

**REPORT**

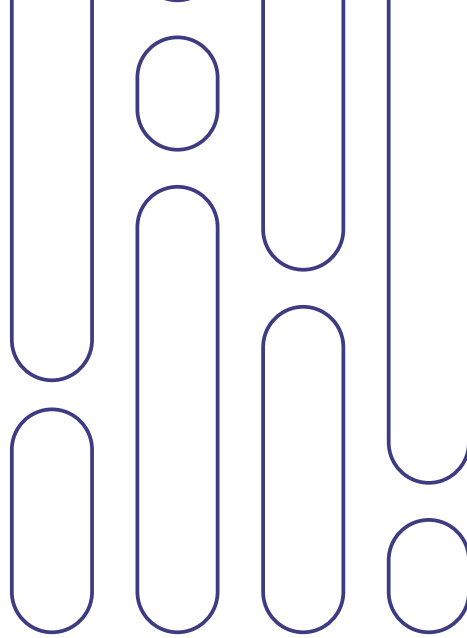
# **The Implications of the Qom-Najaf Division on Najaf's Position Towards Iraq's Parliamentary Elections**

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The fifth Iraqi parliamentary elections held on October 2021 represented one of the most important elections in the post-Saddam era. The elections were held against the backdrop of the October 2019 protests that contributed to the religious authorities [calling for](#) early elections to be held. This call clearly indicated their [support](#) for protester demands.

In Iraq, the political landscape is religiously centered. Unlike in other Arab and Islamic countries, the concept of *taqlid* [blind obedience to past teachings] still holds great sway among Iraq's Shiite clerics in spite of the processes of modernization and westernization. The Iraqi clerical community's strict adherence to religion came about due to the vacuum created after the fall of Saddam Hussein's government as religious rituals were adopted as a form of identity. Overall, religion still plays a significant role in the public and political spheres in the Arab world. This is because the religious card is used by governments to boost their legitimacy as people are more responsive to religious edicts than to laws devised by politicians. Thus, *fatwas* [a formal ruling issued by a qualified legal scholar] are often used by official authorities or religious opposition groups against their political rivals.

However, the case of Iraq is much more complicated due to Iran's interference and its attempt to expand its political and religious project there by employing religion and sectarianism to serve its own interests. Iranians believe that the theory of *Wilayat al-Faqih* [Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist] has no geographical borders. For Iran, Iraq, a Shiite-majority country, is suitable to target in order to spread its influence. In addition, the Iraqi state is dominated by religious elites, Islamic currents and armed factions that hinder the country's transition towards a strong democratic and civil state.

This report seeks to shed light on the positions taken by Iraq's religious authority on the recent parliamentary elections, and how the centrality of religion has impacted the Iraqi public sphere. Finally, the report looks at the ability of religion to influence the country's affairs and to effect change.

## **Religious Tensions Prior to the Parliamentary Elections**

The religious authority in Najaf issued a statement on September 29, 2021 urging Iraqis to go to the polls for the fifth parliamentary elections.

The authority admitted that the elections were not perfect but they were the best way to avoid far worse scenarios such as a boycott. It said that the election “was not flawless but it was the best way to push the country towards a better future through avoiding the ramifications of chaos and a political stalemate.”

In its statement, the religious authority stayed away from appearing partisan, deliberately not specifying any sect or party for Iraqis to vote for in the election. “Voters should learn from past experiences and fully understand the importance and role of their votes in drawing the future of the country. They should take advantage of this important opportunity to bring about real change in the country’s administration and remove the corrupt and incompetent from the pillars of the country. This can only be done through the cohesion of the well-informed and their participation in the elections, choosing wisely and suitably, otherwise the failures of the previous Parliaments and governments will be replicated, and regret will be of [no use](#).”

It can be argued that the statement carries three important messages related to Iraq’s sovereignty, constitutional legitimacy and foreign interference.

### **1. Iraq’s Sovereignty**

The statement reflected the concern of Iraq’s religious authority regarding the violation of the country’s sovereignty through the attempts of internal actors to influence Iraq’s decision-making in accordance with Iranian interests. “It [the religious authority] emphasizes the need to scrutinize the profiles of the candidates in their constituencies and refrain from voting but for the virtuous and just [candidate], who will uphold Iraq’s sovereignty, security, and ensure its prosperity, and is eager to preserve its inherent values and [supreme](#) interests.”

Through this statement, the religious authority in Iraq reflected its desire to safeguard Iraq’s sovereignty and its supreme interests over the interests of other states. This recent statement reminds us of the one issued during the October 2019 protests which stated, “External interferences in the country’s affairs must be [vigorously](#) challenged.” Najaf is aware of Iran’s serious interventions in Iraq’s political and religious affairs, con-

tributing to the country's unstable political and social life and complicating public affairs. Therefore, Najaf is trying to strengthen the Iraqi state and its institutions to prevent Iraqi decision-making institutions from falling into Iran's trap.

## 2. **Constitutional Legitimacy**

Iraq's religious authority also warned voters against electing those who violate the country's Constitution. It cautioned in its statement, "It [the religious authority] warns against voting for incompetent or corrupt individuals who do not believe in the principles of the honorable Iraqi people or work beyond the framework of the Constitution." References to "the principles of the honorable Iraqi people," and to those who "work beyond the framework of the Constitution," are employed without equivocation to emphasize Iraqi identity and isolate actors who do not believe in Iraqi sovereignty or the Constitution, but have sectarian and political loyalties beyond Iraq's borders. In previous statements commenting on the major developments in Iraq, Najaf always emphasized constitutional legitimacy. In its statement in regard to the October 2019 protests, it asserted, "Respect for the will of Iraqis to determine the political and administrative system of their country through the referendum on the Constitution and periodic parliamentary elections is the principle that has been embraced and emphasized by the religious authority since the change of the previous regime, and today [the religious authority] affirms that reform is imperative, as has been stressed more than once, but it is determined in accordance with the will of the Iraqi people and no individual, group or entity with a certain affliction nor any regional or international party can suppress the will of Iraqis and [impose their views](#) on them." Najaf's statements in 2019 and 2021 follow a similar line and their emphasis on certain points have contributed to the current Tehran-Najaf dispute. Najaf has always taken a consistent position regarding Iraqi religious and political affairs and is keen to maintain its independence, its religious legacy as a center for Shiites and to keep a distance from Iran that wants to usurp its power and weaken it in favor of promoting the theory of Wilayat al-Faqih.

### 3. Foreign Interventions

Najaf's religious authority also sent a message to those in charge of the elections, "The religious authority also stresses that those in charge of the elections should work to hold them in a safe atmosphere far from the influence of money, illegal weapons, or foreign interventions. And to observe their integrity and preserve the votes of the electorate, for it is a responsibility [entrusted to them](#)."

Najaf has repeatedly referred to external interventions, as it believes that these foreign intrusions are the main cause of the current problems in Iraq. For example, the religious authority warned against external interventions in [November](#) 2019 when Abdul Mahdi al-Karbalai said in his Friday sermon, "The external interventions pose grave dangers [to Iraq] and turn Iraq into an arena of conflict and settling accounts, contributing to the people being the losers." In September 2020, Ayatollah Sistani said during his meeting with the United Nations Secretary General's Special Representative in Iraq Jeanine Hennis-Plasschaert: "Preserving national sovereignty, preventing its breach and violation, standing up to external interferences in the country's affairs and keeping the risks of fragmentation and division away from it is everyone's responsibility...It is required from the various parties to rise to the level of national responsibility and not to forsake the country's sovereignty, stability, and [independence](#) in their political decision-making."

The aforementioned remarks reflect the centrality of the issue of external interventions to Sistani and Najaf's religious authority. Moreover, the call for merging the Popular Mobilization Forces with the state's security forces reveals the religious authority's fear regarding the expansion of Iranian influence and Tehran imposing its will on the Iraqi people and controlling Iraqi decision-making. The latest statement issued by Ayatollah Sistani does not represent his position alone. Rather, the statement was approved by Ayatollah Bashir al-Najafi, who said that he is [satisfied](#) with the statement of Ayatollah Sistani. This indicates that Sistani's pronouncements are widely supported across Iraq's influential religious community.

## Tehran-Najaf Rivalry

A number of implications arise from Najaf's statements that must be analyzed if we want to understand the foundations of the dispute between Tehran and Najaf. Since the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003, Najaf has played a pivotal role in influencing Iraqi politics. The religious authority has always been unequivocal on the need to hold free and fair parliamentary elections in Iraq.

Post-Saddam Hussein, Iraq's religious authority understood well the internal and regional conflict, as well as the religious legacy that it inherited from Abu al-Qasim al-Khoei, Mohsen al-Hakim, and Mirza Muhammad Hussain Naini as well from other constitutional jurists. Therefore, the Iraqi religious authority supported the elections and submitted to the wishes of the people regarding many thorny political issues as referring to the people preserved the independence of popular will in the face of Iran's pressure, with Tehran wanting to bypass the Iraqi people in relation to many issues, and impose a *fait accompli* on the ground.

Najaf's position upholds the integrity of the Iraqi government and Constitution, away from the theocratic concept of *Wilayat al-Faqih* which Najaf opposes.

Najaf has always believed in a constitutional civil state during the absence of the Infallible Imam, and also believes that elections, the role of the people in public affairs, Parliament, and accountability are safety nets needed during the absence of the Infallible Imam to prevent tyranny and corruption. According to Juan Cole, Sistani stated that Najaf was confident that the people would make the right decisions and if they made wrong choices, they would rectify these in subsequent elections.

Najaf's position was welcomed by Iraqi officials who oppose the expansion of Iran's role. They shielded themselves behind Najaf's statements without directly clashing with Tehran. Furthermore, several Iraqi institutions welcomed the statements regarding parliamentary elections.

Iran responded by addressing Najaf's criticism of Tehran's policy by using similar approaches. Ayatollah Kazem al-Haeri issued a fatwa forbidding voting for or supporting those "Who call for the occupation forces to remain on Iraqi territories or do not call for their expulsion." The fatwa also

prohibited the election of “Whoever is hostile to the forces of the Popular Mobilization, or who hides under the pretext of merging the Popular Mobilization Forces with the state’s security forces to weaken or dilute them, in an effort to please foreign enemies and [corrupt](#) individuals.”

This fatwa was implicitly directed against Najaf’s calls for merging the Popular Mobilization Forces with the state’s security forces. This point is supported by the fact that Haeri’s fatwa was issued on October 2, that is, two days after Sistani’s fatwa which was issued on September 29. Haeri is among the ardent proponents of Wilayat al-Faqih. In addition, he is a religious reference and a charismatic figure for many fighters belonging to the armed factions that operate beyond the scope of the state.

Speaking from the perspective of Islamic law, for something to be religiously forbidden, it needs to be supported by a religious text, so when Haeri forbade the election of those who are hostile to the Popular Mobilization Forces, or who call for their integration into the state’s security forces, in effect he has made the Popular Mobilization Forces sacred and infallible, thus it is not permissible to challenge or disagree with them. In addition, Haeri’s fatwa makes the election of the Popular Mobilization Forces a religious duty, but this has nothing to do with true jurisprudential foundations as he has imposed political opinions on religious interpretations and has placed these political views among those subjects which cannot be disputed or questioned. Haeri’s fatwa illustrated the tyranny endorsed by Wilayat al-Faqih theory which seeks to establish guardianship over all jurists.

## **The Religious Dimension and the Future of the Shiite-Shiite Dispute**

Influenced by Haeri’s fatwa, Tehran’s proxies and agents rejected the results of the parliamentary elections, with the Sadrist movement winning the majority of seats. The Sadrist movement is not linked to Iran, as there are historical, personal and ideological differences between Tehran and the Sadr family since the time of Muhammad al-Sadr. The Sadrist movement is seen by some pro-Tehran supporters to be allied with Tehran’s regional [opponents](#).

In a televised speech on October 11, 2021, Muqtada al-Sadr sent a re-



assuring message to the international community, “All embassies are welcomed unless they interfere in Iraqi affairs and the formation of the [government](#).” Sadr, however, threatened militias and armed factions, “We will not allow interference at all, and from now on, weapons must be confined to the hands of the state, and it is forbidden to use them outside this framework, even by those who claim to belong to the [resistance](#) [forces].” Here, he openly declared his rejection of Iran’s interference, and the proliferation of weapons outside the control of the state.

The Iraqi Hezbollah Brigades quickly reacted to Sadr’s speech and questioned the results of the parliamentary elections. On October 12, the militia’s spokesman Abi Ali al-Askari said, “The results of the legislative elections are fraudulent and deceive [the Iraqi people](#).” He then indirectly urged the Popular Mobilization Forces to defend themselves against Sadr’s threats, “The Popular Mobilization Forces must make up its mind and prepare to defend its [sacred](#) entity.” Afterwards, the Iraqi Hezbollah Brigades’ allies issued threats and questioned the results. The leader of the Al-Fatah Alliance Hadi al-Amiri expressed his rejection of the results by saying, “We do not accept these fake results at any cost, and we will [vigorously](#) defend our candidates and voters.” Furthermore, a leader from Asa’ib al-Haq said, “We will not be silent, and we will shake the Earth under the feet of the traitors and [renegades](#).” Although the aforementioned leaders and others issued many statements before the elections, and welcomed the elections, as well as forecasted an overwhelming victory for what they designated as the “[resistance factions](#),” their rhetoric changed and they turned skeptical after the heavy losses their factions suffered during the parliamentary elections.

It seems that Sadr is well aware of the difficulties and pitfalls that will face any government that attempts to truly crack down on the weapons held by non-state actors. Therefore, his speech also intended to mobilize civil and religious forces around his plan to confront Iran’s allies and agents. Yet, after the threats issued by Iraqi armed factions, Sadr softened his language in his tweet on October 12, 2021 in which he called on everyone to show “restraint,” demonstrate a patriotic spirit, and observe legal protocols when presenting electoral objections, warning against

[“unbearable consequences”](#) should the dispute continue. In the same context, a member of the Sadrist movement, Safaa al-Asadi, said: “Sadr is not like anyone else, and he will not allow the rights of Iraqi [citizens](#) to be undermined.” This statement conveyed to the armed militias Sadr’s concern about their possible use of violence.

The intra-Shiite dispute is clear. All conflicting Shiite groups depend on religion and weapons to defend themselves. Their dispute may appear political in nature and limited to politics and the elections, yet it has intellectual and ideological roots. Muqtada al-Sadr acts as a legitimate representative and follower of the late Muhammad al-Sadr. Other groups such as Asa’ib al-Haq claim to be following Muhammad al-Sadr and attribute their political thought and practices to him but at the same time agree with the Iranian ideology of Wilayat al-Faqih. This is a cause for concern for Muqtada al-Sadr and [the Sadrist movement](#) as a whole because not only was there a serious dispute between the late Muhammad al-Sadr and the Iranians, but also because Muqtada al-Sadr himself does not believe in the geographical expansion of the Iranian doctrine of Wilayat al-Faqih. He also has his own political project and religious beliefs which he considers to be much more worthy than Iran’s. Therefore, Sadr’s speech seems to be consistent with Najaf’s [statements](#), as if he is guarding himself behind the supreme religious authority. He also supports the religious authority’s relentless call to [confine](#) arms to the state following the defeat of [ISIS](#) and its emphasis on standing up to the enemy which seeks to rob Najaf of its religious primacy and obstruct Sadr’s political advances.

Nevertheless, Sadr may develop a more pragmatic approach and seek to build consensus with his Shiite opponents, as was the case in June 2018. At that time, he allied himself with Hadi al-Amiri, after clashes and counter-statements increased tensions and both sides threatened to use weapons against each other. In addition, the Sadrist movement used insulting language to describe the militias such as: “the [impudent](#) militias” and “the puppets of Iran.” After he had allied with Hadi al-Amiri, Sadr described him as a “dear brother.”

In the context of the current dispute, Sadr adopting a more pragmatic and flexible approach is the likely scenario. This was evident in his tweet

on October 17, 2021. He said, "From now on, the elections, their results, and the ensuing alliances should not be a cause for disputes, differences, conflicts and clashes. Rather, fighting, disturbing the peace, and [harming](#) the people, their security and strength are forbidden." He concluded his tweet by saying, "Iraq does not need war, but peace and security." These statements are similar to his statements in 2018 when he said, "Take power and leave the homeland for us." He also wondered, "Who am I? What position do I hold? What danger do I pose [for Iraq] that the people must pay a price for me?" He also stated, "If the victory of the Sadr family is the beginning of revenge against Iraq and the Iraqis, I will not allow it, for we, the Sadr family, have not been created but to [sacrifice](#) ourselves for the oppressed peoples."

Iraq is faced with different scenarios and whether a political process is followed or the country descends into further chaos, what is quite clear is that there will be religious and sectarian bitterness accompanied by politicized fatwas.

## **Summary**

The electoral results reflect the significance of the religious authority in Najaf, its prominent standing among the incubators of religious tradition, and the aspirations of the Iraqi people to eliminate pro-Wilayat al-Faqih religious references. The fatwa of Sistani paid off while the fatwas issued by people like Kazem al-Haeri failed to influence Iraqi Shiite voters. This is because the younger Iraqi generation who witnessed the October 2019 protests wants a decent life and real economic and social reforms, not mere religious and sectarian promises. This generation is no longer connected to Shiite traditional preaching and religious rituals. Moreover, civil and secular groups have emerged from within the Iraqi Shiite community which previously submitted to the religious references of taqlid only.

The trend of the younger generation refusing to blindly follow religious leaders was also witnessed in Iran during the 2009 Green Movement when Ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi advocated the use of force against opponents of Wilayat al-Faqih. Indeed, excessive force and violence were used, justified with jurisprudential, philosophical, religious, and sectarian reasonings, but the case of Iraq is very different. Iran plays a big role in Iraq,

but in Iraq's politics and religious landscape, Iran is not the sole player. There are other players from within the Iraqi Shiite clergy itself. This balance may eventually lead to the adoption of a more pragmatic approach by Shiite religious leaders, as was the case in the past, to avert the use of politicized fatwas and armed militias.

Yet, in the current period, the use of religion and fatwas is likely to be intensified by all actors to boost legitimacy, strengthen popular and traditional incubators, or limit the opportunities of opponents to gain political capital.

