones were thrown at some Hawza , and the demonstrators tried to break down their doors and chanted “Death to the Dictator,”⁷³ in reference to the supreme leader.

These internal rebellions and the disrespect of the supreme leader and the religious elite were a violation of the religious holiness and the aura that surrounded this elite and the supreme leader. They are in fact rebellions against Taqlid and the guardianship of the jurist.

B- The Collapse of the Taqlid Structure Externally:

Only one year had passed since these internal rebellions erupted when the Iranian religious elite faced external rebellions at the core of its Shiite crescent in Iraq and Lebanon, its historical and sectarian spheres of influence, and the central capitals of Shi'ism. The Iraqis and the Lebanese, including a majority of Shiites, rose up against the Iranian supreme leader, the Iranian elite and their local religious and militia arms.

2. The Emergence of the Iranian-Najaf Dispute

The positions of the Hawza and the Shiite religious elites regarding the two uprisings that broke out in Iraq and Lebanon in October 2019 diverged. In fact, the positions of the Shiite religious elites towards these demonstrations have profound indications in context of the historical dispute between Najaf and Qom, and between the reformists and the Taqlidis.

Historically, Najaf does not believe that jurisprudence has a mandate over political and civil affairs, except in matters of Ijtihad. Whereas according to the theory of the Guardianship of the Jurist with its Khomeinist style, the mandate of the Iranian supreme leader is not confined within the Iranian borders but extends to all Muslims with all their doctrines and communities and not to the Shiites only. Therefore, the supreme leader is usually called in Iranian official media “the guardian of the Muslims.” According to Hojjat al-Islam Mohsen Kadivar, the geographical boundaries of the Velayat-e Faqih government should be beyond its current borders; however, the current conditions have confined it within specific borders.⁷⁴

According to the approved approach of the Iranian religious elite and the theorists of the loyalist current, the position of the supreme leader is one of inauguration rather than selection. The role of the Assembly of Experts is to rubber stamp not select the supreme leader. The Guardianship of the Jurist has an absolute mandate that includes all religious and earthly matters.

These three dimensions (the mandate of the supreme leader outside Iran's borders, the comprehensiveness of the mandate covering religious and earthly matters, and appointment by inauguration rather than selection) are the ones that govern the philosophy of the religious elite and their relationship with the doctrine internally and externally.

This philosophy, adopted by the loyalists, is confronted with great resentment and dissatisfaction from both Najaf and Qom alike. There are deep differences between the two schools - loyalists and Taqalids - regarding this political theory and its implications.

The Iranians loyalists have tried to control Najaf since the success of the revolution in 1979, as the Shah did not pursue this control before because he was secular and did not adopt a dynamic religious movement. He also aimed to transfer the Shiite weight to Najaf away from Qom in order to avoid the ongoing conflict with the clergy.

The post-1979 ruling system is purely religious; it fights with the Najaf Marjaya for control over the Shiite doctrine internally and struggles with religious institutions such as Al-Azhar, as well as central Sunni capitals such as Mecca, Medina, Damascus, Istanbul, and Cairo, over religion ex-

ternally. According to the Iranian ruling system, the main conflict is over competition for the leadership of Islam, its representation, and winning loyalty of all Muslims.

The Iranians adopted a pragmatic strategy in this conflict to dominate religion and doctrine, which consisted of two tracks. The first track included the creation of pockets and solid arms similar to the Iranian Revolutionary Guard's model, such as the "Popular Mobilization Forces" in Iraq, "Hezbollah" in Lebanon, and "Ansar-allah" in Yemen.

The second track involved the creation of a religious environment loyal to Tehran, parallel to Najaf and a rival to it at the same time, in order to weaken Najaf which could be controlled over time and especially after the death of the current Supreme Marjaya represented by Ayatollah Sistani. This Marjaya is aware of the complexities of the conflict Shiites are going through and the extent of Iranian pressure. The investment in creating a Shiite crescent was not a coincidence but rather the result of strategic planning worked on by the ruling religious elite since the success of the revolution until the present day. One of those close to Khomeini called it the "Shiite sea that extends from the borders of Pakistan to the Mediterranean."⁷⁵

However, this Shiite Crescent faces a vulnerability that has disturbed Iranians. It has become fragile because of Iranian foreign policies towards other states and non-state actors, especially in regard to political and socio-economic realities in the region, as well as sectarianism - in addition to Iranian national arrogance towards these societies.

This fragility was evident in the massive uprising of the Shiite regions of Iraq and Lebanon, the slogans used

against Iran and the destruction of the images of the Iranian supreme leader. It was also noticeable in the attempts to storm Iranian diplomatic headquarters in historic Shiite capitals, such as what occurred in Najaf and Karbala.

The historic dispute between Najaf and the Khomeinist thesis came to the surface. This dispute has been ongoing since the time of Ayatollah Muhsin al-Hakim, who differed significantly with Khomeini when he was in Najaf, then his successor, Ayatollah Khomeini, who also disagreed with Khomeini but with a deeper confrontation and more intense competition. Today, the current dispute is between Ayatollah Sistani and Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. Iran has never submitted to the Najaf Marjaya since the advent of Khomeini, who went to Najaf as a dynamic marjaya looking for followers and influence, not as a taqlidi and a follower of the Najafis. On the other side, Najaf also did not submit to the will of the Iranians or their philosophy, and looks upon them with suspicion and doubt.

Conclusion

One of the most striking features is the people's uprising in the central capitals of Shiism against Iranian hegemony and its local arms. This Shiite movement is considered the first broad rebellion against subordination by the Iranian guardian jurist in the middle of capitals that Iran once considered part of its dynamic and solid spheres. However, this movement indicates that there was deliberate exaggeration from the Iranian side of Iranian power in the region, as well as in the strength of the Shiite crescent and Iranian military arms in the region. There is sectarian, political, and economic fragility within the structure of this crescent; fragility, which led to uprisings.

In fact, we witnessed internal rebellions against the Guardianship of the Jurist in Iran in 2009 and 2017-2018 strongly and intensively. They spread all over Iran's cities. A large sector of those who participated in them are still under arrest or suffered enforced disappearance. These rebellions are increasing and their effectiveness and scope are spreading during this crisis. The regime is well aware of this and always tries to create enemies, incite a sense of injustice, and a sense of danger within the Iranian nation to ensure the cohesion of Iranians against external danger and the enemies surrounding Iran who seek to eliminate it. Therefore, the Turkish, Saudi, the American enemies and so forth were created. Observers of the Iranian daily press and the speeches of the religious and political elites are aware of the creation of enemies and the increased frequency of warning against dangers surrounding the Iranian nation and civilization. However, as the levels of poverty, corruption, and tyranny increased internally, this rhetoric no longer affects the people who have been harmed by the ruling elite.

After the Iraqis defeated the Islamic State (ISIS) and liberated the cities occupied by ISIS, people began to call for a decent life, and rights.

Najaf is fed up with Iranian influence in Iraq, its attempts to curb Najaf, and the creation of a marjaya loyal to Iran contrary to Hawza traditions and the historical jurisprudential lessons adopted by Najaf and Shiites. Najaf believes that it is the origin of Shiism and is the natural extension of the infallible imams and their successor. At the same time, the Guardian Jurist believes that his mandate includes even the jurists of Najaf and beyond. Hence, Ira-

nian influence in Iraq at the doctrinal and political level is not complete and there is no certainty that it can last in the long-term.

So, we have a Shiite-Iranian confrontation before us. The Shiite sect is facing Iran at home and abroad. The language of the revolution no longer seduces Shiites because Iran raises the slogan of the revolution but suppresses their revolution at the same time. Iran raises the slogan of “we will never accept humiliation” but it gives them the taste of persecution, detention centers, dictatorship and corruption. People realized the duplicity of Iranian discourse, its use of religion, and exploitation of doctrine. Therefore, Iran, with the perpetuation of its policy, is destroying itself. There is a day coming when Iran will face the entire Shiite population. The best strategy to confront Iran is to clear the stage for it to continue its provocative acts against the members of its sect who are now well aware of their true enemy.

When the Iraqis and the Lebanese wanted to unite under one national banner and reject sectarianism and quotas, they were surprised that their leaders refused to abandon the quota system and that the Iranians and their local arms used sectarianism so that the demonstrations and popular uprisings turned into sectarian strife and clashes. Iran then emerges as a champion and guardian of its sect, as it always does.

Finally, regardless of the outcomes of the Iraq and Lebanon uprisings, the Iranians have lost a large part of their sectarian status. The Shiite sect did not expect that the Iranians would point weapons at their heads one day, and

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