

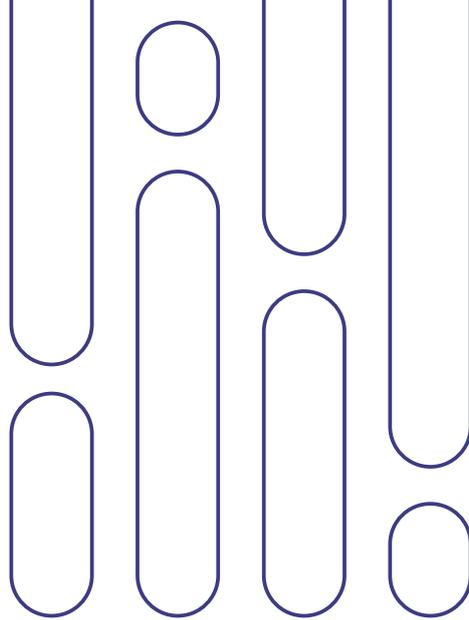
REPORT

The Sarkhi Movement: The Intra-Shiite Rift and Its Political Implications for Iraq

11 May, 2022



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Contents

Introduction.....	3
The Sarkhi Movement: Political and Sectarian Contours.....	3
The Roots of Disagreement	9
Sectarian Defamation: Calling Into Question the Shiism of the Movement.....	10
The Problem Posed by the Sarkhi Movement.....	13
Conclusion.....	15

Introduction

The Iraqi arena is abundant with different confessional factions, movements, creeds and sects. There exists some political disputes within the Iraqi Shiite group, but there is also a deeper rift within it over the particular religious doctrine favored by the Shiite sect, with conflicting schools of thought, each wishing to see their own favored religious doctrine become the dominant one. This internal conflict means that this dispute manifests itself in Iraq's already turbulent political and religious landscape, impacting all areas, including employment.

One of these ancient disputes has long existed between the scholars of the Sarkhi movement and other schools of thought within the Shiite sect but without any real impact on wider society. Unfortunately, this doctrinal dispute was recently revived in an unpleasant way when a Sarkhi preacher delivered a fiery Friday sermon on April 8, 2022, calling for the demolition of tombs, citing the injunction of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) to Imam Ali ibn Abu Talib to demolish tombs, [level](#) them and build nothing upon them. The reaction from the wider Shiite public to this sermon was immediate and violent — at the level of the people, the clergy, and the government. Moreover, this doctrinal dispute seems sure to develop further, with far more serious dimensions and repercussions for Iraq's political and religious landscape, given the fact that the Sadrist Movement, with which the Sarkhi movement is affiliated, has thousands of followers scattered in different Iraqi provinces such as in Diwaniyah, Najaf, Karbala, Nasiriyah and Basra. According to some estimates, the number of Sadrist supporters amounts to approximately 30,000 people, including those affiliated with [Al-Hossein Army](#).

The Sarkhi Movement: Political and Sectarian Contours

The Sarkhi movement is named after the *marja* (clerical refer-

ence) Sayyid Mahmoud al-Hasani al-Sarkhi, who was born in Kadhimiya, Baghdad, in 1964. After studying in his hometown and graduating from the Faculty of Engineering, Baghdad University, in 1987, he joined the hawza in Najaf in 1994.

• **Origins and roots of the movement:** Sarkhi bases his school of thought and tenets on those of the Sadrists Mohammad Baqir al-Sadr (executed in 1980) and Mohammad al-Sadr (assassinated in 1999). The Sarkhists' associating themselves with the aforementioned two Sadrists is of concern to many other Shiite movements, such as the Sadrist Movement, the Dawa Party, and some militias. The Sarkhists also attribute their ideology to the two Sadrists, but they have a different interpretation. The two aforementioned prominent Sadrists, especially Mohammad al-Sadr, clashed with what they called "the silent hawza" (a reference to the hawza which shuns the public sphere), making himself the torchbearer for the "outspoken hawza" (the marjaya that intervenes in the public sphere). However, the situation/context of Mohammad al-Sadr is different from Sarkhi in terms of timing, events, and actors; Sarkhi's position on the "silent hawza" is no longer a point of strength in his project because there are representatives of the Sadrists who are more loyal and closer than him to the Shiite community not only in regard to this issue which might be a matter of dispute but also to other issues central to the Shiite community, which displays respect for marjas, their sons and their households. The role of households in consolidating the legitimacy of clerics within the hawza — as well as the right of sons and relatives to the legacy of fathers and forefathers — is no secret.

• **Sarkhi and the structure of the state:** Sarkhi claims to believe in a state "in which all people can coexist regardless of their sect, religion or [ethnic](#) affiliation." It seems that he adopted this position in light of the sectarian climate which prevailed in Iraq after the US invasion of the country in 2003. This led Sarkhi to warn of the danger of a possible Shiite-Sunni war, call for dia-

logue, and adopt a tough and hostile line toward aspects of the Iranian leadership's Wilayat al-Faqih doctrine.

Despite this tough and hostile line, Sarkhi still believes in Wilayat al-Faqih. But he believes that the jurist who exercises guardianship must possess the highest level of *a'alamiyya* (the most knowledgeable/learned). He believes that Muslims of every age should identify the rightful imam qualified to manage and lead society and follow him. This imam, for Sarkhi, is the leader who can deliver progress and ensure justice and should be more knowledgeable than others. Sarkhi rejects the notion that the general public should participate in choosing or electing the ruler; according to his viewpoint, ordinary people are unable to agree on one qualified leader and will thus have many leaders, prompting power struggles and instability. This defies divine laws, leading to the prevalence of chaos and corruption. According to Sarkhi, obedience to the jurist will mean obedience to the Infallible Imam since, according to the Twelver Shi'ite doctrine, Prophet Muhammad appointed the imams of Muslims who would succeed him and rendered obedience to them mandatory (a reference to the 12 "infallible" Shi'ite imams).

Sarkhi also believes that absolute obedience to the ruler should be mandatory and unquestionable during the minor and major occultations. Following the era during which the Four Deputies become representatives, the guardianship passes on to the just jurist who meets the requirements, the most important of which is *a'alamiyya*. This is defined as the most crucial requirement because, in Twelver Shiism, the imam and ruler should be the most knowledgeable among the people. Sarkhi has bestowed on himself more *a'alamiyya* than the other jurists of his time. Among his most dangerous talking points is that the "guardian jurist has the same legislative guardianship as the Infallible Imam."

Sarkhi does not believe that there should be any limits or restrictions on the guardianship of the jurist, believing that this

guardianship must be absolute. He insists that the jurist alone has the right to issue laws — with his directives overriding all others and being universal in nature rather than limited to specific realities/cases.

At the same time, however, Sarkhi has leveled stinging criticisms against the contemporary Iranian version of Wilayat al-Faqih, deeming this a doctrine designed for Iranian expansionism. He has said about Iran's expansionism: "Planners of imperial projects won't be satisfied with a certain level [of hegemony] as long as the nations and peoples are quiet and submissive and don't have the willpower and determination to stand against the invasion and expansionism coming to [destroy them](#)."

Speaking about the Iranian Wilayat al-Faqih doctrine, he has said, "The inequity, injustice, illness, poverty and hunger suffered by the Shiites in Iraq made them yearn for the rule of Saddam Hussein and made them disdain and abandon Wilayat al-Faqih. Only the murderous and [bloodthirsty](#) militias have connections with Wilayat al-Faqih."

In an old interview with [Al-Sharq Al-Awsat](#) newspaper, he lambasted the Iranian version of Wilayat al-Faqih. He said, "All that happened, is happening and will happen is because of what we have reached based on conclusive scholarly proofs. We have declared it, plainly stated it, and never hesitated to bring it up, which is the general guardianship of the jurist. It shall be conferred on the most knowledgeable jurist wherever he is. It has nothing to do with assuming a position, authority, government, leadership, media prominence or any other benefit. The general guardianship shall not be established through the use of the sword, or through suppression, repression, intimidation, taking bribes, false media, guile and deception."

While Sarkhi unequivocally expresses his endorsement of the concept of the general guardianship of the jurist, he em-

phasizes that this position cannot be taken through the use of force or the implementation of repressive measures, as is the case with the Iranian version of Wilayat al-Faqih, but should be given to the person who meets the criteria of a'alamiyya. Sarkhi has failed to indicate what should happen in cases where there is a dispute over the criteria of a'alamiyya as is the case with him, with his foes rejecting his knowledge credentials. Furthermore, his position regarding comprehensive and absolute guardianship remains unknown. Does it include the other mujtahid jurists or not? Does it include those overseas or not? There are flaws in his position that need clarification and explanation.

So, while we know that Sarkhi believes in Wilayat al-Faqih, it seems that he is attempting to establish himself as the most knowledgeable jurist, fit to serve as the guardian jurist over all other contemporary jurists. This could possibly explain the competition between him and the other jurists despite the fact that they have more followers and financial resources than him.

- **Sarkhi and the marjaya:** Sarkhi criticized the [supreme marjaya](#) in Najaf due to its position in regard to the 2003 US occupation of Iraq and because of the fatwa it issued to launch jihad against Daesh (also known as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria – ISIS) in 2014. This criticism caused some protesters to attack Sarkhi's offices, while the government of former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki fired [missiles](#) at his headquarters after he criticized it and its handling of what he called the plight of Sunnis.

Sarkhi also criticized Sistani's fatwa legitimizing jihad in Syria. However, this disagreement seems to be more profound, with Sarkhi accusing Sistani of being behind his (arrest on three different occasions by the former Iraqi government under Saddam Hussein. This accusation is based on direct communications with Hussein's [special guards officers](#). The same

accusation “was leveled against the late Mohammad al-Sadr and led to his assassination. This accusation leveled against me is causing disturbance to Sistani. That’s because Sadr and I claimed ijtiḥād, a’alamiyya and published usul-centered and jurisprudential research for the scholastic field. This disturbs and [annoys the marjaya.](#)”

Sarkhi failed to open up channels of communication with the marjaya to enable him to consolidate his legitimacy within the Shiite community. He views himself as being the supreme marja —meaning he does not believe in the a’alamiyya of Sistani or in his status as the supreme leader. Sarkhi sees himself as Sistani’s rival and believes he has a more rightful claim to the supreme marjaya. This undoubtedly lost him popular support because his teacher Sadr was not seen as being as knowledgeable as Khoei, Sabziwari or Sistani within the Shiite street.

• **The Arabist affiliation of the movement:** Sarkhi has repeatedly declared the Arabist orientation of his movement in the face of what he calls Iranian/Persian expansionism. In an interview with Egypt’s Al-Watan newspaper in February 2015, he announced, “There is no Iraqi Shiite sectarian religious discourse. The religious discourse in Iraq is purely and totally Iranian. It has nothing to do with the Shiite sect, only to the extent that serves the policy of the ruling Iranian regime and the security of its [authoritarian government.](#)” Sarkhi wants to woo Arab and Iraqi Shiites and disentangle their ties with the Iranians by adopting a pro-Arab position. On the other hand, this pro-Arab Shiite discourse is not entirely accepted by the Iraqi people, with Iraqi Shiites not supportive of any nationalist affiliation among the marjas. They, in the past and the present, emulated non-Arab marjas, showing that the Arab street does not exclusively embrace Sarkhi at the expense of other marjas. However, there are also other actors within the hawza of Arab origins.

The Roots of Disagreement

While longstanding and well-known reasons led to the outbreak of the current disagreement between the two sides, there are also hidden reasons — related to religious, political and economic/interest-centered factors.

The direct/public reason for the current disagreement was the controversial remarks during the Friday prayer sermon delivered on April 8, 2022, at al-Fath al-Mobin Mosque in Babylon Governorate. The Friday prayer leader Ali al-Masoudi called for not building shrines and mosques on tombs, deeming such structures expressions of polytheism, hence directly opposed to the principles of Islam. The Iraqi security forces arrested Masoudi on charges of insulting religious figures and rituals over his call to [demolish the shrines](#).

There is also an undisclosed reason (in addition to the aforesaid disagreement between him and his foes over this radical doctrinal interpretation), which was the call by Masoudi and his supporters for coexistence among Muslims and invoking God's blessings upon Abu Bakr, Omar, Aisha, and all of Prophet Muhammad's companions. There is no question that such a call worries traditionalist conservatives and extremist wings, whether they are affiliated with politicians or clerics. This prompted Yasser al-Habib, one of the extremist clerics affiliated with the Shirazi movement, to lash out at Masoudi and his supporters because of their pardoning of Omar ibn al-Khattab. He described them as manipulators of the fundamental tenets of [Shiism](#).

Thus, for the aforementioned elements, these remarks provided a timely opportunity to work against the Sarkhi movement because of its perceived deviations and acts of misguidance. Accordingly, the Sadrist Movement swiftly adopted a harsh position which was declared by the chief of the movement. Muqtada al-Sadr threatened the cleric Sarkhi two days

after the sermon, when he said, “Some of those emulating Sarkhi are attempting to incorporate some deviant beliefs into the Shiite sect, the last of which was [demonstrated by] the remarks of their affiliated Friday prayer leader in Babylon Governorate who called for demolishing the tombs of saints and infallible imams.”

Sadr gave Sarkhi three days to disavow the Friday prayer leader and threatened him if he did not do so within this period. Sadr said, “I find myself obliged to take action against them and those like-minded in a way dictated by my conscience, religion and sect.” The Coordination Framework also criticized the Sarkhi movement and the call by its affiliated Friday preacher to demolish the shrines.

Sectarian Defamation: Calling Into Question the Shiism of the Movement

This is not the first time that the Sarkhi movement has been targeted, with it previously coming under attack in 2012 when some of its mosques were pulled down, some of its affiliates were arrested, [and others killed](#). The movement was also targeted in 2014 and 2022.

This time is quite different from the past. The issue now is not merely a disagreement over doctrinal or personal issues between him and the traditionalist and reformist marjas in Iraq and beyond but the disagreement is between Sarkhi and the entire Shiite community — who believe that the sanctity of the shrines is one of the fundamentals of the Shiite sect and one of the reasons behind its survival and revenues.

For this reason, Iraqi religious and political movements expressed anger at the Friday prayer preacher affiliated with the Sarkhi movement who called for demolishing the tombs. This growing anger was manifested at the start through limited

protests. Then the situation escalated, with arrests targeting those affiliated with the Sarkhi movement in most of Iraq's provinces. The national [intelligence agency led the arrests](#), and the Interior Ministry opened an investigation into the matter.

At the grassroots level, Iraqi groups have bulldozed mosques, headquarters and seminaries operated by the Sarkhi movement — foremost of which is [Al-Fath Al-Mobin mosque](#) in Babylon Governorate.

As for Moqtada al-Sadr, he denounced the demolition of mosques, stating in a Twitter post on April 13, 2022, that “the popular reaction against the affiliates within the Shiite sect who call for demolishing the tombs is something commendable. It is a defense of religion and sect and a display of love for the infallible imams. But they should refrain from demolishing, setting ablaze, vandalizing, and blowing up the mosques. Instead, they should be satisfied with shutting them down and preventing the inciters of sedition from observing their rituals.” Sadr added that the demolition of mosques is “as horrendous as the [demolition of shrines](#).”

If the demolition of mosques is as horrendous as the demolition of shrines, the paradox is that those who demolished mosques were hailed as heroes. But those who called for demolishing the tombs were arrested, had their offices shut down, and their mosques demolished without any legal or constitutional justification.

Though the moves taken by the national security agency and the Iraqi people did not begin immediately after the sermon on Friday April 8, they accelerated their moves and escalated later on. Political currents took advantage of the crisis. Those affiliated with the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) raised the group's flags, and accused the Sarkhi movement of being a surrogate of Israel and America. They threatened to bury the movement's followers in case they moved against [the](#)

[shrines in Iraq](#). In parallel, the Iraqi Interior Ministry shut down all of Sarkhi's offices in [Iraq](#).

At the sectarian level, cleric Jamil al-Rabiei, a hawza teacher, claimed, "The Sarkhi movement isn't Shiite and he isn't a scholar." Rabiei also accused the Sarkhi movement of being an Israeli scheme. "They are neither Shiites nor Sunnis, nor Arabs nor Kurds. They are puppets in the hands of the Zionists. Sarkhi is not deemed a scholar. He has nothing to do with knowledge. He is the most ignorant one of all. He is a Baathist, from the enemies of the Iraqi people. The mosques that were demolished aren't the mosques of Islam but the mosques of disbelief, hypocrisy and [polytheism](#)."

It is also worth mentioning that some of the clerics affiliated with the reformist Shiite movement in general such as cleric Yasser Awda — have also criticized the Sarkhi movement's fiery rhetoric, discussing various interpretations regarding the demolitions of tombs during the time of Prophet Muhammad. They also said that the issue of the tombs of saints and infallible imams is not abominable (unpopular), adding that the act of visiting saints' tombs to perform worship is among the most favorable means of seeking God's pleasure and pointed out that not even one Quranic narration renders the establishment of shrines over the tombs of Shiite saints unlawful. At the same time, however, they called for removing [the manifestations of polytheism](#).

According to Sarkhi, the campaign against his movement is caused by [the fear of his marjaya](#). He said, "At this point, I find it sufficient to wonder about the reasons behind all that has been inflicted upon us, its increase and escalation these days. Is it because of the desire to wipe out all the potential rivals to an alternative marjaya that they want to establish and consolidate in Iraq? The power-wielding entities have the belief and conviction that they have destroyed all marjas and want to totally obliterate them. Before obliteration, they want to wipe

out from the scene all those believed to be potential rivals or alternatives after liquidating the others. So, we are the first among those who have been enduring this animosity?”

But the critical question in this context is: is Sarkhi a Shiite who believes in peculiarities distinguishing the Shiite sect from all other Islamic sects? The answer is yes. He believes in [khoms](#), temporary [marriage](#), Imam Mahdi, the imamate, self-flagellation and [tatbir \(ritual bloodletting, practiced as an act of mourning\)](#) and other Shiite rituals. In fact, he has not renounced any of the sect’s pillars. This disagreement is, at its heart, a personal and political one. Sarkhi criticized Khomeini’s doctrine, favoring instead the school of Mohammad Baqir al-Sadr and insisting upon its greater authenticity. He also criticized Khomeini’s student; Sistani, who is the most salient figure after Khomeini. In addition to these points, embracing the school of the two Sadrists pitted him against other rivals who also embraced the school of the two Sadrists and want to monopolize the Sadrist school. Iran’s allies also fell out with him over his opposition to the Iranian Wilayat al-Faqih doctrine and his criticisms of Iranian policy. This dispute is not over scholarship. It is a dispute over interests, personal gains, and historical rivalries between different Shiite schools within Twelver Shiism, all of which have been competing and jockeying for power over the model that should represent the sect, as well as over khoms and taqlid incubators.

The Problem Posed by the Sarkhi Movement

It seems that the present battle is the most important one for the Sarkhi movement to date. This time it is not a battle with the hawza or with the Iraqi government — as was the case in 2014 — but with the entire Iraqi people who have dismissed the movement’s call for demolishing tombs and shrines. Iraqi

Shiites — including even those who are non-religious in nature or unaffiliated with the Islamists — view with suspicion any discourse that takes aim at imams' tombs and shrines. This is because religious discourse deems the demolition of tombs as a manifestation of terrorism and extremism, not a means to reform Shiism or a simple difference of opinion on a minor intra-sectarian issue. This tough stance on the demolition of tombs is due to the bombings of the imams' shrines during the 2003 US invasion of Iraq. This issue, then, has not been open to debate or consideration anymore. The Sarkhi movement has failed to realize this outcome/reality.

At the same time, the Sarkhi movement has got into a major battle with the hawza of Najaf, the Iranians and all the other religious and political movements in Iraq. This has made the movement a pariah, despite its declared “moderate and reasonable” rhetoric.

The lack of realpolitik in Sarkhi's approximation cost him and his movement a lot. In pursuing this approach, Sarkhi believes that he is following in the footsteps of the two Sadr cleric. But times move on, and the context is nowadays quite different. The Iraqi government is currently affiliated with the Shiite movements, with Shiites now being the rulers and statesmen and the hawza being outspoken, not quietist. Therefore, the persecution formerly inflicted on the two Sadr clerics by a non-Shiite government no longer exists. Moreover, the Sarkhi movement is even being castigated from within the Shiite community. This has been reflected in its small number of supporters and backers — contrary to what the situation might have been if the persecution it faced had been inflicted by those outside the Shiite sect.

There is another development which is of an unambiguous significance. Many of the clerics and followers of the Sarkhi movement do not comply with the cleric's prescribed turban and cloak, which weakens their religious standing among the

masses. This makes them easy prey at the political and religious levels. Yet the Sarkhi movement is politically ineffective, depriving it of a legislative arm which could have provided it with protection like that enjoyed by all major Shiite movements during critical periods.

On balance, the standoff between the Sarkhi movement and the other movements within the Iraqi Shiite community has given rise to several paradoxes, including the lack of independent scholars and the rejection of free *ijtihad* (reasoning), which is limited to what the prominent actors within the *hawza* and the influential figures in the public sphere agree upon. Otherwise, any *mujtahid* can face persecution and repression even if he embraces all the stances compliant with Twelver Shiism — regardless of his *ijtihad* in line with the *usuli* criteria.

Additionally, these intra-Shiite differences point to the lack of the rule of law at all levels and the absence of a civil constitutional state. The popular punishment of the Sarkhi movement, its mosques and affiliates appears to be without legal and constitutional backing, in addition, the government's apparatuses have turned a blind eye to the backlash facing the movement.

Conclusion

The recent intra-Shiite standoff appears significant at this delicate historical juncture. It could potentially expedite the *marjaya's* resumption of [Friday prayer](#) sermons, suspended since the start of the coronavirus pandemic, in an attempt to adjust and rebalance the Shiite religious discourse and curb the counter-discourse which goes against the approved official reading of the Shiite sect. In addition, Iraq's political crisis could expedite the return of Friday prayers.

It is also noticeable that this issue has taken on a political

dimension. Some people are attempting to sectarianize the matter, amplify it and employ it with the aim of winning over the masses and enhancing their own political and sectarian legitimacy. This comes amid an intra-Shiite dispute at the political level, which has disrupted the formation of the Iraqi government. Thus, each party has been keen to display its sectarian loyalty and defend its rituals and distinct features. In a nutshell, it is unlikely that the Sarkhi movement will integrate into the Iraqi state in the short run or enter into negotiations and agreements with its foes which could enable all parties to coexist and participate in the political and communal structure. This is because the foes of the Sarkhi movement consider it to be “wholly heretical.” Further, the Sarkhists traditionally believe that those who are extremely fanatical adherents to their sect are more dangerous to them than those who are non-sectarian. At the same time, the Sarkhi movement believes that they are more rightfully entitled to claim the legacy of the two founding Sadr clerics. This belief is derived from their claim to represent Arab Shiism as opposed to Persian Shiism, a stance which they are relying on to attract support from local, regional, and maybe international actors. Such efforts have not yet succeeded to the present day, and the movement is suffering from near-total political and confessional isolation, especially following its recent call for demolishing shrines.

