The Hawza and Its Role in Post-War Iraq

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The Hawza

The Hawza consists of the most qualified Shi’a scholars of religion (the mujtahids), their students, and the assisting staff. This educational and spiritual institution is considered the extension of the authority of the twelve Shi’a Imams, who succeeded the Prophet as the custodians of authentic Islamic knowledge and spirituality, according to Shi’a doctrines. The first Imam is Ali b. Abi Talib (d. 661 AD) and the last is the Mahdi, who disappeared in 874 AD and believed, by the Shi’a, to be in occultation until the end of time, when he will appear to restore justice on earth. During the earlier period of Islamic history, until 874 AD, authority was vested in the Prophet and the Infallible Imams. The history of the era from 874 AD until the end of time is divided into two periods; the Minor Occultation period, which lasted from 874 to 941 AD, when the Major Occultation began and will last to the end of time. During the Minor Occultation period, the twelfth Imam, al-Mahdi, communicated his guidance to the Shi’a through his delegates, or deputies – four men chosen by him to hold the position consecutively. He appeared only to them to receive the questions and concerns of the Shi’a and pass the proper answers and solutions through them.

The death of the fourth deputy in 941 AD ended the direct communication between him and the Shi’a, and the role of the ulema (religious scholars) was elevated as the deputies of the Imam, who exerted their best efforts to interpret the Qur’an and the statements attributed to the Prophet and the Imams in order to answer new questions put before them. From that point in time forward, the Shi’a community was divided into two classes, the ulema (also called mujtahids), who may practice religion according to their own interpretation of Islam, and the ordinary Shi’a, who must emulate the ulema and follow their instructions in all spiritual and temporal matters. This essential role of the ulema created the necessity to prepare qualified personalities to lead the Shi’a throughout the centuries. Every year, thousands of aspiring students join the financially and politically independent Shi’a seminary (the Hawza) to pursue a rigorous lifetime course of studies for the successful candidates, who will join the ranks of the mujtahids. Those who stop at advanced levels may serve at lower functions within the network of certain mujtahids, but may not propagate their own religious interpretations, having not attained the necessary credentials.

For a long time, the Hawza was not associated with a particular city. Rather, it was located
where the most qualified Shi‘a mujtahid resided. However, when al-Shaykh al-Tusi (d. 1067 AD) was forced to move from Baghdad to Najaf, the Hawza followed him and, for the first time, an educational institution was established in Najaf (Iraq) and remained in operation for the past nine centuries. Until this day, the Hawza of Najaf continues to graduate the most prominent religious scholars in the Shi‘a world, along with its sister institution in Qum (Iran), which was established in the 1920s.

But the maintaining of independence in Najaf was not always an easy task for the Hawza leadership. The Ottomans, who became the self-appointed champions of Sunni Islam viewed the Hawza as the greatest obstacle to their quest for securing the allegiance of the majority population in Iraq. Their rule (1638 – 1918) was characterized by continued hostility toward the Hawza, whose graduates were never certified or granted government employment, unlike their counterparts in Sunni religious schools. This hostility continued in the modern Iraqi state, which inaugurated its political acts by deporting the most prominent mujtahids to Iran and did not grant them re-entry until they pledged not to assume any political roles in Iraq.¹

The Hawza was subjected to the cruelest treatment during the Ba‘th rule, especially the period of Saddam Hussein’s presidency (1979-2003). At the height of the Iran-Iraq War, between 1983 and 1987, the highest echelons of the leadership of the Ba‘th party of Iraq engaged in a comprehensive series of appraisals of the Shi‘i seminary institution of Iraq, the Hawza, and in the position of its leading figure, Grand Ayatatullah Abu'l-Qasim al-Khoei. Following the fall of the Ba‘th regime in 2003, and the subsequent transfer of a considerable portion of its internal archives to the United States over the following years [currently hosted by the Hoover Institution at Stanford University], the details of these appraisals have most recently been made available to the public. These disclosures present for the first time the opportunity for the provision of critical insight into the internal workings and of the Ba‘thists and their fears and motivations regarding the Shi‘i clerical classes during the crisis hit years of 1980-1990.

Lead by Izzet Ibrahim al-Duri, Saddam Hussein’s own deputy, and with considerable feedback from Saddam himself (through the provision of handwritten notes and direct instructions), the appraisal sought to provide a strategic insight as to the tumultuous and often antagonistic relationship between the two major centres of authority in Iraqi society, the Shi‘i clerical leadership of Najaf, and the centralized Iraqi state at the cusp of which stood the Ba‘th party itself. Amongst

¹ For further details, see Abbas Kadhim, “Forging a Third Way: Sistani’s marja‘iyya between quietism and wilayat al-faqih,” in John Esposito and Ali Paya (eds.), Iraq, Democracy and the Future of the Muslim World, pp. 69-73.
the questions the report considered were:

- Should Grand Ayatullah Al-Khoei, and the Hawza itself, stay in Iraq or be expelled?
- Could a pro-Ba‘th "Arab" replacement be prepared to take over the Hawza instead? If so who could lead it, and how?
- What steps could be followed to close the religious schools? Or could they be incorporated by the official educational system and therefore come under the purview of the state?

The studies prepared by the leadership of the Ba‘th detail the considerable degree of antagonism and outright hostility manifest by the circles around Saddam towards the leadership of the Hawza of Najaf, including Ayatollah al-Khoei and his assorted representatives, whose roles and functions were discussed at the highest levels of the Ba‘thist state.

Many analysts and scholars have until present time presented a series of narratives about the inner workings of the Ba‘th Party and the government in Iraq during this, depending either on open sources or the unfolding events, but without the benefit of reviewing such highly classified documents. Now that these documents are finally accessible, this seminar will seek to open the discussion as to the extent to which many previous accounts of Iraqi political and social history need to be revised.²

This paper will critically examine the claim that the Hawza of Iraq has adopted quietism as a principle of political philosophy. The main question posed here is whether quietism was a survival mechanism adopted by the Hawza to overcome the adversity meted out on it by the ruthless state of Iraq, or a conviction deeply rooted in the interpretive conclusions reached by the ulema concerning their obligations viz. participation in the public realm.

Recent quietism commenced in the 1920s following a high-stakes political confrontation between the newly established Iraqi government – still under British auspices – and the four principal Shi‘a ulema in Iraq, all of whom were Iranian nationals. The stalemate caused the Iraqi government to undertake an unprecedented measure by deporting the ulema to Iran. After spending

² I am currently preparing the manuscripts for several case studies based on the review of the Ba‘th Party archives currently hosted by Stanford University.
many months in exile, three of them petitioned the Iraqi government to be allowed back in the
country and were granted the permission after having agreed to refrain from “meddling” in Iraqi
politics.

This trend, however, was not the uninterrupted norm in the following decades. The Hawza
took sides in many subsequent Iraqi political disputes and was, perhaps, the decisive factor in
shaping the outcome – albeit not always to the best interests of the Shi’a constituents.

The extraordinary political circumstances under the Ba’th regime, especially between 1974
and 2003, have caused the Hawza, under the leadership of Grand Ayatullah Abu al-Qasim
al-Musawi al-Khoei, to recoil on itself and practice extreme measures of self-restraint to keep the
institution afloat. Al-Khoei managed to minimize the wrath of the Ba’thist regime throughout the
trying decades of the 1970s and 1980s by refraining from voicing any public criticism to their
anti-Shi’a measures – those measures ranged from placing bans on the usual rituals to outright
oppression and mass executions of certain dissidents. He also managed to pass the Iran-Iraq War
era with minimum extra damages to the relations with the regime, as both sides settled on a public
position of neutrality on the part of the Hawza.

This pretentious tolerance was abandoned in 1991, when the Shi’a revolted against the
regime after its defeat in Kuwait. Saddam’s troops sacked the South and murdered tens of
thousands of the Shi’a men, women and even children, leaving them behind in mass graves. When
their work was done, they departed taking with them tens of thousands to unknown destinations.
Those were initially taken to interrogation camps in Baghdad and other centers. A small number of
them were released, but the vast majority simply vanished. Grand Ayatullah al-Khoei was
summoned to Baghdad and appeared on the Iraqi TV with Saddam Hussein in a situation never
seen before in Iraq’s history – Saddam was triumphantly interrogating the frail Ayatullah, whose
most memorable statement was, “I am approaching death.” He died the following year.

Ayatullah Sistani’s Leadership of the Hawza

Grand Ayatullah al-Khoei decided in his late years to prepare a successor for the position
of the supreme religious authority and the leadership of the Najaf Seminary. The choice fell on
Grand Ayatullah Sistani for his merits, eligibility, knowledge, and character. Accordingly, he
started leading the prayer in Ayatullah al-Khoei’s mosque, known as Jami’ al-Khadhra, in his
mentor’s lifetime in 1986 and continued leading prayers until that mosque was closed in 1993, a
year after al-Khoei’s death. His rise to the supreme position in the Shi’i scholarship and authority in
Iraq, in 1992, presented him with tremendous challenges, especially because the government considered him an adversary ever since he supported the uprising of 1991. He remained under house arrest until the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, when a new era of reserved activism ensued.

The Role of Sistani in Post-Saddam Iraq

In his capacity as a theologian and Jurist, Grand Ayatullah Sayyid Ali al-Sistani is the head of the Shi`i school of Najaf (Iraq), also known as the Hawza. He is the supreme figure among his peers, the three other major clerics in the country, each of whom also carried the title ‘Grand Ayatollah.’³ He came to the fore of the religious scene in Najaf after the death of his mentor and predecessor, Grand Ayatollah Abu al-Qasim al-Khoei, in 1992, being the most prominent scholar among al-Khoei’s students. After spending more than twelve years under virtual house arrest in his residence in Najaf, the U.S. invasion of the country and the removal of Saddam Husayn’s regime placed Sistani at the top of Iraq’s power pyramid. Since then, he has been the highest source of political legitimacy in the country in spite of his not being an Iraqi citizen. He has been visited by almost all national and international figures working on the Iraqi issue. While he refused to meet with the Americans and other officials from the coalition that occupied Iraq, as a matter of tradition, he has been very essential in keeping the majority of the Shi’a away from an open revolt. His communication with the Americans was always indirect and through Iraqi politicians – mostly Shia – or UN representatives, who “served as a bridge for the Americans to...Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani.”⁴ In his memoirs, L. Paul Bremer, claimed several times that he had communicated with Sistani. In one instance he wrote, “Throughout the Coalition’s time in Iraq, [Sistani] and I communicated regularly on vital issues through intermediaries.”⁵ Sistani’s authorized spokesperson, Hamid al-Khaffaf, presented twenty-page response to Bremer’s claims, essentially describing them as “inaccurate or completely false, and sometimes distorted or taken out of context.”⁶

What to make of this discrepancy between Bremer’s account and that of Sistani’s media

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³ These are Ishaq al-Fayyadh (an Afghan), Bashir al-Najafi (a Pakistani) and Muhammad Said al-Hakim (an Iraqi).
⁴ This tradition was set during the British occupation of Iraq 1914-1932, when British officials failed to meet with any grand ayatollah from Najaf, Karbala or Baghdad. The only exception was Gertrude Bell’s meeting with Ayatullah Sadr in Baghdad.
⁵ Ricks, Thomas, Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq, p. 216.
⁶ Bremer, L. Paul, My Year in Iraq, p. 166.
⁷ Al-Khaffaf, Hamid (ed.), Texts Issued by Sayyid Sistani Concerning the Iraqi Affair, pp. 419ff.
secretary? Since there was no direct contact between Bremer and Sistani, or the aides of the two men, it is most likely that Iraqi political operatives – that includes all top Iraqi politicians on the Shi’a side – tried to give Bremer the impression that they were able to communicate with Sistani on his behalf, in hopes to further their own chances in the competition for power and for Bremer’s approval and support. This was similar to the impression these politicians gave to the Americans and the British in the time leading to the invasion, that they had the mandate from the Iraqi people to represent Iraq before the world and arrange for the post-Saddam era. Bremer perhaps knew this aspect of their personality and acted accordingly – hence he did not rely on one Iraqi politician’s account of what Sistani might have wanted – but he did not mind using their purported mediation to support his claim.

On the other hand, Sistani was not naïve to believe that whatever he said to the Shi’a politicians was not going to be reported to Bremer immediately, perhaps with some modification. Therefore, he may have sent some messages to the American official without putting it exactly that way. In this sense, his statements to Iraqi politicians are no more indirect messages to the Americans than his fatwas, press releases and responses to media questions, all of which were immediately being translated and presented to Bremer and other Coalition officials. For example, in responding to questions from Agence France Press in July 2003, Sistani was in fact sending a message to Bremer as he wrote: “The constitution of Iraq must be written by the representatives of the Iraqi people who will be elected in a general election; any constitution written by an unelected assembly will not be accepted.” Similarly, Sistani continued using such opportunities to send messages to the Americans. In his meeting with Iraq’s Prime Minister, Nuri al-Maliki, soon after the latter’s designation to form a government, Sistani’s office issued a press release on April 27, 2006, which included this admonition: “The new government should exert all its effort to regain its full sovereignty on the country, politically, militarily, economically, and in every other aspect; and it must use every means to remove the traces of occupation.”

Among his many occupations, Grand Ayatullah Sistani presides over the Najaf seminary, the Hawza, an institution whose existence has continued for over a thousand years. In this capacity he is the guardian of a firmly held tradition of learning at the same time as he is expected to make his own contribution to this tradition, mainly through ijtihad.

In addition to his teaching, Sistani wrote forty-four books and treatises on various religious

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8 Ibid., p. 333.
sciences, twenty five of which are waiting to be published.\textsuperscript{10} Since the fall of Saddam’s regime many prominent Iraqi religious scholars returned to their country. However, the Sistani leadership has emerged as the most influential religious institution in Iraq. In addition to his dominance in Iraq, he also has representatives (wakils) and offices in every country with a Shi`i community, including major representations in the UK, India, Iran, Lebanon, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, Syria, Turkey and the United States.

The Hawza of Najaf continues to grow in size and prestige, becoming the most influential seminary in the Shi`i world since the collapse of the regime of Saddam Husayn, whose thirty-five years of tyrannical reign suffocated the school and eliminated its most illustrious scholarly figures either by execution, deportation or – as in the case of Sistani – by placing them under a very strict house arrest. Saddam’s repressive practices gave rise to the competitor seminary in the Iranian city of Qum, especially after the Iranian Revolution of 1979. With Saddam out of the scene and the ensuing extraordinary level of religious freedom in Najaf, the seminary under the leadership of Sistani has recovered almost fully in less than four years and began to attract the best and the brightest scholars and students alike. Taking lessons from the Lebanese experience, many centers in Iraq were established and managed by the representatives of Sistani, providing what the Iraqi state has failed to deliver. Facilities, including Internet and media outlets in most Iraqi cities like. In addition to receiving religious guidance, Iraqis can also receive financial support from the well-funded charitable organization of Sistani. However, according to his official web-site, it seems that most of Sistani’s charitable projects, such as housing projects and hospitals, are located outside of Iraq – mainly in Iran.\textsuperscript{11} It goes without saying that Sistani is the best-financed ayatullah in Iraq and one of the best financed Muslim scholars worldwide. The money comes from the religious duties of the Sistani constituency (muqallidun) worldwide, inevitably translates into more loyalty and popularity for the Grand Ayatullah and the institutions under his auspices.

Sistani has been one of the first Ayatullahs who made effective use of the Internet and the technological revolution of the current era. The Internet has helped him increase his social and religious network on a worldwide scale. Sistani’s web site provides religious advice and disseminates his works and religious rulings (fatwas) in Arabic, Persian, Urdu, Turkish, French and English. It receives some 15,000 visits and up to 1,200 e-mail messages each day.\textsuperscript{12}

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{12} Escobar, Pepe, “Sistaani. Qom: In the wired heart of Shi’ism,” Asia Times Online, atimes.com (accessed on
Upon the fall of the regime of Saddam Husayn in 2003, many Iraqi Shi’a, who disapproved the quietist position of the Hawza on matters of politics in most of the past 80 years, surrounded Sistani’s home and attempted to force him out of Iraq, but his popularity among the Iraqi tribes helped him survive a fatal attack. Having skillfully read the writing on the wall, Sistani made major modifications to his political position. He began his major political involvement in the post-Saddam era in June 2003, when his office in Najaf issued a communiqué that challenged the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA)’s decision to form an interim government for the transfer of sovereignty. Sistani demanded an immediate general election, through which all eligible Iraqi voters (men and women) can and must vote for their representatives of choice to form a constitutional assembly.

When the CPA announced on November 15, 2003 a plan for the Iraqi political process, Sistani’s office responded with a categorical rejection of the plan because,

“The [Occupation] does not have any authority to appoint the members of the committee to write the constitution. Further, there is no guarantee that such a committee would draft a constitution according to the supreme interests of the Iraqi people and their national identity, whose main pillars are the pure religion of Islam and noble social values. Hence, the project is categorically unacceptable. There is no alternative to starting with a general election, allowing all eligible Iraqis to elect their representatives to a constituent assembly to write the constitution, which in turn will be presented to the people to vote on it. It is the duty of all believers to demand this process and achieve it in the best manner.”

Throughout the years after 2003 Sistani has always supported the elections and popular participation in the political process, although he strongly recommended that religious figures keep an advisory role, rather than actively holding office, and has led by example. “It is not right,” he declared, “to push the religious figures into the administrative and executive aspects. Rather, it is desired that their role be restricted to guidance and supervision over the committees which are formed to administer the affairs of the cities and for the purpose of providing security and public

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August 8, 2008).

13 See George Packer, Assassins’ Gate: America in Iraq, p. 313.
14 Al-Khaffaf, Hamid (ed.), The Texts Issued by Sayyid Sistani Concerning the Iraqi Affair, p. 222.
However, he did not keep a mere advisory role when he saw the country at a close range from a catastrophe during the battle between the Multi-National Forces and the fighters of Muqtada al-Sadr. As the battle was coming to the shrine of Imam Ali in Najaf, in August of 2004, Sistani returned from London and scored a historical triumph for himself while steering the country away from an imminent bloodbath.  

Sistani’s return home from a trip to London for medical treatment accomplished a lot for him and for the disputants alike. First, his return cast away allegations that he left the city to avoid any involvement in the looming crisis or, to the more cynical, to clear the way for the Iraqi government and US forces to attack Muqtada al-Sadr. Secondly, his well-staged entry to Iraq and the rally that accompanied him from Basra to Najaf was a reminder to everyone that the era of a powerless Hawza has come to an end. Such a rally was not assembled in Iraq for an ayatollah for over half a century. Thirdly, Sistani has established himself as the most powerful man in Iraq, an indispensable force with a positive role.

Another strong involvement by Sistani was his personal interference to prevent the UN Security Council from including any language referring to the Transitional Administrative Law (TAL) that was governing Iraq before the permanent constitution was ratified. Sistani correctly argued that the TAL was problematic on the basis of its genesis and its content, which will hinder the efforts to reach an agreement on a constitution that would secure the interests of all Iraqis. In a letter to the UN Security Council, dated on June 6, 2004, he wrote,

“We are told that some people try to mention the so-called ‘Transitional Administrative Law’ in the upcoming UN Security Council Resolution concerning Iraq, in order to mask it with an international legitimacy. This ‘Law,’ which was drafted by an unelected assembly under the Occupation, and influenced by it, will restrict the Constituent Assembly that is about to be elected in the beginning of the coming year for the purpose of drafting a permanent constitution for Iraq. This is something against the laws and is rejected by most the people of Iraq. Therefore, any attempt to grant this ‘Law’ any legitimacy, by mentioning it in the International Resolution, is considered an act contrary to the will of the Iraqi people and will have dangerous consequences. We hope that the members of the

\[15\] Ibid., p. 307.
\[16\] Sistani arrived in London on August 6, 2004.
UNSC are briefed on the position of the religious Marji’iyya.”17

In the same way, Sistani sent, through his spokesperson, a warning to the Iraqi Parliament, in October 2009, that any election law endorsing the “Sealed List” would be unacceptable for the Iraqi people – that is to say: unacceptable to Sistani – and “it would reduce the desire of Iraqi citizens to participate in the elections and this will very harmful to the democratic process,” calling on the members of the Parliament to live up to the great responsibility given to them and implement the will of most iraqis by adopting the open list in the coming parliamentary elections.”18

Following these, and many other successful intercessions, Sistani became the most influential figure in Iraq, in spite of the fact that he is an Iranian citizen. His humble office in Najaf became the site of pilgrimage for Iraq’s officials who seek legitimacy or popular support for their agendas or political aspirations. The man who was thought to be a quietist ayatullah used a remarkable skill to gain the upper hand in every situation, thanks to his incredible self-restraint and immense wisdom that allowed him to resist the temptations of power and the spotlights.

Knowing that his constituents, the Shi’a, have been accustomed to many centuries of giving full allegiance to a hidden Imam, he managed to make use of this tendency and successfully keep himself invisible to the people, but, at the same time, kept his presence in every moment of their lives. Two examples may illustrate this phenomenon. On April 8, 2006, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak granted an interview to the Al-Arabiyya TV, wherein he stated that “the loyalty of most of the region’s Shi’a is for Iran rather than to their countries.” On the following day, Sistani addressed Mubarak with a long letter describing his opinion as “ignoring the facts of recent and contemporary history in most countries such as Iraq, Lebanon, Kuwait and Bahrain.” He cited the Shi’a 1920 Revolution, the Lebanese resistance to Israeli occupation, the resistance of Kuwaiti Shi’a against the Iraqi occupation and the Bahraini Shi’a who supported the referendum for independence.19 He also responded to the sentiments of the Iraqi Shi’a during the Israeli bombing of Lebanon. On July 16, 2006, Sistani issued a press release condemning the attacks and urging

17 Ibid., pp. 261-262.
18 Huda Jasim, “After Sistani’s warning against the Sealed List, Shi’a Members of Parliament eagerly support the Open [List].” Al-Sharq al-Awsat (October 7, 2009). The “Sealed List” is a ballot with the names of the groups, or coalitions, without mentioning the candidates’ names. It is a way to allow candidates with less popularity to attain seats in the Parliament, unlike the “Open List”, which allows the voter to cast their vote to their preferred candidates.
19 Ibid., 405.
the world to put a stop to them. Two weeks later, Sistani released a stronger statement saying that “it is impossible to sit idle by…this horrifying tragedy,” calling again on the International Community to do what it takes in order to “impose an immediate ceasefire.”

World perceptions about Grand Ayatullah Sistani were initially prejudiced by the conventional wisdom that Ayatullahs are anti-West radicals whose worldview is still trapped in the theological mindset of the seventh century. This false perception was shaped by a long history of negative experience Western officials had in dealing with traditional Shi’i religious scholars and re-enforced by pessimistic media coverage of everything Shi’i. However, this image changed very rapidly as Sistani handled his responsibilities in a very admirable way that the most skeptics of his observers turned quickly to praise him. Additionally, his status was helped by the fact that the other key figures involved in the Iraqi political process were the corrupt Iraqi politicians and the eccentric neo-conservative Americans, none of whom stood a chance to compete with an insightful personality like Sistani. They possessed none of his wisdom, self-restraint or lack of lust for attention.

In every turn Sistani out-performed the competition. Perhaps the starkest example of his symbolic triumph was his call for national elections in Iraq while the Americans, whose rationale for invading Iraq was then reduced to the single claim of democratizing the country, opposed holding elections on the pretense that Iraq was not ready.

Sistani’s greatest legacy will perhaps be his triumphant effort to spare the city of Najaf the eminent destruction during the showdown between the U.S. forces and the loyalists of Muqtada al-Sadr. His return from London just in time to prevent the bloodbath and the procession that accompanied his motorcade from Basra to Najaf was an event not experienced by any Shi’i scholar in the past sixty years. During a brief meeting I had with Ayatullah Sistani, in late December 2010, he emphasized the mediation between al-Sadr and the American forces as the best accomplishment he had in his life, because he helped save many lives from both sides and spared the city of Najaf, specially Imam Ali’s shrine, potential destruction. Another memorable trait of Ayatullah Sistani will be his skill in facing the greatest challenge to Iranian Shi’i scholars in Iraq: how to maintain a pivotal role in the social and political current of events without alienating the authorities. He ably overturned an eighty-year long tradition of quietism and stepped into the political arena to play a constructive role that often times spared many Iraqi and non-Iraqi lives. He will also be

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20 Ibid., pp. 409 & 411.
remembered for his remarkable resistance to the spotlights that made him more effective and revered by the Shi’a and the world at large.

**Conclusion**

The collapse of Saddam Hussein’s regime inaugurated a new era of the Hawza dominance in Iraqi social and political affairs. After being the subject of government oppression for centuries, the Najaf Hawza now is enjoying a golden age not seen since its establishment in the 11th century AD. Other than the self-imposed rules, there are virtually no restrictions on the activities of the Hawza and its personnel. The offensively memorable scene of Saddam Hussein’s triumphant interrogation of Grand Ayatullah al-Khoei in the presidential palace is now bad chapter of Iraqi history that is not likely to be ever repeated. In the new Iraq, the prime minister must have an appointment before coming to meet the Grand Ayatullah and, often times, his request for appointment is not granted, as a sign of the Hawza disappointment with government performance.

There is one remaining challenge for the Najaf Hawza, which is the continued Iranian effort to establish a sphere of influence in Iraq by using Iraqi political and clerical personalities who are either sympathetic to Iranian interests or returning the Iranian favors and ongoing support. Muhammad Ridha al-Sistani presented me with a detailed account on his efforts to curtail Iranian influence in Najaf and, as much as possible, in other cities, but acknowledged that the challenge is very strong. The conflict between Iran and the Najaf Hawza is both ideological – Sistani does not agree with the unlimited claims to authority given to the jurist in the Iranian theory of wilayat al-faqih – and practical, because Ayatullah Sistani as the greatest threat to the legitimacy of Iranian efforts to consolidate their power to speak on behalf of the world’s Shi’a. Their control of Najaf could threaten his life or monopoly on Shi’a leadership. Alternatively, it could lead to imposing a pro-Iran mujtahid to succeed Sistani, who is eighty-two years old, rather than the currently planned transition to replace Sistani with a like-minded mujtahid from the students of al-Khoei – most likely Ayatullah Ishaq al-Fayyadh. But all indicators seem to show that the Hawza will not be overrun by the Iranians, because Sistani’s support among the Iraqi tribes and religiously-inclined urban population is unprecedented in the history of the Hawza.

As someone who lived in Najaf during Saddam Hussein’s most powerful years (1980s) and returned to Iraq after the fall of his regime, the most striking change I saw was the scene at the narrow street leading to Sistani’s residence in the old town. In the 1980s, one would intentionally accelerate his steps while passing on foot by that particular location, or avoid taking that road
altogether if possible, to avoid the danger of being suspected by government agents as a visitor of
the Ayatullah. In 2010, it was very difficult to make my way through the crowd of Iraqis and
foreigners who blocked the road waiting or begging the generally kind security personnel for the
opportunity to see Sistani for a few seconds. While sitting in the waiting area outside Sistani’s
guest room, where he met his visitors, his son, Muhammad Ridha, filled the forty-five minutes of
waiting and spoke to me about the Hawza political and social activities and its positions on national
and international affairs. Every few minutes, he was interrupted by an assistant who announced to
his the arrival of a religious figure, a high ranking politician, or a delegation of some sort. His
response was: “Ask them to wait until I finish and serve tea to them in the meanwhile. The
Sayyid’s schedule is full today, but I will see if I can carve out five minutes for them. But don’t
promise anything.” He then turned to me and said, “This is what we have to go through every day,
for the past seven years.”