

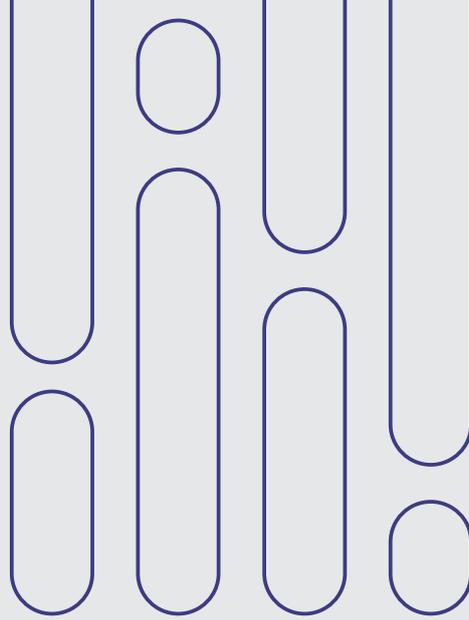
Study

The Supreme Marjaya: The Post-Sistani Era and the Future of the Hawza

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Introduction

The system of succession for the supreme *marja* in the Shiite *hawza* is quite complicated and sensitive as many factors are taken into account for his appointment: internal factors within the seminary and external religious/political factors. The cleric who assumes the supreme *marja* post is not only tasked with religious matters but also with political and social matters, even if he does not believe in the “absolute guardianship.” Therefore, the post is ultimately significant and draws great attention from political actors in the region and the world.

Though it is difficult to foretell who will succeed the current Supreme Marja Ayatollah Sayyid Ali al-Husayni al-Sistani (1930), reviewing the seminary’s history, studying its criteria, conditions and its actors, whether from the political or religious spheres, will help in understanding the complexities of the current *hawza*, and provide indications about the future of the Najaf Marjayya.

The study aims to answer a host of questions regarding the future of the Shiite *marjayya* and its political position; the preservation of the seminary’s heritage; the *marjayya*’s relations with neighboring countries in general and with Iran in particular; finally, Iran’s role in influencing the appointment of the next supreme *marja*.

Marja Succession: Historical Background

There is a difference between the Shiite *marjayya* and other religious institutions in the world. The position of *marja* is not determined by elections nor is the person appointed. Public popularity and his status with the Shiite communities of *maraji al-taqlid* play a critical role in the determination of the aforesaid position. Furthermore, different people including religious scholars, economists, and politicians view the *marja* as a role model. Many clerics can assume the position of *marja*; there are hundreds of *maraji* in Qom, Najaf, Karbala, Mashhad, Tehran, Lebanon and even in some Arab Gulf states. But the position of the supreme *marja* is determined by many different and special conditions; he is emulated by the majority of Shiites and is responsible for collecting the highest share of Shiite funds. Ali al-Wardi describes the system of choosing the supreme *marja* as “social sifting: if the present *marja* dies, competition is ignited between the *mujtahids* (jurists) who are next to him. This competition might extend for a short or long pe-

riod according to the conditions. Many times, the [competition] ends between two jurists; every jurist has a similar number of *muqallideen* (those who follow a particular mujtahid), only then the competition intensifies and takes different patterns and forms, [to the extent that] none of them can assume the leadership of the marjayya until after the death of his competitor.”⁽¹⁾

He argues that this system ensures the independence of Shiite jurists from the government (whether a Shiite or Sunni government) and is reflected in Shiite fatwas and jurisprudence as well as in the relationship between the jurists and the public — Rashid Reza and Morteza Motahhari and others hold the same view.⁽²⁾ This system, however, includes some flaws/demerits such as the jurists’ dependence on the public and their fear to address popular superstitions, myths and outdated traditions in case they lose public support in favor of other maraji al-taqlid. Wardi says, “Most of the muqallideen are from the public. The public usually are adherents to myths and falsehoods, which they believe to be the undoubted truths. Some mujtahids resort to pleasing the public and endorsing their myths and falsehoods, so that the public will not abandon them.”⁽³⁾

Morteza Motahhari (died 1979) had the same observations as Wardi. He said that Abdul-Karim Haeri, the founder of the Qom Seminary, canceled the English course at the seminary along with other scientific courses due to public opposition. The public warned him saying, “The money the people pay is not to be spent for teaching students the language of *kafirs* [disbelievers].”⁽⁴⁾ Haeri changed his decision, fearing it would lead to the bankruptcy and dismantling of the seminary. Motahhari therefore argues that some clerics are obsessed with being aligned with “the public stream.” Even if jurists are sometimes able to oppose the government’s misconduct, they have to please the public, who provide funding for the seminary. According to Motahhari, this is a point of weakness in the Shiite marjayya.⁽⁵⁾

Some say Shiite jurists have not been disengaged from the political authority. However, one cannot deal with all Shiite political thought as one bloc. For example, Qatifi refused to take rewards from the government yet Kararki rendered it lawful for jurists to take gifts and rewards from the government – this point was comprehensively discussed in a study carried out by al-Sayyad and Alwadai.⁽⁶⁾ In modern

times, the Iranian authority, especially the Wali al-Faqih (supreme leader) has generally controlled the clergy, especially those who live under his authority and security apparatuses.

In a nutshell, the marjāyya system is different from religious institutions across the Islamic world. Probably, al-Azhar Mosque (simply known as al-Azhar) had been relatively close to this system in the pre-modern era, specifically before Napoléon's invasion of Egypt (1798- 1801) and before Muhammad Ali Pasha (the ruler of Egypt from 1805 to 1848) nationalized the iltizām (taxation system) and the waqf system. However, there were essential differences between al-Azhar and the hawza system. The grand sheikh of al-Azhar is not like the Shiite supreme marja as it is an honorific, administrative, and religious-scholarly position. In addition, the superiority of knowledge in jurisprudence is not a criterion for choosing the grand sheikh as is the case in the Shiite school, it was conditioned in the Shafi'i school for a short period of time.⁽⁷⁾ The Sunni marjāyya, regardless of al-Azhar, was active for some time. Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti (1445- 1505) said that the dispute with his counterpart Shams al-Din Muhammad ibn Abd al-Rahman al-Sakhawi (1428- 1497) was because of their competition over assuming the scholarly legacy of Ibn Hajar (1372- 1449) to unilaterally lead the Sunni marjāyya.⁽⁸⁾ Karen Armstrong says that Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (1058 -1111) "was a religious supreme marja of his time."⁽⁹⁾ Clerics are like all people; they have human failings. It is quite normal to see them competing to unilaterally lead and control; however, the lack of comprehensive rules and agreed upon laws makes their competition more complicated.

1. Conditions of Leading/Assuming the Marjāyya

Shiite jurists and *Usulis* (the majority Twelver Shiite Muslim group) have put forward a host of conditions for anyone wanting to assume the marja position. Some of these conditions are agreed upon while others are controversial. In the following section we discuss the most significant conditions/criteria.

A`alam and Shaya`

A`alam and *shaya`* : According to Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, these conditions are verified by reliable mujtahids, even those with general jurisprudential knowledge.⁽¹⁰⁾ They also can be confirmed by *al-wasi-*

yyah of *al-sābiq*. Al-wasiyyah is considered a qualification for being *a`alam* and *mujtahid*, and a successor. For example, Muhammad Hasan al-Najafi (1785-1850) recommended Murtadha al-Ansari (1781-1864) as his successor for the marjayya.

Shaya` can determine whether a jurist is *a`alam* or not. Other jurists and the public may hold a certain jurist in high repute because of his knowledge. For example, the current Supreme Marja Sistani received massive support from his deputy and son-in law Javad al-Shahrastani and other clerics such as Ayatollah Muhammad-Baqir al-Irawani and Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah, who later dedicated his efforts to develop his own marjayya and project his reform project. Further, other maraji al-taqlid recommended Sistani after their deaths such as Mohammad Ali Araki (died 1994) and Mohammed al-Rouhani (died 1997) and Mohammed Reza al-Kalbaekani (died 1993).⁽¹¹⁾

Some Shiite jurists limited *a`alam* to *fiqh and usul al-fiqh* (jurisprudence and principle of jurisprudence) yet we find other jurists who expanded its scope to include all religious knowledge; not specifically Sharia rules about what is *halal* (permitted) or *haram* (prohibited); the rules pertaining to actions or what is known in the seminary as *fiqh*.⁽¹²⁾ The criteria of *a`alam* is controversial among clerics; some resort to a general definition while others tend to adopt a narrower one. The testimonies of experienced jurists regarding a jurist being the most knowledge (*a`alam*) is relevant according to the view of Abu Ishaq Ibrahim ibn Musa al-Shatibi (died 1388) especially in Sunni discourse. Shatibi said that *ijtihad* must be assessed by qualified jurists (*ahl-al rutbah*; the specialized jurists).⁽¹³⁾ Al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī or “the lecturer from Baghdad” (1002- 1071) also adopted the same view to prevent a non-specialized person from exercising knowledge (jurisprudence). He allowed the imam/caliph to review muftis, and then to choose the most qualified one to issue fatwas and to disqualify the ineligible. The qualifications of the imam/caliph are verified by scholars and famous jurists; their feedback is taken into consideration.⁽¹⁴⁾ Al-Suyuti, also known as Jalaluddin (1445- 1505), holds a different opinion. In verifying *a`alam* and whether a jurist is a *mujtahid* or not, he does not limit it to the jurists, but he also includes students and the public. In response to one of his opponents, he argues, “You claim to be a scholar who imposed himself on the people; you do not have evidence for your

knowledge. Tell me where are your enormous publications? Where are your fatwas that filled up the books?”⁽¹⁵⁾ In fact, the public plays a significant role in choosing the jurist and making him lead. In addition, the public judges his qualifications. One cannot deprive the public of this right because it is a norm and a legitimate right and an indispensable reality that cannot be neglected. The Usulis have held detailed discussions on this issue, but we cannot delve into this because of the study’s limitations.

Network of Relationships

Being a *lam* is not the only criteria needed for a mujtahid to be a marja. There are other personal, political, and economic factors. A network of relationships is significant for a mujtahid to strengthen his legitimacy amongst scholars (jurists). For example, Al-Khoei Foundation promoted Sistani to be the supreme marja. The foundation contributed to entrenching his marjayya (position) across the Shiite world.⁽¹⁶⁾

Muhsin al-Hakim (1889- 1970) an Iraqi Shiite marja, was accused of using the people of his district, Amara Mahalla in Najaf, and thugs from Mahallah to take the lead of his contemporary maraji. Even if this was true, one cannot deny that Hakim was competent in the Usuli school of thought. Thus, establishing a network of relationships will be useless for clerics with a low level of knowledge.⁽¹⁷⁾ However, networks of relationships, tribes and followers make a difference in the maraji’s competition.

The Political Dimension

Politics plays a role in determining the marja. After the death of Hossein Ali Tabatabaei Borujerdi (1875-1961) an Iranian Shiite marja, the Iranian Shah reportedly supported Hakim to be the next supreme marja. Borujerdi was the Shiite supreme marja. The Shah wanted to export the influence of the Qom Marjayya to Najaf to partially free himself of its burden and eliminate the key role of clerics in Qom. He sent a letter to Sayyid Muhsin al-Tabatabaei al-Hakim saying, “To Hojatoleslam Muhsin al-Tabatabaei al-Hakim may God prolong your blessings, Najaf. We are very painfully affected by the death of Hussein Tabatabaei Borjerdi. We would like to express our deepest condolences. We ask God, the Almighty to strengthen and raise the great-

ness of Islam. The Shah.”⁽¹⁸⁾ Hakim replied to him with a letter. The Iranian leadership during and post the 1979 revolution resorted to overlooking the criteria of a`lamiyya. Immediately after the 1979 revolution, Khomeini led the marjaya and Wilayat al-Faqih in Iran, disregarding 30 grand jurists in the Qom Seminary including Golpaygani, Shariatmadari, and Mar’ashi Najafi. Some attributed this to Khomeini’s charisma and leadership of the revolution as well as his previous efforts against the Shah. After Khomeini’s death, the position of supreme marjaya was expected to be filled by Golpaygani. However, the Iranian government preferred to grant the position to a cleric who was revolutionary and close to Khomeini. All the aforementioned theories and arguments about the supreme marja were totally overlooked; Ali Khamenei, who was not back then an ayatollah (a Shiite religious rank), was chosen as the successor to Khomeini.⁽¹⁹⁾

Throughout Shiite history, politics has not been disengaged from religion. The Safavid empire supported Karaki against other maraji who objected to participating in politics in the absence of the Infallible Imam.

Rebelling Against A’alamiyya

Many Shiite jurists criticize the a’alamiyya criteria, arguing that it is controversial as it was not present in the first Shiite era or before the Safavid empire; the beginning of the centralization of Shiite institutions. Marja Mohammed Hussein Fadlallah criticizes a`lamiyya saying, “I do not call for a’alamiyya of the mujtahid who is followed by people (who is marja al-taqlid) because it is evidence, according to my view, of his a’alamiyya. According to me, the criteria is ijtiḥad and experience evolved from longstanding practice. I do not deem a’alamiyya realistic. In the whole world, in any field of knowledge, it is not possible to identify someone as the most knowledgeable of all people in one field or another. There might be some sort of comparison between two mujtahids according to [his] qualities and characteristics.”⁽²⁰⁾ Marja Kamal al-Husayni al-Haydari argues that shaya` is not deemed a criteria for a marja’s eligibility nor does it prove his a’alamiyya (knowledge).⁽²¹⁾ Haydari criticizes the lack of fixed criteria for a`lamiyya; there are thousands of jurists and hundreds of maraji,

it is impossible that the experienced and trusted jurists review the opinions of this enormous number of jurists and maraji and judge their theses.⁽²²⁾

It seems that the disagreement regarding the marja's criteria is merely theoretical. Practically speaking, no one can prevent the maraji from taking the lead even with the presence of a notable supreme marja with proven a`lamiyya.

Support of Tradesmen and Businessmen

Tradesmen play a significant role in political life and in the religious seminary arena. Since the founding of the seminaries, they have played a key role in choosing the marja and are part of the vetting system that leads to choosing the leading marja and identifying his a`lamiyya. Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani (1934-2017) referred to the role of tradesmen in choosing the marja following the death of Borujerdi. Abu al-Qasem Kohbabi, marja of bazaar dignitaries, was "influential in choosing the marja because collecting religious taxes, in a way or another, draws the public and students' attention and attracts religious figures," Rafsanjani said.⁽²³⁾ After Borujerdi's death, Kohbabi tasked Hakim with collecting religious taxes; this contributed to strengthening Hakim's marjayya.

The tradesmen played a great role in the 1891 Tobacco Protest; the maraji were keen to attract the major tradesmen to their side.⁽²⁴⁾ When most of the tradesmen and the public rejected the teaching of English at the Qom Seminary, its founder Abdul-Karim Haeri Yazdi retracted the decision to teach English in fear of losing public support and weakening the seminary.⁽²⁵⁾

Today, tradesmen and the business community still play a big role. However, the latest developments and changes in the nature of maraji's families and the hierarchy of the modern state have meant that financing is not solely dependent on senior tradesmen. The marjayya started to receive funding from new economic institutions, local and international companies, state actors, individuals, and groups. This is in addition to the maraji's families possessing wealth and having the ability to establish financial institutions in order to generate a permanent income for the maraji. As a result, the role of tradesmen has declined. The process of choosing the marja does not only de-

pend on personal (internal) traits like a`lamiyya , piety, and fear of Allah (God),⁽²⁶⁾ there are other external factors and actors whose interests, orientations and relationships must be considered.

Marjayya Succession – Mechanisms and Rules

To understand how the position of the marjayya is handed over from one cleric to another, it is important to look into the historical experiences that indicate how the transition was undertaken, its methods and conditions. The cleric Murtadha al-Ansari (1781-1864) who was better known as “the most eminent jurist of the time,” enjoyed uncontested authority over the Shiite marjayya and contributed to laying the foundations of the Usuli school of thought which still exists and dominates the teachings within the hawza to this day. There are hawza traditions that determine how a marja takes over the marjayya leadership. Although they are not mentioned in written notes or embodied in constitutions or law, they have become well-established traditions within the hawza and they cannot be bypassed or replaced with an opposing tradition.

Between Kashif al-Ghiṭa and Sahib al-Jawahir

In the first half of the 19th century, competition intensified between Muḥammad Ḥusayn Kashif al-Ghiṭa (1877-1954) and Muhammad Hasan al-Najafi (1788–1850), the author of *Jawahir al-Kalam Fi Sharh Shara’i’al-Islam*. After the death of Kashif al-Ghiṭa, Najafi became the exclusive leader of the marjayya. But he died four years after his rival. Before his death, he bequeathed the leadership of the marjayya to his student cleric Murtadha al-Ansari (1849–1864). The reason behind the bequest (al-wasiyyah) remains unknown and why the matter was not left up to the discretion of the Shiite community as had always been the case back then.⁽²⁷⁾

The Leadership of Ansari and His Successor

After the death of Ansari, two of his students assumed the leadership of the marjayya. The first was Muhammad-Hassan al-Husayni al-Shirazi (1815-1895) — a famous cleric during the Tobacco Revolution. The second cleric was Hossein Kuh-Kamari (d.1882). But Shirazi rose to prominence and exclusively led the marjayya given that he died later after Kuh-Kamari — who was ill a while before his death

and unable to continue teaching. Yet Shirazi exclusively led the marjaya given the standing and popularity he gained because of the support he won from the masses on many occasions — including when he distributed food to the people amid the severe price hike in 1871 and his stance when the Tobacco Revolution took place in 1891. He also refused to come out to receive Naser al-Din Shah Qajar when he visited Iraq in 1870, saying, “I am a dervish. What is my business with kings?” After repeated requests, the cleric agreed to meet with the Shah in the Imam Ali Shrine.⁽²⁸⁾

Perhaps the political factor contributed to entrenching the leadership of Shirazi over the marjaya. His relationship with the Shah — despite the fatwa rendering tobacco unlawful — was good. He was not an absolute revolutionary. Jamal al-Din al-Afghani sent him a stern message, which amounted to a rebuke, for the cleric’s silence and his courting of the Shah.⁽²⁹⁾ At the same time, he established good ties with the Ottomans who prevented attacks on Shiite visitors in Samarra. The Ottomans neutralized the British on the one hand and the Iranians on the other and maintained good relations with the heavyweight Shiite cleric at the time.

Marjaya Division After Mirza Shirazi

After the death of Shirazi, his son Agha Shirazi (d. 1936) succeeded him as leader of Samarra. Some of Shirazi’s students remained in Samarra. But most of them departed to Najaf after the death of the cleric such as Mohammad Kazem al-Khorasani, also known as Akhund Khurasani (1839-1911) and Mohammed Kazem Yazdi (1831-1919). Thereafter, they took over the marjaya leadership.⁽³⁰⁾

Akhund Khurasani took over the leadership of the marjaya following the death of Mirza Hossein Khalili (1815-1908). He was Mirza Shirazi’s academic peer, and both were of the same age. But he — unlike Shirazi — remained in Najaf and did not move to Samarra. Shirazi also used to refer some matters to him for the issuance of fatwas. Such referrals point to the fact that the supreme marja opened the door for Khurasani to succeed him and considered him to be the second most significant cleric in terms of jurisprudential standing. Khalili along with his colleagues were supportive of the Constitutional Movement.⁽³¹⁾ After Khalili’s death, Akhund took over the leadership of the

marjayya — but not exclusively. His marjayya jurisdiction was not extended to the public but rather was limited to the elites — unlike his rival Mohammed Kazem Yazdi, who was emulated and backed by most of the public. This disagreement impacted the position on the Constitutional Movement.⁽³²⁾

Akhund Khurasani and some of his students — primarily Naini — were supportive of the Constitutional Movement. On the other hand, Kazem Yazdi and some of his students were against the Constitutional Movement. Therefore, the differences between them moved from the political sphere to the hawza and personal sphere — leading to mutual attacks and accusations of apostasy. The two camps interchangeably defeated each other. When the Turkish Constitutionalists deposed Sultan Abdul-Hamid II from power in 1909, Kazem Yazdi and his disciples were disappointed at the rapprochement between the Najaf Constitutionalists and the Turks, resulting in the marginalization of Yazdi and his disciples.⁽³³⁾

But Akhund Khurasani died in 1911 and Yazdi became the exclusive leader of the marjayya. Some of the students of Akhund such as Mehdi al-Khalissi (1890-1963) and Muhammad Taqi al-Shirazi (1840-1920) attempted to continue with Akhund's approach. But the marjayya leadership of Kazem Yazdi was stronger and more comprehensive — especially after the execution of Sheikh Fazlollah Noori, and the defeat of the Constitutional Movement in Iran. Moreover, some Constitutionalist jurists took a step back. Naini got rid of his book *Tanbih al-Umma wa Tanzih al-Milla* (Awakening the Community and Refining the Nation).

Hence, after the death of Shirazi, the marjayya was no longer consolidated under the authority of one cleric. It was rather shared among rivals within the hawza because of political and personal postures — not purely jurisprudential ones.

Between Naini and Isfahani

After the death of Kazem Yazdi in 1919, Muhammad Taqi Shirazi exclusively took over the marjayya leadership. But he died one year after Yazdi's death. Hence, the marjayya leadership was passed down to Fethullah Qa'ravi Isfahani (1850-1920). But he also died the same year. Hence, the dispute over the marjayya leadership intensified be-

tween Muhammad Hossein Naini (Mirza Naini) (1860-1936) and Abu l-Hasan al-Isfahani (1861-1946). Isfahani had the upper hand in that dispute in spite of Naini's standing and position within the hawza.⁽³⁴⁾ But Naini remained effective and active in political and religious life in Iraq in particular and across the Shiite house in general. Isfahani, Naini and Shahrastani were called the three mujtahids.⁽³⁵⁾

Marjayya Leadership of Muhsin al-Hakim

Following the death of Mirza Naini, the mentor of Muhsin al-Hakim, and the demise of Abu l-Hasan al-Isfahani, the circles of taqlid of Muhsin al-Hakim grew. Especially after he published his dissertation titled Minhaj al-Saliheen. His counterparts at that time included cleric Muhammad Husayn Kashif al-Ghita (1877-1954), cleric Muhammad Ridha al-Yasin (1880-1950), Sayyed Hossein Hammami (1881-1959), Hossein Borujerdi (1875-1961) and Ayatollah Abd al-Hadi al-Shirazi (1888-1962).⁽³⁶⁾

Borujerdi became the exclusive leader of the marjayya after the death of Abu l-Hasan al-Isfahani, shifting the influence of the marjayya to Qom. But it returned to Najaf again after the death of Borujerdi. When the Shah sent a letter of condolence to Muhsin al-Hakim, it was construed as a recognition of Hakim's leadership of the marjayya⁽³⁷⁾—making Hakim the uncontested leader.

Khoei's Leadership of the Marjayya

After Mohsen al-Hakim died, some clerics wanted to hand over the marjayya leadership to his elder son Youssef al-Hakim (d. 1990). But he rejected such an offer, and shut the door of his home in recognition of Khoei's leadership of the marjayya (1899-1992). He limited his role to leading congregational prayers.⁽³⁸⁾

Khoei then became the undisputed leader of the marjayya. However, he faced opposition from Mahmoud Shahrudi (d. 1976) until he became the absolute leader of the marjayya.

Khoei was among those who rejected Wilayat al-Faqih. The Iranian political system wanted to place all Shiite jurists under the jurisdiction of the Iranian supreme leader (Khomeini at that time). Khoei and his school of thought faced systematic slander and defamation by the Iranians. At home, the Iranian government worked to curb the influence of heavyweight clerics such as Mohammad Kazem Shari-

atmadari, Lotfollah Safi Golpaygani and Mar'ashi Najafi, allowing Khomeini to be the undisputed leader of the marjaya. Overseas, the Iranian government attempted to do the same, hence triggering the Qom-Najaf dispute which continues to this very day.

Marjaya Leadership of Abd al-A'la al-Sabziwari and the Successor of Sistani

After the death of Marja Abu al-Qasim Khoei, Abd al-A'la al-Sabziwari (1910-1993) took over in his place. He was a source of emulation for many Shiites in the Shiite community in Iraq, Iran and elsewhere. But he passed away months after Khoei's death. Sabziwari was not one of Khoei's students but was Mirza Naini's student. He was close to both Mohsen al-Hakim and Khoei.⁽³⁹⁾

After the death of Sabziwari, it cannot be said that Sistani became the undisputed head of the marjaya, i.e., he did not have absolute and sole control of the marjaya. A host of clerics competed for the leadership of the marjaya. They included Sistani, Mohammad Sadeq al-Sadr (1943 -1999), Mortaza Borujerdi (d. 1998) and Mirza Ali Al-Gharawi (d.1998). It was a collective leadership of the marjaya to a big extent. All of these clerics have died except for Sistani. Sistani voluntarily isolated himself until the downfall of the Saddam Hussein regime —hence becoming the leader of the marjaya.⁽⁴⁰⁾ He also adopted a negative position toward Wilayat al-Faqih — like his two mentors Khoei and Hakim. From within the framework of political jurisprudence, he embraced certain principles such as popular will, constitutional government, state sovereignty and other modern democratic principles.

The Marjaya and Politics – Iran Is Watching

It remains unclear how the next supreme marja will be chosen in a world which has witnessed rapid modernity and technological advancements. The potential successors to Sistani are elderly and some of them have died such as cleric Muhammad Saeed al-Hakim (1936-2021). He was the most popular cleric expected to take over the marjaya leadership after Sistani.

Today, there is no equivalence among marjayyas in terms of followers and funds. Hence, the system of “social sifting” laid out by Wardi may

need a very long time in order for it to produce a marja from Najaf on par with the Najaf chain of maraji from the leadership of Ansari to Sistani. This does not prevent maraji such as cleric Bashir al-Najafi (b. 1942) or cleric Ishaq al-Fayadh (b. 1930) from assuming the marjayya. But the tenure of either or both of them will be something akin to a transitional period given their old age — as was the case with the tenure of Sabziwari after Khomeini. But the important question in this context is: what role will Iran play in the process of choosing the next marja?

Iran and the Limits of Pressure

There are hindrances to the social filtering process during the post-Sistani period. Iran's interventions are powerful and influential in Iraqi affairs in general and in religious affairs in particular. Hence, none of the maraji are expected to lead the marjayya independently if they are not accepted by the Iranians or if there is no consensus, triggering a dispute and an intellectual crisis as the environment of taqlid incubators is fragmented and split between the Arab-Iraqi camp and the pro-Iran one.

There is another scenario that sees Iran having a decisive say over the issue of the supreme marja. It would marginalize Najaf, make central Qom and the guardian jurist or polish the image of and highlight a Najaf jurist following its line and pledging allegiance to the guardian jurist. There are many maraji such as Kazem al-Haeri who apparently belong to Najaf but do not have a problem with belief in the absolute guardianship of the jurist. This means that the Najaf marja would work under the jurisdiction of the guardian jurist. No doubt this is an Iranian option and a possible scenario it could move ahead with. But whether it will succeed remains uncertain since the scene is filled with intersections and complexities, the outcomes of which cannot be predicted.

For Iranian decision-makers, there remains another rational option: strengthening Najaf and enhancing its independence, which would preserve the reputation of the hawza and the sect and maintain its heritage and its soft power — without politicization which would pulverize the history of the hawza. This is in addition to maintaining traditionalist options/clerics to face off rebels against Wilayat al-Faq-

ih or those feeling uneasy about following in the footsteps of his ideology.

But it is not expected that Iran would resort to such a rational option because the mindset of the Iranian establishment is based on monopolization. It believes in absolute control and total overpowering — not participation. The ruling theocracy sees itself as the epicenter of the Shiite sect. It believes that Qom is the cradle of the sect, and Najaf is something ephemeral. Yet, the guardian jurist believes in the comprehensive jurisdiction of its guardianship even over peer jurists. Hence, the talk about a rational option in light of the current pro-Wilayat al-Faqih conservative religious elite is out of the question and highly unlikely.

Iran and Imposing a *Fait Accompli*

The determinants of Iran's strategy in Iraq is established on two parallel dimensions. The first is making inroads into the hawza, in what seems to be a soft infiltration through aligned clerics and convincing the hawza students of the Wilayat al-Faqih version of Shiism — which we discussed before. The second is the infiltration through creating armed militias that impose a *fait accompli* — without paying heed to the interests of the state or integrating into its official institutions. This use of hard power was against the *marjajyya* of Sistani himself when they rejected full integration and full loyalty to the Iraqi state and Iraqi army. Sistani has repeatedly called for banning arms beyond the Iraqi state. He even pressed such a demand in a meeting with the former Iranian President Hassan Rouhani in March 2019 — the demand has not been met so far. It is not expected that such a demand will be met while Ebrahim Raisi is in power in Tehran. Raisi is one of the hawks within the Iranian government and one of the supporters of exporting the revolution and expanding the dominance of the guardian jurist.

The Iranian-backed militias aim to pulverize the *marjajyya* of Sistani by imposing a *fait accompli* while showing respect toward him but stopping short of declaring full loyalty to him. These militias form the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) and they mostly emulate the *marjajyya* of Khamenei. This contradicts some claims that the PMF derives its legitimacy from Sistani (the only overseer who could in-

fluence the acts of the PMF). Such claims are a gross generalization and distort the reality of the situation. Even the Sadrist Movement which is closer to Najaf and the Iraqi marjaya than the PMF cannot be described like this — given the political and jurisprudential disagreement between the Sadrists and Sistani.⁽⁴¹⁾

Against the Guardian Jurist: Actors and the Political Future

Sistani is still and has been a barrier preventing the Iraqis from becoming totally embroiled in the US-Iran dispute and a bulwark against Iranian interventions in Iraq. He has constantly called for a constitutional state and rejected the guardianship of the jurist and its draconian geographical and sectarian custodianship. He has also embraced positions like popular sovereignty/will and allowed some brigades from the hawza to join the PMF. All these efforts led to curbing Iran and curtailing its expansion into Iraq and Najaf — the way it wishes. Hence, the Iranians — in the post-Sistani era — do not want to see the Khomeini-Sistani model being repeated. They are concerned about the existence of a powerful marjaya in Najaf that opposes or has authority that is equivalent to that of the supreme leader in Iran. This is in order to ensure that the comprehensive jurisdiction of the guardianship is not harmed and the Shiite community continues to be subject to the guardianship of the guardian jurist. Furthermore, Iran wants to ensure that its project to export the revolution is not impeded. In other words, Iran wants to step into the Iraqi political void in order to amass political, economic and security influence in the country. Iran believes its inability to strip Najaf of its clout and subject it to the authority of the guardian jurist has curbed its efforts and prevents it from carrying out its ideological project. Yet, its failure has provided room for those who are critical of its expansionist project, especially those from among the nationalists and secularists and has provided an opportunity for some Shiites to align themselves with Najaf and its positions. Hence, it becomes difficult to strip them of religious sanctity, stigmatize them as unbelievers and defame them in the name of the sect since they are aligning themselves with the hawza of Najaf and citing its jurisprudential opinions as their guide-

lines.⁽⁴²⁾

It is likely that no specific marja will be nominated after the demise of the current marja Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani. There is likely to be a long period for social, political, and economic filtering to happen — meaning that the struggle will take some time to reach its conclusion. In the end, a marja from the heart of Najaf will exclusively lead the marjayya or there will be another marja backed by other actors from outside Najaf such as Iran. Yet, other maraji could lead the marjayya collectively as had been the case throughout Shiite history. However, regardless of the clerics who could potentially lead the marjayya, an important question is whether or not Najaf could turn to embrace Wilayat al-Faqih? If we assume that this could happen, will it be a satellite to the guardianship of the jurist in Iran? Or will it be a Najaf-style guardianship independent of Iranian decision-making —rendering the Shiite community adherent to two guardian jurists?

Moqtada al-Sadr and the Postponed Guardianship

In this context, we cannot remain heedless of the role of the Sadrism Movement and its leader Moqtada al-Sadr (b. 1974) who is headquartered in Najaf. He will play a crucial role in choosing the next marja. But the movement and its leader's ability to support a cleric from within the movement remains uncertain. The movement is no longer backed by charismatic and grassroots-based maraji, especially after the death of Muhammad Muhammad-Sadiq al-Sadr and Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr. But Moqtada al-Sadr not only presents himself as a political leader but also as a cleric, now labeling himself *hojatoleslam wal muslimin* (authority on Islam and Muslims). He is also studying *bahth al-kharij* (advanced seminary studies) lessons under several maraji in Qom and expresses his jurisprudential opinion on several matters. He also fell out with several clerics, including Kamal al-Haydari, and Kazem al-Haeri, who he emulated for a period of his life, and others. Therefore, it is not ruled out that Sadr may declare himself a marja. But making such an announcement while Sadr is still under 50 is extremely difficult. This has not happened over the course of contemporary Shiite history. Yet his attempts at exclusively leading the marjayya will be countered by waves of defamation and distor-

tions — first by the Iranians and second by some powerful households in Iraq that are antagonistic to the Sadrists. The strength of Sadr's networks at the social, economic and sectarian levels remains unknown — as well as his relationship with traders and heavyweight figures in Najaf. In all cases, it is unlikely that Sadr and his monolithic movement will be excluded from the process of choosing the coming marja — whether by throwing its weight behind a Sadrist marja or by supporting a marja from outside the Sadrist household. It would be a transitional period until Sadr acquires sufficient jurisprudential and hawza qualifications or there is an attempt to move the marjayya away from Iranian influence.

Militias and Their Expansion Into the Hawza Void

Many fear that the Shiite militias and Islamist parties (embracing Wilayat al-Faqih) will step into the void that will be created after the demise of the current marja Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani. Though the Iranians today are hostile to the marjayya of Sistani, they are well aware that it is the biggest and most comprehensive marjayya in the Shiite world. It has palpable support and respect from regional and international actors — and even from other religions and sects. Therefore, they do not openly attack it and prevent their militias from directly clashing with the marjayya. All these considerations will be blown up after the death of Sistani and the void that may prevail in Najaf, which will allow the pro-Wilayat al-Faqih militias and parties to increase their political, military and even their sectarian clout. The worst-case scenario will see the lingering disputes between militias and factions getting out of control and triggering a war between them — in light of the lack of checks and balances within the hawza to keep things under control.

By contrast, there is another scenario: the death of the Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei before Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani. In this case, these militias will be stripped of all religious cover, with the hawza void being created in Qom, not Najaf, since the stability of the religious marjayya of any Iranian supreme leader — unlike his political leadership — needs time.

The Local Actors and Major Households

The local actors within the hawza include some powerful households in Najaf as well as some institutions and personalities. They include Sistani's house, particularly his elder son Mohammad Reza, who is highly respected within the Shiite house and the powerful and influential Khoei Foundation which has internationalized the hawza's relations. Yet there is the powerful household of Hakim in Najaf plus the Sadrists as we mentioned before. We notice that all these actors are angered by Iranian interventions and want an independent Najaf. But there are internal differences among them over leadership and control over the marjaya.

Sistani's Successors and the Constitutional Culture

The biggest challenge facing Najaf is not in regard to the hawza culture (jurisprudential and usuli lessons) because there is no considerable difference between itself and Qom in this respect. The only difference is that Qom focuses on philosophy and usul and Najaf focuses on jurisprudence, with an apparent inclination toward the Akhbari current. The biggest challenge, however, is how far the next marja believes in the political theory and the constitutional culture of Najaf. Will the next marja adopt the Najaf political heritage? Will he be able to counter the Iranian project in Iraq or will he succumb to it? There are no definite answers to these questions due to the complexities of the Shiite and Iraqi landscape and the existence of various actors at home and overseas at the political, hawza and economic levels. Answers and results will differ according to the cleric leading the marjaya and the outcomes of the Iran-Najaf dispute. Therefore, it seems we are approaching a crucial moment in the history of the Shiite community. Both Khamenei (b. 1939) and Sistani (b. 1930) are elderly. By exaggerating the Iranian role without taking into consideration the changes that could impact the structure of the political system and its religious elite after the death of Khamenei could lead to unpleasant results. Change could happen in Qom, not Najaf — or it could happen in both. Hence, the matter hinges on the future of the Iranian political system and the Iraqi one which could be in the future a point of strength for the independence of the hawza in Najaf— or it could make it fragile.

This study does not seek to specify certain names but instead its focus is on the approach and rules of the marja succession. However, there are some major potential successors to Sistani — in case there are no major shifts or interferences by external/domestic actors that change the well-established rules and methods. A primary candidate to succeed Sistani is his son Mohammad Reza. He is a mujtahid and known for his efficiency. It is reported that he has intervened in the Iraqi landscape to curb Iranian influence. It is likely that he will receive strong support from the religious and powerful households in Najaf and the students of religious science in the hawza. But he could decline the position to preserve the reputation of the marjayya for fear of accusations of it turning into a hereditary system — as did Khomeini before.

There is also Riyadh al-Hakeem, the eldest son of Muhammad Saeed al-Hakim (1936-2021) who was nominated to be Sistani's successor — but he was elderly and died suddenly. His son Riyadh al-Hakeem is a mujtahid. He directs the office of his father in Qom, and studies *bahth al-kharij*. He may receive support from the Hakim household, who could advance him to become the next supreme marja. He faces rivals from within the household such as Hossein al-Hakeem, a cleric and jurist from Najaf who has vast support within the household as well.

The potential successors also include Ayatollah al-Fayadh and Bashir al-Najafi. Both of them, along with Saeed al-Hakeem and Ayatollah Sistani, were called the big four. It has always been predicted that Sistani's successor will be from one of the three clerics: Ayatollah al-Fayadh, Bashir al-Najafi and Saeed al-Hakeem. The latter died while Fayadh and Najafi remain alive — but have reached extreme old age. If we assume that one or both of them will take over the marjayya, it will be a transitional and temporary leadership — as was the case with Sabziwari after the demise of Khomeini.

Yet, there is Muhammad-Baqir al-Irawani (b. 1949) who opened Barrani Diwan (office) in Najaf. He chose his office in a location with historical significance. It was the office of Abd al-Hadi al-Shirazi (d. 1962). Irawani's *bahth al-kharij* lessons are among the largest in terms of attendance and presence by hawza students. He studied under Baqir

al-Sadr, Khoei and Sistani — which pits him against the guardianship of the jurist.⁽⁴³⁾ Nonetheless, the rise of Irawani through the hierarchy of the marjaya needs direct support from Najaf, the Shiite community and from actors within the hawza such as the Khoei Foundation, Sistani's house, and Hakim's household. This is likely — especially given that Irawani was among those propagating the a'alamiyya (criteria of being the most knowledgeable jurist) of Sistani. At the same time, ignoring Najafi and Fayadh remains unlikely.

There is another possibility of the influence of the marjaya shifting to Tehran as was the case after the death of Borujerdi when it shifted to Najaf or after the death of Isfahani when it switched to Qom. Iran has been seeking to promote maraji aligned with it in the heart of Najaf such as Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi who died in 2018. Now other clerics could be floated such as Kazem al-Haeri. The Iranians could suffice with some aligned maraji in Najaf or they could seek to switch the entire marjaya to Qom — especially to the Iranian supreme leader, making him an uncontested supreme marja. It is a complicated scenario that will be difficult to predict — as mentioned earlier.

Could the Hawza Vanish?

In the past, some paid heed to the rise of the hawza and the expansion of its role during the Constitutional Movement in Iran. They also paid attention to the role of the Constitutionalist jurists in the movement and to the role of jurists during the Tobacco Protest that preceded it. Yet they noticed the decline in the role of the hawza after the Parliament was convened, with legitimacy handed to the Parliament, the public, the army and other state institutions. The new rule — based on a Constitution and elected Parliament — did not need the hawza's blessings. Thus, its role declined, resulting in its isolation and hibernation.⁽⁴⁴⁾

Accordingly, can we say that the standing of the Hawza will decline after the death of Sistani? Especially in case the Iraqi state turns into a civilian constitutional one or provided Iran turns into a civilian constitutional state.

If we assume this transformation will happen in Iran or Iraq — which is unlikely in the foreseeable future due to several religious, societal,

and political factors — the hawza cannot be totally bypassed. It will have an effective role like the other seminaries in the Islamic world such as al-Azhar, Zaytuna Mosque and Dar al-Iftaa in Islamic countries. It is a role that enhances the legitimacy of the government and ensures that there is a guardian to protect the Sharia against aggressive secularism — especially in relation to personal and social laws. The decline of the hawza is practically impossible — even in light of strong currents within society embracing secularism and opposing the hawza. That is because religion is an essential factor in the region in general and in Shiite society in particular.

Conclusion

Based on the foregoing, we conclude that the system of the marjaya is deeply complicated. There are actors inside and outside the hawza who control or contribute to determining the a'alamiyya of the supreme marja. In most cases, there is no coordination between these actors — and sometimes they are of conflicting and divergent orientations.

Yet, the Iranians are watching in wait for the post-Sistani period — in a bid to dominate Najaf and strip it of its historical independence and its centrality in the Shiite world in favor of Qom — or more specifically — in favor of the rule of the guardian jurist because Qom is no longer the former Qom. It was hijacked after 1979 and was turned into one of the tools of the Iranian political authority after it previously was one of the elements that limited the powers of the political authority.

It remains hard to predict the fate of the supreme marjaya and the actors influencing it — given the complexity and the overlapping religious, political and economic aspects. This is added to the conflicting interests of regional and global actors. Even if there is a will by some countries or parties to install aligned clerics as marja, the whole matter in the end will be subject to the process of social filtering. There is no doubt that this needs time. However, the social incubators are controlled as they are subject to the media, and to actors, and figures — who could be independent or directed. Hence, some countries and actors will seek to invest in these popular incubators

which make up the hawza's taqlid incubators.

In all cases, there are inherited and well-established hawza traditions that could determine the rules for choosing the next supreme marja, unless there are developments that change the rules of the game.

Term	Explanation
A`lam (adj/ agent noun)	The most knowledgeable/learned.
A`lamiyya (gerund noun)	Criterion of being the most knowledgeable/ learned
Al-sābiq	Preceding marja
Faqih	Jurist
Fiqh	Jurisprudence
Grand/ Supreme Marja (<i>marja`a`la</i>)	The highest Shiite authority. A title given to the leading of all Shiite community
Hawza	A seminary where Shiite Muslim scholars are educated
Ijtihad (noun)	Reasoning
Infallible Imam	Immune from sins or committing errors, and mistakes
Maraji	Plural form of marja (sources of imitation).
Marja (al-taqlid)	Literally means “the source of imitation,” it is a title granted to the highest-ranking cleric within Twelver Shiism. He is a religious source/refer- ence to follow.
Marjayya	The most significant and influential social and religious position in the Shiite community.
Mujtahid (agent noun)	A title describing someone one who is qualified to practice ijtihad (reasoning), or the exercise of independent reasoning
Shaya`	Wide reputation
Uşūl al-fiqh	Principles of jurisprudence
Usuli(s)	It is derived from the term <i>Uşūl al-fiqh</i> (princi- ples of jurisprudence). It is the largest school of Twelver Shiism
Wilayat al-Faqih	The ruling of the jurist.
Bahth al-Kharij	Advanced seminary studies

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