Thinking ahead : Shi'ite Islam in Iraq and its seminaries (hawzah 'ilmiyyah)

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ABSTRACT

In this "position paper", the author tries to develop his thoughts with regard to the future role of Shi'ite Islam and the Shi'ite seminaries (hawzah 'ilmiyyah) in Iraq, looking beyond the country's present occupation by the US-led coalition forces. Contrary to what is usually held by the wider public, Twelver Shi'ite Islam had been characterized in the course of its history by quietism, intellectual activity, and the pursuit of scholarship, rather than by political assertiveness. These features should be taken into consideration when discussing the future of Iraq, a country with an Arab Shi'ite majority. Iraq's Shi'ite seminaries, especially those in Najaf, had been centres of learning prior to the rise to prominence of those in Qom (or Ghom) in neighbouring Iran. The rise of Qom ought to be considered an exceptional (and not necessarily irreversible) phenomenon within the context of Shi'ite history that is peculiar to 20th-century Iran. Consequently, and in spite of the daily increasing communal violence, the revival of the Iraqi seminaries – situated in a multi-confessional country – could contribute towards moderation within Shi'ism, and beyond that, in the Islamic and Arab world at large, given the quietist tradition of Shi'ite Islam during its formative and classical periods. Moreover, within the context of a secular Iraqi republic, the restoration of the leading position of Iraq's hawzah alongside the reassertion of traditional religious leadership from the part of the country's senior Shi'ite clerics, could also become a corrective and stabilizing factor vis-à-vis the influence of Iranian Qom. However, the crucial prerequisite for such a development would be the successful and long-lasting pacification and consolidation of Iraq, the continuation of some form of national coherence and territorial integrity, and the containment of Iran, which is utilizing the aspirations of the non-Iranian Shi'ites in order to achieve hegemony over the Middle East.

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Thinking Ahead: Shi'ite Islam in Iraq and its Seminaries (*hawzah 'ilmiyyah*)

Introduction

Paradoxically, the 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq and the removal of the Saddam Hussein regime appear to have opened new horizons for the country's Shi'ites. In spite of recent theories of a threat by a Shi'ite crescent (first promulgated by Jordan's King Abdullah II about two years ago[1]), Shi'ite Islam in Iraq, as elsewhere for that matter, tends to be anything else rather than monolithic or static. In the case of Iraq, this is exemplified by the gallery of major players, among them Grand Ayatollah Sistani (representing original mainstream, quietist and scholarly Shi'ism), 33-year-old self-appointed religious authority-cum-gang leader Muqtada al-Sadr, the laymen Shi'ites in the central government, and very recently, the emerging self-styled Grand Ayatollah Sayyid Mahmud al-Hasani, who appears to combine anti-American as well as anti-Iranian sentiments and whose supporters had been involved in several violent clashes with coalition forces. [2]

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[1] See Robin Wright and Peter Baker, "Iraq, Jordan See Threat to Election From Iran. Leader Warn Against Forming Religious State" in *Washington Post*, 8 December 2004, p. A01, also available online at www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A43980-2004Dec7.html, accessed on 21 November 2006.

[2] Karbala'-based Al-Hasani, who is about 40 years old, is often described as a Sadrist, an ally of Muqtada al-Sadr. However, he fell out with Al-Sadr over the latter's decision to allow his supporters to participate in the Iraqi parliamentary elections. In August 2006, Al-Hasani is said to have questioned the authority of Najaf-based Grand Ayatollah Sistani over Karbala' and to have made an attempt to take control of its Imam Husayn shrine (and the substantial funds therein). This particular incident led to the death of 10 Al-Hasani militiamen and the arrest of 281. An interesting feature on Al-Hasani is found in Sami Moubayed, "Mahmud al-Hasani: A Profile of Iraq's Rising Shi'ite Leader" in *Global Terrorism Analysis* 3, No. 35 (12 September 2006), pp. 6–8, also available online at http://jamestown.org/terrorism/news/article.php?articleid=2370129, accessed on 15 November 2006. *Global Terrorism Analysis* is published by the Jamestown Foundation, a conservative U.S. think tank. A more recent account on Al-Hasani can be found in a Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty feature by Kathleen Ridolfo, "Iraq: Radical Cleric Challenges Shi'ite Establishment", 24 August 2006, available online at www.rferl.org/featuresarticleprint/2006/08/ae4f5a5e-1a51-4e75-af1a-2dc7133e29e3.html, accessed on 22 October 2006.
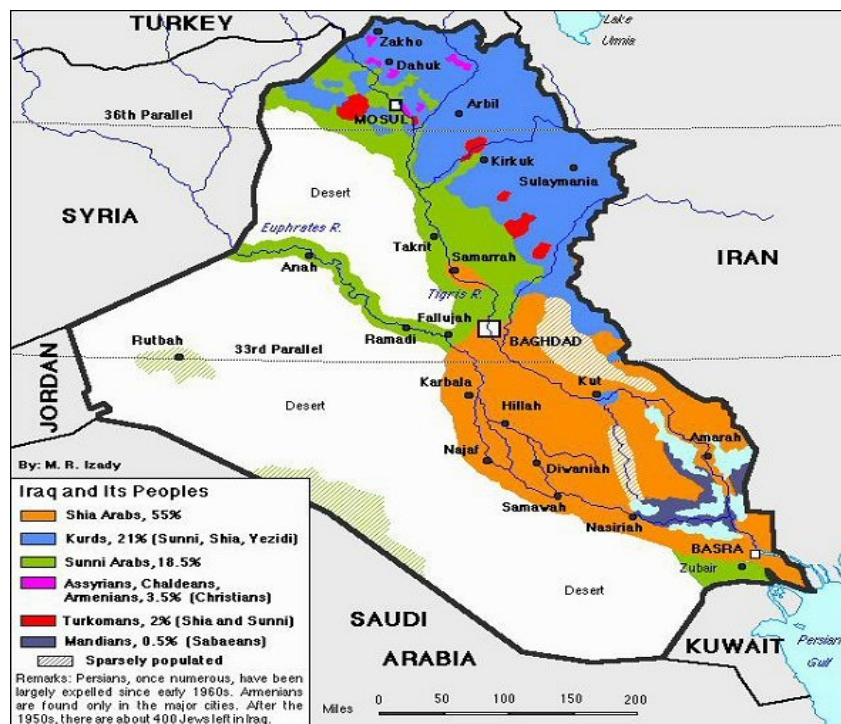
Figure 1

Major denominational and ethnic divisions in contemporary Iraq[3]

While this position paper intends to point at selected political scenarios towards the closing section, its focus is on possible future roles for Iraq's Shi'ite seminaries, known in Arabic as *hawzah*.[4] In the past, the most eminent and senior scholars of these seminaries had been seen by the faithful as the sole authority. Recent events in Iraq, however, such as the rise to prominence of rather obscure second-rate clerics such as Muqtada al-Sadr, have shown that this authority has been

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[3] Source: Wikipedia art. "Iraq Study Group", available online at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iraq_Study_Group, accessed on 6 December 2006.

[4] This paper is an elaboration of thoughts expressed in my "Reviving the Intellectual Heritage in Contemporary Islam: The Shi'ite Perspective" in *IDSS Commentary* 61/2006, available online at www.idss.edu.sg/publications/Perspective/IDSSS0612006.pdf, accessed on 29 November 2006. Abridged versions of the IDSS Commentary had been published under the same title in *Al-Huda*, 14 July 2006 [Al-Khoee Foundation, a moderate Shi'ite organization], available online at http://al-huda.al-khoei.org/news/124/ARTICLE/1155/2006-07-14.html, accessed on 3 November 2006; as "Reviving Islam's Classical Heritage" in *The Straits Times* [Singapore], 15 July 2006; as "Reviving Shi`ite Intellectual Heritage in Islam" in *ISN Security Watch* [Zurich, Switzerland], 24 July 2006, available online at www.isn.ethz.ch/news/sw/details.cfm?ID=16362, accessed on 3 November 2006, and under the same title in *Ahlul Bayt Islamic Mission*, 7 July 2006, apparently a moderate U.K.-based Shi'ite website, available online at www.aimislam.com/forums/lofiversion/index.php?t404.html, accessed on 3 November 2006.

questioned. As shall be elaborated later, the reassertion of traditional leadership by the seminaries and the most senior Shi'ite scholars might be able to contribute towards diffusing the current crisis in Iraq.

However, before proceeding—and in order to anticipate criticism—I should like to clarify that I have tried to approach the issue of the future course of Iraqi Shi'ism from several perspectives: the bulk of this position paper is thought to provide an institutional and historical survey—and this not only because of certain personal preferences of this writer who is basically a historian of Islam. I would like to argue that in order to understand the current state of affairs and in terms of arriving at realistic solutions for the foreseeable future, a somewhat more comprehensive, less sensational understanding of Shi'ism and its multi-facet character—differing from one country to another—might be advisable.

To some readers, the distinction between quietist Iraqi Shi'ism on the one hand and activist, politically assertive Shi'ism in Iran on the other may appear a bit overdrawn, and I agree to this to a certain extent. Nevertheless, it is also true that within Twelver Shi'ism, there have always existed both of those tendencies side by side. In the view of this writer, however, the explicit millenarian aspect of Twelver Shi'ism—the expected return of the final Mahdi Saviour-Imam at the "End of Time"—a time which is thought by the majority of the faithful to be decided by God alone—seemed to have contributed to political quietism—at least among the Iraqi Shi'ites during the larger part of their history. Needless to say, it is the prerogative of the scholar to differ on the interpretation of facts. Compared with the historical-institutional part, the paper's closing section might be considered by some as a break in the narrative as it also makes reference to the recent advice given by the Iraq Study Group to the U.S. Administration, for instance. However, I was just trying to make

those historical issues relevant to the current discourse. The main point of this paper is intended to express the conviction of its writer that any solution plan for Iraq that disregards the role and particular characteristics of Iraqi Shi'ism might be doomed to fail.

Najaf and the first Shi'ite *hawzah*

We shall begin with a brief survey on the genesis of the *hawzah*, focusing on Najaf, before turning to the role to be played by the Shi'ite seminaries in contemporary Iraq. Here, the issues to be touched upon shall be as follows: Can their curriculum be adjusted to the needs of the present times? Is there a role for Shi'ite seminaries beyond the Shi'ite community? Can they contribute to a fostering of a climate of moderation? Will they be able to reassert their leadership that had been lost to Qom in neighbouring Iran during the last decades of the 20th century? The latter in particular had been one of the results of the repression under the Saddam regime and the establishment of an Islamic theocracy in Iran. As I have tried to show elsewhere,[5] it should not be forgotten that the fate of Shi'ite Islam in Iraq and other parts of the Middle East has also a bearing on Southeast Asia, which is home to a steadily increasing number of converts from Sunnism to Shi'ism.

In order to understand the challenges that lie ahead of Iraq's Shi'ite community, we have to take a look at some of the basic features and characteristics of Shi'ite seminaries, and their role in the past, as the different historical developments

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[5] See my forthcoming *Shi'ite Islam in Southeast Asia. Basic Concepts, Cultural and Historical Aspects, Contemporary Implications*, as well as my "Shi'ites in Southeast Asia" in *Encyclopedia Iranica,* available online at www.iranica.com/newsite/articles/supp4/ShiitesSEAsia.html, accessed on 23 November 2006. See also my "Facets of Shi'ite Islam in Contemporary Southeast Asia (I): Thailand and Indonesia" in *IDSS Working Paper* No. 120, and "Facets of Shi'ite Islam in Contemporary Southeast Asia (II): Malaysia and Singapore" in *IDSS Working Paper* No. 121 (both December 2006, Singapore, Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies), available online at www.rsis.edu.sg/publications.

of Sunnism and Shi'ism have also been reflected in the evolution of their respective educational systems.[6]

In the 11th century CE, and perhaps in order to counter the threat of rivalling Ismāʿīlī "Sevener" Shi'ism,[7] the Sunnite Abbasid caliphs in Baghdad, together with their Turkic Seljuk protectors, established state-sponsored *madrasahs*, literally "schools", throughout their empire.[8] Sevener Shi'ism—in the form of the Egypt-based counter caliphate of the Ismāʿīlī Fatimids—did not acknowledge orthodox Sunnite rule. The Ismāʿīlī philosophical approach to several issues of Islamic theology exercised considerable intellectual influence (and, in fact, stimulus) in the Muslim world of that time. The Fatimids were not only the founders of the city of Cairo (Arab. *al-Qāhirah*, the Victorious), but they also established what may be called Islam's first university, Al-Azhar, which exists until today—although as a leading *Sunnite* institution.

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[6] For useful surveys, see Jawdat al-Qazwini, "The School of Najaf" in Faleh Abdul-Jaber (Ed.), *Ayatollahs, Sufis and Ideologues. State, Religion and Social Movements in Iraq*, London, 2002; Fadil al-Jamali, "The Theological Colleges of Najaf" in *The Muslim World* 50, No. 1 (1960), pp. 15–22; Muhammad Mahdi al-Asifi, *Madrasat al-Najaf wa-tatawwur al-harakah al-ʿilmiyyah fiha* [The theological school of Najaf and the development of its scholarly movement; in Arabic], Najaf, 1964; Ali al-Bahadili, *Al-Hawzah al-ʿilmiyyah fi'l-Najaf al-Ashraf, 1339-1401/1920-1980* [The seminaries in Holy Najaf, 1339–1401/1920–1980; in Arabic], Beirut, 1993. For a good survey on the Shi'ite seminaries in Karbala', see Nur al-Din Shahrudi, *Ta'rikh al-harakah al-ʿilmiyyah fi Karbala'* [History of the scholarly movement in Karbala'; in Arabic], Beirut, 1990. Less academic but by no means less interesting are the following online resources from Shi'ite communities: JANA [Jafria Organization of North America], "A Brief History of the *Hawza*" in *Alnoor*, 21, No. 1 (1 January 2001), available online at www.jana.org/al-noor/page3.html, accessed on 24 November 2006 [apparently, JANA is based in the State of New York, United States, and is mainly patronized by Pakistani Twelver Shi'ites]. A very comprehensive survey of the history of the Shi'ite seminaries in general in Arabic (unfortunately without stated sources) is available at www.moujtaba.com/alfakih/taarifhawza/nathra_t.htm, accessed on 24 November 2006.

[7] For the most comprehensive treatment of the Ismāʿīlī political and religious movement to date, see Farhad Daftary, *The Isma'ilis: Their History and Doctrines*, New York, 1992.

[8] On the genesis of the Islamic educational system, see the magisterial studies by George Makdisi, *The Rise of Humanism in Classical Islam and the Christian West. With Special Reference to Scholasticism*, Edinburgh, 1990, and especially idem, *The Rise of Colleges. Institutions of Learning in Islam and the West*, Edinburgh, 1981. See also idem "The Madrasa as a Charitable Trust and the University as a Corporation in the Middle Ages" in *Correspondance d'Orient* 2 (Actes du V[e] Congres International d'Arabisants et d'Islamisants, Brussels, 1970; idem, "Interaction Between Islam and the West" in George Makdisi and Dominique Sourdel (Eds.), *Mediaeval Education in Islam and the West*, Paris, 1977; idem, "On the Origin of the College in Islam and the West" in K.I.H. Semaan (Ed.), *Islam and the Mediaeval West: Aspects of Intercultural Relations*, Albany, 1980; idem and J. Pedersen, Art. "Madrasa" in *Encyclopedia of Islam*, new edition, Vol. 5, Leiden, 1985, pp. 1123–1113.

In short, the foundation of the state-run *madrasah* system aimed at providing the Sunnite Islamic world with a larger output of orthodox scholars and clerics, who would be able to counter the Fatimid heretical threat intellectually.[9] Famous Sunnite theologians, such as Al-Ghazali (the "Algazel" of the Latin West, d. 1111 CE), who is also particularly revered by Southeast Asian Muslims, have been teaching at these *madrasahs*, which were known throughout Seljuk-controlled Iran and Iraq as *Nizāmiyyah*, after Nizam al-Mulk, the famous and powerful Persian vizier. Initially, Sunnite *madrasahs* taught only specifically Qur'an-related subjects, such as exegesis and Arabic grammar, as well as *hadīth*,[10] the Traditions of the Prophet, although in the course of time their curriculum became more inclusive, by adding exact sciences, such as astronomy, that were deemed relevant to Islamic jurisprudence.

Twelver Shi'ites felt obliged to follow suite with the establishment of their own educational system. It would lead too far to give a detailed account in this regard. Here, it suffices to state that this establishment was the result of increasing sectarian violence between Sunnites and Twelver Shi'ites in the course of the first part of the 11th century, similar to what Iraq is currently going through. Both sects used to live side by side in Baghdad and elsewhere in Iraq.

Traditionally, Twelver Shi'ites consider Shaykh Muhammad b. al-Hasan al-Tusi (995–1067 CE),[11] an ethnic Persian from eastern Iran, as the founder or

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[9] At this place, it can only be noted in passing, that—for certain theological reasons that shall not concern us here—Twelver Shi'ite Islam, too, does not acknowledge Isma'ilis as orthodox Muslims.

[10] "Traditions", recording the sayings and doings of the Prophet Muhammad, or his *sunnah*. *Hadīth* collections are tools for establishing the *Sunnah* in Sunnite as well as Shi'ite Islam. A useful introduction to the Twelver Shi'ite approach toward *hadīth* is Saiyad Nizamuddin Ahmad, "Twelver Šī'ī *Hadiṯ*: From Tradition to Contemporary Evolution" in *Oriente moderno* 21, No. 1 (2002), pp. 125–45.

[11] See my "Rapprochement and Fealty during the Buyids and Early Saljuqs: The Life and Times of Muhammad ibn al-Hasan al-Tusi" in *Islamic Studies* 40, No. 2 (Summer 2001), pp. 273–96. On the significance of Tusi within the Twelver Shi'ite tradition; see also the excellent article by Rasul Ja'fariyan, "Four Centuries of Influence of Iraqî Shî'ism on Pre-Safavid Iran" in *Message of Thaqalayn* 4, No. 2 (Summer 1998), available online at http://al-islam.org/mot/iraqishiism/, accessed on 29 November 2006. Al-Islam.org is a Shi'ite website and as such is part of the Ahlul Bayt Digital

developer of the Shi'ite educational system. Until today, they revere him as one of the compilers of their four canonical collections of *hadīth*, comparable in this regard to the status enjoyed by Bukhari and Muslim among the Sunnites. The foundation of the seminaries (*hawzah*) of Najaf is usually ascribed to Shaykh Tusi.[12] Tusi was first based in Baghdad, but after the burning and looting of his house and library by Sunnite mob, he moved to the town of Najaf, about 160 kilometres south of the caliphate capital. Najaf houses the tomb of 'Ali b. Abi Talib (d. 661 CE), the first Shi'ite Imam and cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Mohammad. 'Ali is also revered as the fourth orthodox caliph by the Sunnites (r. 656–661 CE).

Today, Najaf, situated on high plateau over a desert-like plain, has a population of about half a million. It lies about 160 kilometres south of the capital Baghdad and about 60 kilometres to the south of Hillah, which, too, had been an important Shi'ite study centre in the past. During Tusi's time, Najaf was far away enough from the tensed atmosphere of Baghdad with its communal violence, and its status as a site sacred to both, Sunnites and Shi'ites, appears to have offered a higher level of security for Tusi and the steadily increasing number of his students. It is worth to note that Najaf also contains one of the largest cemeteries in the world—the *wādī al-salām* or Valley of Peace. According to a belief that is widespread among the

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Islamic Library Project, which shall be referred to again further below. Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq*, pp. 238–68, offers a useful and concise survey of the origin and historical development of the Shi'ite seminaries in Iraq. With regard to the significance of the 10th and 11th centuries for the future development of Twelver Shi'ism, see John Donohue, *The Buwayhid Dynasty in Iraq 334H/945 to 403H/1012: Shaping Institutions for the Future*, Leiden, 2003, and Anrew Newman, *The Formative Period of Shi'i Law: Hadith as Discourse Between Qum and Baghdad*, Richmond, Surrey, U.K., 2000.

[12] Meir Litvak, "Shi'ite Seminaries in Iraq" in *Encyclopedia Iranica*, available online at www.iranica.com/newsite/articles/ot_grp5/ot_shiites iraq_20050106.html, accessed on 21 November 2006.

Shi'ites, any believer laid to rest here will enter Paradise,[13] and they still consider it a privilege to be buried here.

As in the case of Karbala' and the other Shi'ite holy sites in Iraq, Najaf, too, is during most of the year the pilgrimage destination of hundred-thousands of Shi'ites from all over the Islamic world. Throughout Islamic history and up to the present, ordinary pilgrims and even heads of state—Shi'ite and even Sunnite ones—made generous donations to the shrine. These can be sizeable, among them being countless great works of art, precious rugs, and gold artefacts. The magnificent golden domes, for instance, that grace the shrines of the most eminent Shi'ite shrines in Iraq[14] (and of those in Mashhad and Qom, in neighbouring Iran, for that matter) have been paid for by rulers of Iran's Shi'ite Safavid and Qajar dynasties, during the 16th–18th and 18th–19th centuries, respectively.[15] Especially in Iran, state-appointed shrine administrators or custodians, known as *mutawallīs*, enjoyed particular power.[16]

More significantly, however, the shrine treasury also holds valuable financial assets that had been accumulated over the course of a millennium. Throughout the Islamic part of Iraqi history, the governments of the day tried to put their hands on those funds, especially after the establishment of a more or less secular republican

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[13] Hamid Algar, "'Atabāt" in *Encyclopedia Iranica*, available online at www.iranica.com/newsite/articles/v2f8/v2f8a078.html, accessed on 21 November 2006.

[14] The Shi'ite shrine cities in Iraq are known in Arabic as *'atabāt*, "thresholds". Apart from Najaf, Iraq's other major shrine cities are Karbala', Kazimayn (now part of the Baghdad metropolitan area) and Samarra'; see Algar, "'Atabāt". See also World Organization for Islamic Services (Ed.), *A Brief History of the Fourteen Infallibles*, Tehran, 1984. This book contains, apart from related pictorial material and biographical data, also hagiographical accounts of the lives of the Imams from the Shi'ite perspective, which nevertheless might be useful in terms of gaining an idea of the meaning of those shrines in Shi'ite faith and practice. For a list that includes information about additional Shi'ite sites in Iraq, see also Yitzhak Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq*, Princeton, 1994, pp. 285–86, Appendix 2.

[15] Algar, "'Atabāt".

[16] On some exemplary aspects related to the administration of the Shi'ite shrines in neighbouring Iran during the Safavid period (1501–1722), see my *Mirza Rafi'a's Dastur al-Muluk: A Manual of Later Safavid Administration. Annotated English Translation, Comments on the Offices and Services, and Facsimile of the Unique Persian Manuscript*, Kuala Lumpur, 2002, pp. 79–86 and 256–68 (with detailed bibliographical references), and my "Administrators of Sacred Ground: *Mutavallis* in the Late Safavid Manual *Dastur al-Muluk*" in *Journal of Shi'ite Islamic Studies* 2, No. 2 (2007, in press).

system following the overthrow of the monarchy in 1958. Thus, it can be understood easily why the shrine's enormous financial resources had been an unspoken issue in much of the dispute over the control of Najaf after the 2003 Anglo-American invasion of the country. In August 2004, for instance, during the violent conflict caused by the occupation of the shrine complex by Muqtada al-Sadr and his militant followers, it was widely believed that al-Sadr was in reality after the control of those funds. Thus the reason for Grand Ayatollah Sistani's refusal to receive the shrine's keys until the compound was completely evacuated of al-Sadr's supporters and until Sistani's officials had inspected that nothing there was missing.[17]
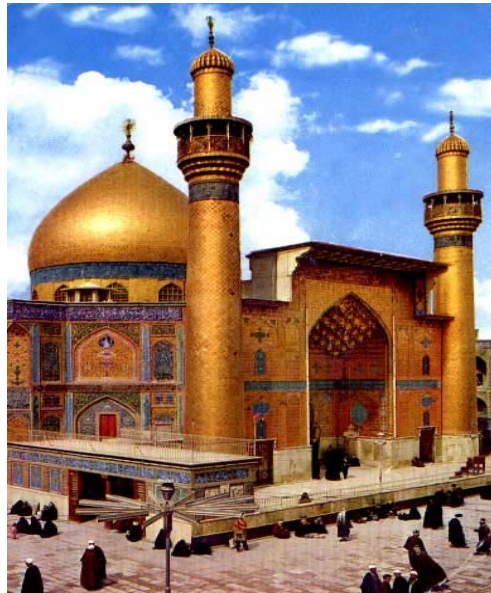
Figure 2

The shrine and mosque complex housing the tomb of the first

Shi'ite Imam 'Ali b. Abi Talib (d. 661 CE) in Najaf, Iraq. 'Ali is

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[17] Naseer Nouri and Rajiv Chandrasekaran, "Militia Clings to Najaf Shrine. Shiite Factions Fail to Agree on Terms for a Handover" in *Washington Post*, 22 August 2004, p. A01, available online at www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A22296-2004Aug21.html, accessed on 23 November 2006.

also revered by the Sunnites as the forth of their Rightly Guided

Caliphs.[18]

It is particularly remarkable that the *hawzah* was able to survive under rapidly

changing—mostly Sunnite—regimes.[19] In this regard, it shared the fate of Iraq as a

whole, which was since the coming of Islam in the 7th century CE. Iraq was mostly

part of one of the larger Sunnite entities—from the 11th-century Seljuks to the

Mongols in the 14th century (when the town of Hillah was temporarily superseding

Najaf in significance as centre of Shi'ite scholarship), down to the Ottoman empire,

which collapsed in the wake of World War I. During all those periods, Najaf, as well

as Karbala', enjoyed often a quasi-autonomous status that was for the most part

respected by the Sunnite rulers of the day. As Iraq houses several of the tombs of the

Shi'ite Twelve Imams, other Iraqi cities apart from Najaf, (especially the *'atabāt* or

shrine cities Karbala', Samarra' and Kazimayn, now a part of Baghdad), also

established their own *hawzah*s soon after and in close cooperation with Najaf.

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[18]   Source: website   of   Ayatollah   Sistani,   available   online   at
www.sistani.org/html/eng/main/index.php?page=10&lang=eng&part=1, accessed on 5 November
2006.
        [19] It is remarkable that so far studies in Western languages on the Shi'ite seminaries are rather
hard to come by. A useful and comprehensive bibliography on this subject is to be found in an
important article by Meir Litvak: see his already referred to "Shi'ite Seminaries in Iraq". Another
article by Litvak, "Shi'ites of Iraq" in *Encyclopedia Iranica*, available online at
www.iranica.com/newsite/articles/ot_grp7/ot_iraq_shiite_20050113.html, accessed on 21 November
2006, provides also good background reading on the history of Shi'ism in Iraq in general.

Figure 3

Largest extent of the Safavid Empire (highlighted) in the early 16th century, and again in the early 17th century. As can be seen, the Shi'ite shrine cities of Iraq have been part of the Safavid dominions. The borders indicated are those of our own times.[20]

Twice, during parts of the 16th and 17th centuries, the Shi'ite Safavid shahs of neighbouring Iran were able to control Iraq and its Shi'ite shrine cities, and furnished them with the splendid golden domes that are until today fascinating to visitors. It should be kept in mind that since 1501, the Safavids introduced Twelver Shi'ism as the official creed throughout their realm, a process that took several decades. The special connection between Iraq and Iran in terms of exchange of Shi'ite scholars and students and the existence of entire dynasties of clerics that were active on both sides of the border dates back to the Safavid period (1501–1722).[21]

In the 18th century, following the decline of the once powerful Safavid empire, the *'atabāt* lost some of their previous importance as one of the training and recruiting

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[20] Source: Wikipedia art. "Safavid dynasty", available online at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:LocationSafavid.PNG, accessed on 5 November 2006).

[21] For an account of the living conditions of scholars and students during that period, see Devin Stewart, "The Humour of the Scholars: The Autobiography of Ni'mat Allāh al-Jazā'irī" in *Iranian Studies* 22, No. 4 (1989), pp. 47–81.

centres for Iran's Shi'ite clerics and recipients of large amounts of royal financial support. However, the later part of the 18th century witnessed severe quarrels among Shi'ite scholars based in Iraq for mainly theological reasons—a conflict that became known as the *Akhbārī-Usūlī* conflict and that was to become crucial for the further ideological development of Twelver Shi'ism.[22] It was that particular period, and especially the following 19th century, which shaped Twelver Shi'ism into as we know it today—a strongly clerical hierarchy and an organizational structure with a clear-cut nomenclatura.[23] The same period saw also close interaction between clerics residing in Iraq and with their peers in neighbouring Iran. As a matter of fact, in the 19th century, the shrine cities of Najaf and Karbala' in Ottoman-controlled Iraq reemerged as the most important Shi'ite centres of learning. Moreover, it should be emphasized that the prevailing atmosphere in those *'atabāt* was always international, with a strong Iranian flavour and cultural influence, as many of the scholars and students residing there originated from Iran. As I have also pointed out elsewhere,[24] up to the early 20th century, that is to say, during Iran's Constitutional Revolution of 1906 and in the early aftermath of the First Word War, Najaf and the other Shi'ite seminaries in Iraq enjoyed the highest respect among the Twelver Shi'ite faithful, and its Shi'ite clergy intervened often in the political discourse in neighbouring Iran.[25]

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[22] For further elaboration on this issue and for suggested further reading, see my "Twelver Shi'ite Islam: Conceptual and Practical Aspects" in *IDSS Working Paper* 114/2006, available online at www.ntu.edu.sg/rsis/publications/WorkingPapers/WP114.pdf, accessed on 24 November 2006, pp. 22–23. For a detailed treatment, see also Andrew Newman, "The Nature of the Akhbari/Usuli Dispute in Late-Safawid Iran. Part One: Abdallah al-Samahiji's 'Munyat al-Mumarisin'" in *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 55, No. 1 (1992), pp. 22–51, and idem, "The Nature of the Akhbari/Usuli Dispute in Late-Safawid Iran. Part Two: The Conflict Reassessed" in *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 55, No. 2 (1992), pp. 250–61;

[23] A very useful study for the understanding of the evolution of a Twelver Shi'ite clerical hierarchy is Ahmad Kazemi-Moussavi, *Religious Authority in Shi'ite Islam. From the Office of Mufti to the Institution of Marja'*, Kuala Lumpur, 1996. See also Linda S. Walbridge (Ed.), *The Most Learned of the Shi'a. The Institution of the Marja' Taqlid*, Oxford, 2001.

[24] For a brief overview, see my "Twelver Shi'ite Islam: Conceptual and Practical Aspects", p. 23.

[25] Discussed in some detail in Nikkie Keddie, "The Roots of the Ulama's Power in Modern Iran" in *Studia Islamica* 29 (1969), pp. 31–53; eadem, *Roots of Revolution: An Interpretive History of*

It is crucial to be aware of those historical dimensions and to have a thorough understanding of the significance of 19th century developments within Twelver Shi'ism in order to arrive at some sort of answer to the question of which centre of Shi'ite learning will be able to assert its supreme leadership over the Shi'ite faithful in the mid-range future—Iranian Qom or rather quietist Najaf.[26] In the past, the Safavids, who had claimed religious legitimacy (due to their claim of descent from the Prophet, their zeal for the Shi'ite cause in general, and several other socio-political factors that shall not concern us here), enjoyed an aura of sanctity among wider strata of their subjects.[27] However, the succeeding Qajar dynasty (r. 1781–1925),[28] as well as the Pahlavis (deposed by the 1979 revolution), lacked this aura and their rule was largely considered as mere kingship. The Qajars in particular were at no point of time able to exert their power thoroughly over the entire country. This inherent weakness of Qajar rule enabled leading Shi'ite clerics of mostly Iranian descent, based in neighbouring Ottoman-controlled Iraq, to fill the power vacuum and to meddle into Iranian affairs.[29]

Modern Iran, New Haven and London, 1981; eadem, *Religion and Politcs in Iran. Shi'ism from Quietism to Revolution*, New Haven and London, 1983; Abdul-Hadi Hairi, "Why did the 'Ulamā' Participate in the Persian Constitutional Revolution 1905–1909?" in *Die Welt des Islams* 17 (1976–77), pp. 127–54; idem, *Shi'ism and Constitutionalism in Iran. A Study of the Role Played by the Persian Residents in Iraq in Iranian Politics*, Leiden, 1977; idem, "Shaykh Fazl Allah Nuri's Refutation of the Idea of Constitutionalism" in *Middle Eastern Studies* 13, No. 3 (October 1977), pp. 327–39.

[26] For a comprehensive survey, see Litvak, *Shi'i Scholars of Nineteenth-Century Iraq. The 'ulama' of Najaf and Karbala'*, idem, "Shi'ites of Iraq", idem, "The Finances of the *'Ulamā'* Communities of Najaf and Karbalā' in the 19th Century" in *Die Welt des Islams* 40, No. 1 (2000), pp. 41–66.

[27] Marcinkowski, *Mirza Rafi'a's Dastur al-Muluk*, pp. 42–43; John Perry, "The Last Safavids, 1722–1773" in *Iran* 9 (1971), pp. 59–69.

[28] For good insights in the Qajar period, see the seminal studies by Ann K. S. Lambton (Ed.), *Qajar Persia: Eleven Studies*, London, 1987; Clifford Edmund Bosworth and Carole Hillenbrand (Eds.), *Qajar Iran: Political, Social and Cultural Change, 1800–1925*, Costa Mesa , CA, 1992; and Nikki Keddie, *Qajar Iran and the Rise of Reza Khan 1796–1925*, Costa Mesa , CA, 1999.

[29] This issue has been dealt with most comprehensively by Abdul-Hadi Hairi in his *Shi'ism and Constitutionalism in Iran. A Study of the Role Played by the Persian Residents in Iraq in Iranian Politics*, Leiden, 1977.

The usurpation of imperial power by the Pahlavis in Iran in the 1920s, the installation of the British-run Hashemite monarchy in Iraq during about the same period, and in particular the establishment of the secular Iraqi Republic in the aftermath of the bloody 1958 military coup, changed this pattern. Both regimes—the Pahlavis in Iran as well as the various brands of Iraqi military dictatorship from the 1960s onwards—saw themselves as modernizers, introducing new secular legislation (such as land reform, alphabetization campaigns, and voting rights for women). Although these changes were seen as a challenge to their authority by the Shi'ite clergy, those measures were initially perceived as progressive even by the majority of the Shi'ites in both countries.

This process of temporary estrangement between the clergy and the Shi'ite lay people lasted in Iran up to the early 1970s when unemployment and economic slowdown plagued Pahlavi Iran, leading to widespread dissatisfaction and finally revolution. In Iraq, the takeover by the Baath regime in 1968 and the brutal terror against any form of Shi'ite cultural or religious expression led to increasing unrest and transformation (and politicization) of traditional Shi'ite leadership.[30]

With Najaf facing a decline in significance, the city of Qom in Iran rose to prominence. Qom remains to date as the primary centre of traditional Islamic learning for Twelver Shi'ites today. This decline of Najaf, followed by the revival of the *hawzah* in Qom immediately after World War II, is usually described as the result of the activities by Qom-based Grand Ayatollah Sayyid Husayn Borujerdi, one of the

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[30] See on this crucial process Joyce N. Wiley, *The Islamic Movements of the Iraqi Shi'ites*, Boulder CO, 1992; Amatzia Baram, "Two Roads to Revolutionary Shi'ite Fundamentalism in Iraq" in Martin E. Marty and Scott Appelby (Ed.), *Accounting for Fundamentalism: The Dynamic Character of Movements*, Chicago, 1994, pp. 531–90; Hanna Battatu, "Iraq's Underground Shi'a Movements: Characteristics, Causes and Prospects" in *Middle East Journal* 35, No. 4 (1981), pp. 578–94; Ofra Bengio, "Shi'is and Politics in Ba'thi Iraq" in *Middle Eastern Studies* 21, No. 1 (1985), pp. 1–14; Chibli Mallat, *The Renewal of Islamic Law, Muhammad Baqer as-Sadr, Najaf and the Shi'i International*, Cambridge, 1993; Abdul-Jabar, *The Shi'`ite Movement in Iraq*, London, 2005; idem (Ed.), *Ayatollahs, Sufis and Ideologues. State, Religion and Social Movements in Iraq*, London, 2002; Yitzhak Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq*, Princeton, 1994.

most important teachers of Ayatollah Khomeini and, until his death in 1961, considered the Supreme *marja'* (or most senior religious authority) by the majority of the Twelver Shi'ites.[31] It is worth mentioning at this point that the rather quietist Borujerdi had nevertheless exercised a strong intellectual influence on some of the theoreticians of Iran's 1979 revolution, among them Ayatollah Mutahhari (assassinated in 1980).[32] It was Borujerdi who sent Imam Musa Al-Sadr[33] to Lebanon to emerge as the revered leader of the Shi'ites there, and it was the same Borujerdi who established in the 1950s cordial relations with Shaykh Mahmud Shaltut, the head of Egypt's Sunnite Al-Azhar University.[34]

Moreover, among the wider public, it is often forgotten that Ayatollah Khomeini spent the time from 1965 to 1978 in Najaf, after he was exiled from Iran by the Pahlavi regime following the 1963 riots which were directed against the Shah's reforms known as White Revolution. It was on the insistence of the Shah regime that Saddam expelled him to France just one year prior to the Iranian revolution. During his time at Najaf, Khomeini developed his concept of vicegerency of the jurisprudent, or of a supposed leading political rule for the Shi'ite clergy—a concept known in Persian and Arabic as *velāyat-e faqīh* or *wilāyat al-faqīh,* respectively)—for which there does not exist much precedence in early, classical Twelver Shi'ite scholarship and historical experience.

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[31] Moojan Momen, *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam*, New Haven and London, p. 247 f.

[32] See Mahmoud Davari, *The Political Thought of Ayatollah Murtaza Mutahhari. An Iranian Theoretician of the Islamic State*, London, 2005.

[33] See the very interesting account on him by Fouad Ajami, *The Vanished Imam Musa al-Sadr and the Shi'a of Lebanon*, Ithaca and London, 1986.

[34] On the issue of Shaltūt and Sunnite-Shi'ite rapprochement during the 1950s, see F. R. C. Bagley, "The Azhar and Shiism" in *Muslim World* 50 (1960), pp. 122–29, and K. Zebiri, "Shaykh Mahmud Shaltut: Between Tradition and Modernity" in *Journal of Islamic Studies* 2, No. 2 (1991), pp. 210–24. On Shaltut's famous "Shi'ite-friendly" *fatwa* and its Arabic text with English translation,z see "Al-Azhar Verdict (*Fatwa*) on the Shia", available online at www.geocities.com/Tokyo/Spa/7220/azhar.html (accessed on 3 July 2006).

However, in spite of the decline of the Iraqi seminaries in terms of numbers of scholars and students, due to the suppression by the Baath, the *hawzah* of Najaf was nevertheless able to maintain its intellectual significance. Here, it can only be noted in passing that Grand Ayatollah Sayyid Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr, for instance, tried to develop—independently from (and earlier than) Khomeini—an Islamic model that would have aimed at reconciling Western-dominated modernity with classical Shi'ite thought. The Iraqi Baath regime felt threatened and Saddam Hussein resolved to kill him in 1980.[35]

Contrary to what is usually held by the wider public, the outlook of the revived *hawzah* of Qom can thus be considered somewhat more internationalic. Qom is not only housing seminaries of the *madrasah*-type with the usual traditional curriculum. The Imam Khomeini Education and Research Institute, for instance, also offers courses and degrees of higher learning in several secular subjects, such as education, politics, sociology, psychology, economics and management, apart from the specifically Islamic subjects.[36] Its academic staff also includes scholars from the Western world, such as American-born convert Professor Muhammad Legenhausen, who teaches Western and Islamic philosophy. Since 2001, distance learning (from inside Iran only at the time of writing), too, is offered, which is rather unusual from the perspective of traditional Islamic education. On the other hand, despite this quasi-liberal outlook, it is rather odd that the institute is headed by Ayatollah Mesbah-Yazdi, considered one of the most extremist conservatives in the contemporary Iranian political arena and spiritual mentor of the country's current president,

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[35] Recently, Lebanese scholar-turned-politician Chibli Mallat published a fascinating study on al-Sadr; see his *The Renewal of Islamic Law: Muhammad Baqer as-Sadr, Najaf and the Shi'i International*, Cambridge, U.K., 2004. Sayyid Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr was the father-in-law of Muqtada al-Sadr and cousin of both Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr and Imam Musa al-Sadr.

[36] The website of the "Qabas" Imam Khomeini Education and Research Institute is available online at www.qabas.net/, accessed on 27 November 2006.

Mahmud Ahmadinezhad. At any rate, the case of this institution has been mentioned here only in order to demonstrate that Shi'ite education in Iran has gone through some changes in the course of the recent years, in particular since the end of the 1980–1988 war with Iraq. However, in spite of all those developments and the fact that Qom, too, happened to be an ancient centre of Shi'ite learning in its own right, dating back to the early 10th century CE,[37] it should be kept in mind that in Shi'ite conscientiousness the *'atabāt* in Iraq have never lost their aura of sanctity as the birth place of Shi'ism and the burial place of several of the most revered Imams.

Within the Iraqi context, in turn, the main reason for the silence of the Najaf seminaries can be seen in the extreme repression faced by the Shi'ite clergy under the Baathist Saddam regime. I myself recall that, that during a visit to Najaf in 1989, I hardly saw any Shi'ite cleric donning his characteristic garb. I was told that this was out of fear. Moreover, as I also could see for myself, the late Grand Ayatollah Sayyid Abu'l-Qasim al-Khu'i (1899–1992), according to many the supreme Shi'ite *marja'* from the 1970s onwards, was kept under house arrest. Even the performance of festivals or mourning ceremonies with a particularly Shi'ite flavour had been banned under the Baath regime, as those gatherings attracted always thousands of people and were thus considered dangerous hotspots of violent opposition. It should be noted that the performance of most of those ceremonies had been tolerated for centuries by Sunnite authorities that ruled Iraq prior to the Saddam regime, and that it had been the Buyid dynasty who had introduced them for the first time about a millennium ago.[38] In the light of those circumstances, the outburst of Shi'ite pride, self-

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[37] Situated about 150 kilometres south of the Iranian capital Tehran. See also Jean Calmard, "Ḳum" in *Encyclopedia of Islam*, new edition, Vol. 5, Leiden, 1985, pp. 369–72.

[38] See my "The Buyid Domination as the Historical Background for the Flourishing of Muslim Scholarship During the 4th/10th Centuries" *Iqbal Review* 45, No. 4 (October 2004), pp. 83–99, where further references are to be found.

confidence and conscientiousness after the liberation of the country in 2003 might appear understandable to a certain extent.

In the light of centuries of Shi'ite history and tradition, the phenomenon of the decline of Najaf and the rise of Qom during the second half of the 20th century must not necessarily mean that it is irreversible. To the mind of this writer, it is not only a nationalistically motivated drive towards hegemony over the Middle Eastern region but also awareness (and fear) of a resurgence of quietist Najaf as the true and original centre of Shi'ite Islam that determines the current Iraq policy of Tehran. Keeping in mind that the only *raison d'être* of the Iranian regime is its claim to be the guardian of true (Shi'ite) Islam, a revival of the *hawzah* in Najaf (for which a politically stable Iraq would be a major condition) would not be desirable to Tehran as it would threaten its assertion to represent undiluted, uncompromising politicized Shi'ism.[39] Interpretations by other scholars and observers on this might differ. However, as I was trying to show above, due to the essential millenarian nature of Twelver Shi'ism which is awaiting the return of the Hidden Imam by the command of God alone, any kind of political model during his absence (including a Shi'ite one) is, strictly speaking, considered unsanctioned as no one is thought to have access to him in order to receive instruction.

Tehran would thus *not* be seriously interested in supporting in the long run moderate Shi'ite Iraqi scholars with a quietist background. The same applies in terms of Iranian support for fundamentalist Shi'ite preachers of the Muqtada al-Sadr type— as long as the latter pursues a somewhat too independent policy from Tehran. Thus, the nature of Iran's future influence in Iraq remains to be seen. This ambivalent attitude of Tehran and its particular interest in maintaining some sort of instability

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[39] See also the excellent article for the German weekly newspaper *Die Zeit* by Faraj Sarkohi (translated by Sabine Kalinock), "Heilige Wende", available online at www.zeit.de/2004/12/Konkurrenz, accessed on 27 November 2006 [in German].

among the Iraqi Shi'ites should be considered a serious obstacle when trying to find a future for Iraq.

So far, we have covered some basic historical considerations. Next, we shall have a glance at some major characteristics of the Shi'ite seminaries in Najaf before proceeding to the issue of their political significance.

Inside the *Hawzah*

As already pointed out earlier, the Arabic term *al-hawzah*[40] refers to a traditional Islamic school of higher learning. However, it is a term used mostly by the Shi'ites. Although both the Shi'ite as well as Sunnite educational systems go back to almost the same period—i.e. the 11th century CE, as already mentioned earlier—there are several distinctive characteristics with regard to the Shi'ite *hawzah*:

> Unlike other centres of religious learning in the Muslim world, the *hawzāt* [Arabic plural of *hawzah*] in the *'Atabāt* were not set up or sustained on a regular basis by political elites in order to provide them with legitimacy and juridical manpower. Therefore, they did not serve primarily as an arena for stipendiary posts (*mansab,* plural: *manāseb*), in which notables exploited knowledge primarily as a form of capital in order to acquire social and political distinction. Instead, they grew "from below" by the efforts of the *ulama* themselves, serving primarily as centres for teaching and scholarship. They were sustained chiefly by

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[40] Originally, the Arabic word *al-hawzah* denotes a place from where something is gained, acquired, or obtained. The acquisition here refers to knowledge—religious knowledge in particular. Within the Shi'ite context, *al-hawzah* is usually translated into English as "Shi'ite seminaries". The expression *hawzah* is not particular to Iraq alone—the seminaries in Qom, too, are known in Persian under the same term.

the canonical *khoms* (the fifth) and *zakāt* taxes, and by donations from faithful, rather than by landed endowments (*awqāf*). This had significant ramifications for many other aspects of life there, ranging from the structure of leadership to the relations between teachers and students. Consequently, the Shi'ite study centres lacked a formal and centralized organization or religious hierarchy that had a bearing on the curriculum of studies, finance, and administration. This contrasted strikingly with the situation of the Ottoman learned establishment and with the situation of the *ulama* in Persia. To sum up, teaching and scholarly production, rather than the administration of justice or political/communal leadership, were the hallmarks of the communities of Shi'ite ulama in the *'Atabāt*.[41]

Most of the traditional subjects taught at the Shi'ite seminaries are interconnected and they supplement each other.[42] The traditional syllabus[43] includes theology (*'aqā'id*, in the sense of key items of belief, creed), formal logic *(mantiq,* in essence Aristotelian), principles of jurisprudence (*usūl al-fiqh*), jurisprudence proper (*fiqh*), Qur'an exegesis (*tafsīr*) and related qur'anic studies, the study of the Traditions of the Prophet and the Twelve Imams (*'ilm al-hadīth*) and of the veracity and authenticity of their transmitters (*'ilm al-rijāl*), history (*ta'rīkh*; for the most part

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[41] Litvak, "Shi'ite Seminaries in Iraq".

[42] The above description of the basic characteristics and activities of Shi'ite seminaries is based on Esam Hikmat, "A Hawza Backgrounder" in *Iraq Today*, available online at www.iraq-today.com/article.php?id=1133&sp=&searchstring=&section=15, accessed on 28 August 2006, as well as on observations during my own stay in Qom, Iran (1984–1986). My experiences there might resemble closely those of the students in Najaf, which had also been confirmed to me in personal communications by several alumni of the Najaf *hawzah*.

[43] For a very detailed description of the topics and books traditionally taught at Shi'ite seminaries, see "Hawza-Advanced Islamic Studies. A Beginner's Guide to Hawza Studies", available online at www.al-islam.org/alpha.php?sid=678417020&cat=258&alpha_id=182&t=258, accessed on 29 November 2006.

Islamic), Arabic language (*lughah*, a subject that includes also eloquence, *balāghah*, and related fields), and—in contrast to many Sunnite *madrasah*s—also Islamic philosophy (*falsafah*), and gnosis (*'irfān*). Moreover, from the very beginning, the curriculum of the Twelver Shi'ite *hawzah* included also other topics that have an impact on religion, such as mathematics (needed to calculate inheritance and for other matters related to finance and business) and astronomy (for determining the times of prayer and fasting, etc.). However, *hawzah*s today (in particular those in Iran), are also increasingly introducing secular subjects, such as psychology or Western philosophy, into their curriculum, as in the case of the above-mentioned Imam Khomeini Education and Research Institute in Qom.

As the situation in Saddam's Iraq had not been congenial for the flourishing of the *hawzah* of Najaf, the late Grand Ayatollah Sayyid Abu'l-Qasim al-Khu'i (1899–1992) then the most senior *marja'* and as such predecessor to Grand Ayatollah Sistani, became active in establishing Shi'ite institutions of higher learning outside the country, mainly through the Al-Khoei Foundation (established in 1989) which maintains a General Consultative Status with The United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). One of the results of those efforts was the foundation of the Islamic College for Advanced Studies (ICAS) in London, [44] which has since recently also a branch in Jakarta, Indonesia, a country which has witnessed the largest increase in the number of converts to Shi'ism in the last years.[45] The London branch of the ICAS college describes itself as a twinning programme kind of institution that tries "to address the challenges and opportunities offered to contemporary Muslims by globalization". It offers a BA degree that is said to be validated by Middlesex

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[44] For further information on the Islamic College for Advanced Studies (ICAS), consult its website, available online at www.islamic-college.ac.uk/, accessed on 28 November 2006.
[45] See their website, available online at www.icas-indonesia.org/, accessed on 28 November 2006.

University, whereas the Jakarta branch offers Bachelor Degrees in Islamic Studies as well as Masters Degrees in Islamic Philosophy and Islamic Mysticism, respectively. Both institutions, in London as well as in Jakarta, offer traditional and secular subjects. As related by a former Malaysian student at the London branch, both institutions are founded by Sistani, but there is no official confirmation for this. At any rate, this would imply a rather politically non-assertive and purely educational purpose of ICAS.

Coming back to Iraq, there are a number of outlets of the Najaf seminaries in several parts of the city. The *hawzah* also used to have branches in other Iraqi cities, such as Baghdad, Samarra' (apart from its Shi'ite shrine, a basically Sunnite town), and Karbala', but these were apparently shut down when Saddam Hussein came to power. After the 2003 liberation of Iraq, the Najaf seminaries were embarking on a programme to re-establish or set up new schools throughout the country, where they are intended to offer religious education not just to young men but to women and children as well. In Najaf, the biggest institution is known as Al-Akhund (the originally Persian expression *ākhund* means roughly the same as *mullah*, i.e. cleric), with about 350 students. The smallest school is known as Al-Sharbiyānī, with about 20 inmates.[46] As in the case of Iran, most of the Shi'ite seminaries in Najaf bear the name of their founder or of any eminent scholar. Again, as the case with similar establishments in Iran, the classical architectural ensemble of a Shi'ite *madrasah* surrounds a square, often with a pond in the middle for the obligatory ablutions. Also grouped around the courtyard are a library, a major study hall (often also functioning as the mosque), as well as the blocks with the student quarters (known as *hujrah*,

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[46] For the names of more Shi'ite *madrasahs* in Najaf, consult the website of Grand Ayatollah Bashir Husayn al-Najafi, available online at www.alnajafy.com/english/biography.htm (accessed on 28 November 2006. It should be noted that this quietist Indian-born scholar is considered among Iraqi Shi'ites to be a potential successor to Grand Ayatollah Sistani in the event of the latter's demise.

"cells"), as the students usually live at the school compound. Only those in advanced studies and those who are already married live outside the school. Whilst some of them may stay at a *hawzah* for decades and devote their entire lives to the study and teaching of the traditional Islamic sciences, others study for as little as three to five years at such a school and thereafter return to their hometowns as *muballigh* (missionary, preacher).

Until the late 1970s—the time when Saddam Hussein assumed full control of the Baath regime and just at the eve of the Iraq-Iran War—the *hawzah* of Najaf had also many foreign students, mostly from countries with a numerically significant Shi'ite population, such as Iran, Lebanon and the Arab countries of the Persian Gulf littoral, or the Indian subcontinent. Especially since the Iranian revolution of 1979, the seminaries in Qom, in neighbouring Iran, have also students from Southeast Asia, for most part converts from Sunnism.[47]

Some students of the seminaries in Iraq and Iran are descendants of well-known dynasties of scholars. Many others, however, especially those with a more humble family background, will be provided by the *hawzah* with lodging in a *madrasah*, as well as with pocket money, known as *shahriyyah*, or monthly stipends. Those stipends—usually just enough to meet the basic needs of the student—are paid off by the offices of leading *mujtahids* and are derived from the canonical Shi'ite taxes (among them being *khums*, the fifth, an income tax amounting to 20% of their yearly income) or from other donations by the faithful. Through their donations and especially through their choice of a particular *marja'* or Grand Ayatollah as administrator of those funds, donors have an indirect effect on his popularity among the students. In this way, Grand Ayatollahs have control over enormous funds, in spite

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[47] On some implications, see my forthcoming *Shi'ite Islam in Southeast Asia. Basic Concepts, Cultural and Historical Aspects, Contemporary Implications*.

of usually leading a rather modest and sometimes even frugal personal lifestyle. According to Baghdad-based journalist Esam Hikmat:[48]

[t]he seminary is characterized by paying special attention to its students. It does not issue certificates or licenses but is keen on developing the students' research skills and mental capacities; on increasing their cultural, juridical and philosophical information; and on providing them with a scientific and political attitude. A student, thus, assimilates from very early the *ijtihād*[49] methodology as he assumes religious ranks … until he becomes … great ayatollah or *āyatullāh al-'uzmā*.[50] This gradual process contributes to the continuous renewal of Shi'ite thought, religious speech, and the organization of the seminary itself. Some seminary scholars, however, suggested issuing scholastic certificates, conferring academic degrees, and applying a credit system in the seminary schools. A wide section of other scholars fiercely opposed these suggestions as being of Western origin and different from the Islamic culture and the cultural identity of the Shi'ite religious communities. Many expressed their fear of stagnancy as the cultural and scientific level would be moulded into fossilized formal systems and inflexible examination methods that would belittle abler non-certificate-holders. This would in turn cause

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[48] Hikmat, "A *Hawza* Backgrounder" [transliteration of Arabic terms adjusted by this writer].
[49] The Arabic term *ijtihād* can be rendered in English (admittedly, somewhat awkwardly) as "effort towards independent reasoning, based on Islamic scriptural sources".
[50] These ranks are usually known as preacher (*muballigh*), then *hujjat al-Islām* [lit. "sign of Islam"], *hujjat al-Islām wa 'l-Muslimīn* [lit. "sign of Islam and the Muslims"], and *mujtahid* [a scholar permitted to exercise *ijtihād*]. Hikmat erroneously put the *mujtahid* before the *hujjat al-Islām* in his list, although the *mujtahid* is higher-ranking.

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dangerous morale troubles that would destroy the community as a whole.

Although there exists indeed some sort of nomenclatura within the Shi'ite religious establishment[51]—a circumstance that sets Shi'ism apart from Sunnism to a certain extent—it is not as clear-cut as, let's say, the hierarchical ranks of an army. Perhaps the most distinguishing step in the career of a Shi'ite scholar is when he has reached the highest level of religious education and is considered a *mujtahid,* a position that can be compared to the prestige that is usually enjoyed by a university professor. A *mujtahid* is expected to have published a number of books in his field of specialization (in most cases, practical aspects of Islamic jurisprudence). The most senior *mujtahids* are called *marja'* or *marja' taqlīd* (example for emulation),[52] and lay Shi'ites are obliged to choose from among those living examples one scholar whom they follow in terms of the performance of their daily devotions or even business transactions. This following, peculiar to Twelver Shi'ism, is called *taqlīd* in Arabic. Apart from his qualities as a scholar, another distinctive mark of a *marja'* is the number of his followers. I have dealt with this complex issue in more detail elsewhere.[53] As any other ordinary Shi'ite believer, seminarians, too, are free to choose which *marja'* they prefer to follow and which professors they wish to study under. Each *marja'* has an office in Najaf, which is called *al-Barānī* in Najaf dialect.[54] From my own time in Iran during the mid 1980s, I recall that similar offices

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[51] See n. 23 above.

[52] In English, they are also often referred to as Grand Ayatollahs, which is a literal translation from the Arabic *Āyatullāh al-'Uzmā'*.

[53] On the position of *marja'*, the nature of their authority and the issue of *taqlīd*, see my "Twelver Shi'ite Islam: Conceptual and Practical Aspects", p. 39.

[54] The *Barānī* is originally an alley in front of the Imam 'Ali shrine in Najaf; see also Nir Rosen, "Iraq's Cleric Who Would Be Heard" in *Asia Times*, 16 August 2003, available online at www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle_East/EH16Ak01.html, accessed on 23 November 2006

in Qom distributed the *shahriyyah* to the students and had been open to them, as well as to the wider public, from morning until about sunset. At the time of writing, in late Autumn 2006, Grand Ayatollah Sistani had been considered the most senior *marja'* of the *hawzah* of Najaf, as well as in the rest of the Shi'ite world—at least outside Iran—with several million of followers.

Reasserting traditional Shi'ite leadership

The question of the supreme *marja'* brings us to the issue of the contemporary political significance of the *hawzah*. Much has been written, and continues to be written, on denominationally oriented Shi'ite political parties and movements in Iraq,[55] as well as on Shi'ite lay leadership, as embodied, for instance, in the country's current Prime Minister, Mr. Al-Maliki. However, among all those certainly important political commentaries of varying quality and competence, which might be relevant for addressing day-to-day situations, the observer faces the danger of losing sight of long-term political goals. One of those goals is certainly the pacification and subsequent healing of Iraq.

In spite of the Iranian triumphalism and *schadenfreude* in the light of Washington's current Iraq troubles, it is a fact that the majority of the world's Shi'ites is non-Iranian. It can be expected that it will be *their* voice and *their* particular interests that will prevail over Tehran's plans which are aiming at Iranian hegemony over the Middle Eastern region. In the course of the last millennium, it had been traditional Shi'ite leadership and scholarship, embodied in the *hawzah* of Najaf, to

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[55] A very good overview of Shi'ite political organizations that is still of reliance is Walter Posch, "Die irakischen Schiiten nach dem Fall Saddam Husseins" [The Iraqi Shi'ites after the fall of Saddam Hussein] in *Österreichische Militärzeitschrift* [Austrian Military Journal] (2003/6), available online at www.army.at/omz/ausgaben/artikel.php?id=157, accessed on 22 November 2006. Posch's article—although currently only available in its original German version—gains in importance as its writer, a military officer of the Austrian Armed Forces, is also a scholar in Shi'ite and Iranian Studies.

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which the faithful took recourse. To the wider public, it might come as a surprise that at least in the 1990s, many Lebanese Shi'ites, including adherents of *Hizbullāh*, had been emulating rather quietist Grand Ayatollahs in their acts of worship and other transactions. Most prominent among those quiestist Iraqi clerics was the late Grand Ayatollah Khu'i. Ayatollah Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah, born in Najaf in 1935 to a Lebanese father, was his student.[56]
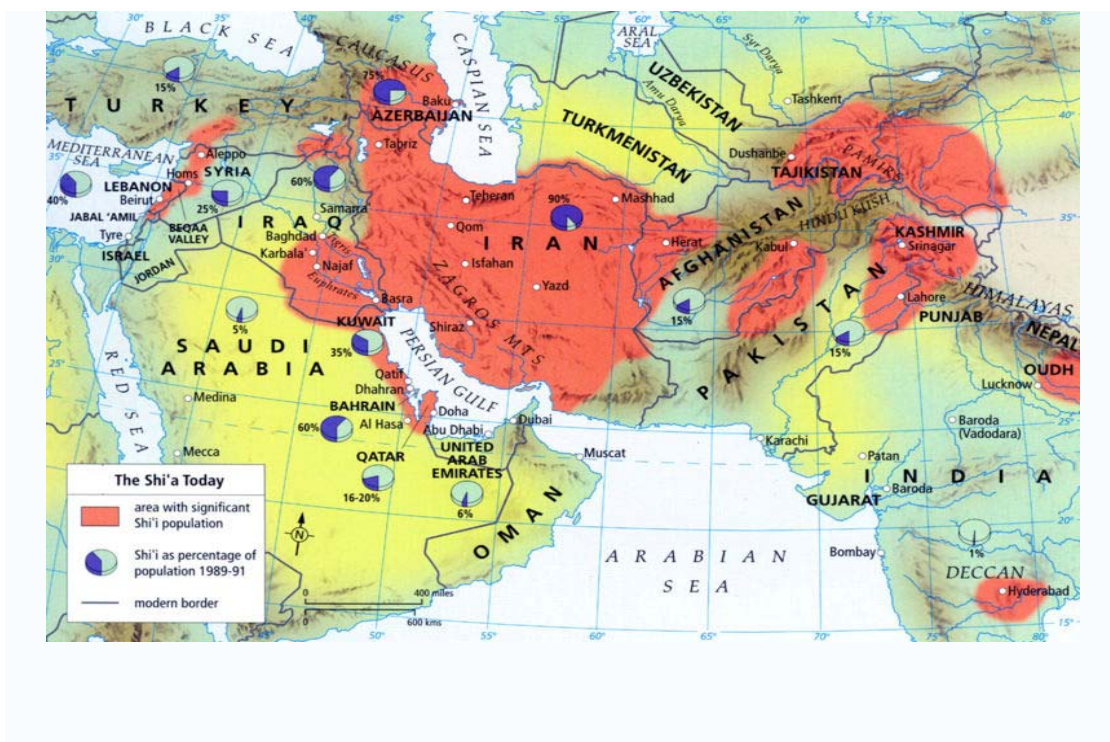
Figure 4

Geographical distribution of Twelver Shi'ites in the contemporary Middle East[57]

This means that political allegiances on the one hand and purely religious authority on the other are not necessarily of the same consequence in the minds of the ordinary Shi'ite faithful. In other words, Iran's current political quasi dogma of the vicegerency of the jurisprudent is not necessarily seen as such by non-Iranian Shi'ites,

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[56] For a recent biography of Fadlallah, see Jamal Sankari, *Fadlallah: The Making of a Radical Shi'ite Leader*, London, 2005.

[57] Source: Wikipedia art. "Shi'a Islam", available online at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shiite, accessed on 5 November 2006.

not to speak about the majority of the Iranians themselves. It can thus be foreseen that the question of traditional religious leadership as exemplified by the seminaries and their senior scholars will assume once again a crucial significance in the mid-range future.

Currently, four senior Grand Ayatollahs—including Ayatollah Sistani, who is considered the most senior of them—can be considered as the soul of Najaf's seminaries. Three of them are considered potential successors to Sistani as head of the Najaf seminaries in the event of his demise. Usually, all four of them are collectively referred to as the *hawzah 'ilmiyyah*, i.e. the religious institution per se in Najaf. However, one has to be aware of the fact that in Shi'ite Islam, there does not exist any official process of investing the potential successor to a Grand Ayatollah. The seniority is rather decided by the practice of the Shi'ite faithful themselves, as they decide whom they follow in their religious obligations.

At any rate, the first contestant is Shaykh Bashir Husayn al-Najafi, known as al-Bakistani, the Pakistani, a quite interesting figure as he is neither Iranian nor Iraqi by origin. He was not born in Pakistan, but rather in Jalindher, India, in 1942, before migrating to Pakistan.[58]

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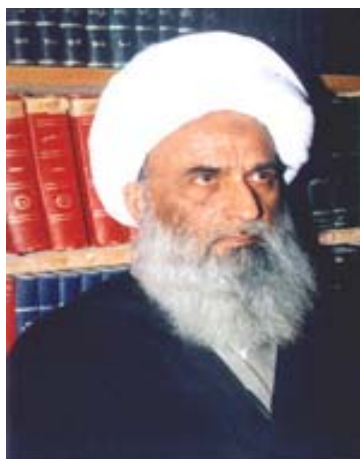
[58] Available at www.alnajafy.com/english/biography.htm, accessed on 1 December 2006.

Figure 5

Grand Ayatollah Bashir Husayn al-Najafi al-Bakistani [59]

Moreover, Bashir al-Najafi does not have the bonus of being a *sayyid*, a descendant of the Prophet. As far as this writer is aware of, most of his about 40 books, published in Arabic, Persian, Urdu, and English, are dealing with matters of Islamic law and theology, but none of them with politics. Perhaps, Bashir Husayn al-Najafi can be considered the most ecumenical or anti-sectarian candidate, as he advocates national unity beyond sectarian borders and sees the role of clerics as mere advisors and reconcilers. Apparently, he is not attached to any of the current Shi'ite political movements in Iraq. On 6 January 1999, still during the rule of the Baath regime, he and his entourage and students were attacked during prayer by a group of armed men who threw a hand grenade after them. The assault caused the deaths of three people and many more were injured, including al-Najafi, the prime target.[60] According to al-Najafi's website, he was a favourite student of late Grand Ayatollah Khu'i, who was perhaps the most learned and widely respected quietist Shi'ite scholar of the 20th century. Although al-Nafaji, too, is a leading scholar, it remains to be seen as to how he would be able to establish his leadership in Arab Iraq after the demise of Sistani.

Similarly, this also applies to the next candidate, Grand Ayatollah Shaykh Muhammad Ishaq al-Fayyadh, who was born 1930 in Ghazni, Afghanistan.

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[59] Source: website of Ayatollah Najafi, available online at www.alnajafy.com/english/biography.htm, accessed on 2 December 2006.

[60] Ibid. See also U.S. Department of State, "Country Reports on Human Rights Practices", available online at www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/1999/410.htm, accessed on 1 December 2006, where it has been suggested that the assault was part of a larger government campaign to eliminate senior Shi'ite scholars, including the quietist ones.

Figure 6

Grand Ayatollah Shaykh Muhammad Ishaq al-Fayyadh[61]

Being of ethnic Hazara extraction, he came to Najaf at the tender age of 10. He too is a quietist, politically non-assertive scholar, and he too is not a *sayyid*. On 25 September 2005, he issued a *fatwa*, in which he expressed his support for the new Iraqi constitution. This can be considered a rather rare incident, as even Sistani has chosen to remain silent on this issue. The wording of the *fatwa* in English translation deserves to be quoted here in full:

The Office of His Excellency Grand Ayatollah Shaykh Muhammad Ishaq al-Fayyadh (may his shadow persist).

Question: Peace be upon you, and the mercy and blessings of God. Give us, the abject, your considered opinion on this question: What is the opinion of Your Excellency concerning participation in the referendum on the draft constitution?

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[61] Source: www.al-shia.com/html/ara/ola/?mod=hayat&id=11, accessed on 26 November 2006.

Answer: In His [i.e. God's] Name, May He be Exalted. The draft of the permanent constitution for Iraq, even though it falls short of being appropriate to the Islamic, civilizational and religious status of Iraq throughout history, nevertheless answers the aspirations of the Iraqi people of all stripes, strata, and religions. In addition, this is the feasible result yielded by the strenuous efforts exerted by the sincere children of Iraq. For this reason, we call upon the Iraqi people of all kinds and sects to participate in force in this referendum on the constitution, and to vote "yes" in order to safeguard their rights, liberties and the future of succeeding generations, and in order to close ranks and defeat terror and the terrorists, and to end the Occupation. We ask God, may He be Exalted, to take the hand of all with regard to whatever is good for Iraq and its people. Peace be upon you and the mercy and blessings of God.[62]

The third potential successor to Sistani as the most senior Shi'ite scholar in Najaf would be Grand Ayatollah Sayyid Muhammad Sa'id al-Tabataba'i al-Hakim, a scion of one of the most prominent and respected Iraqi Shi'ite families. He is the only candidate of local Iraqi, Arab, origin, which would make him perhaps more acceptable to the Iraqi faithful. Moreover, he is the uncle of Ayatollahs Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim—the late leader of the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in

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[62] The English translation was posted on the Internet by eminent scholar Juan Cole, Professor of Middle Eastern Studies in the University of Michigan, on his popular website "Informed Comments: Thoughts on the Middle East, History, and Religion" (dated 26 September 2005; translated by himself?), available online at www.juancole.com/2005/09/grand-ayatollah-ishaq-fayyads-fatwa-in.html, accessed on 24 November 2006. The Arabic online version of this *fatwa* was first published on 25 September 2005, at www.karbalanews.net/artc.php?id=2557, accessed on 24 November 2006.

Iraq (SCIRI, in Arabic: *Al-Majlis al-A'lā' li'l-Thawrah al-Islāmiyyah fi'l-'Irāq*)—and 'Abd al-'Aziz al-Hakim, who had both been assassinated.

Figure 7

Grand Ayatollah Sayyid Muhammad Sa'id al-Tabataba'i al-Hakim[63]

In August 2003, Sayyid Muhammad Sa'id was slightly injured in the car bomb attack that killed his nephew Muhammad Baqir, the SCIRI leader—along with more than 100 other people. Grand Ayatollah Sayyid Muhammad Sa'id al-Hakim, who is not directly associated with SCIRI, is said to be closer to Sistani and his quietist line. His cousin, Grand Ayatollah Sayyid Muhsin al-Hakim, had been the most senior Grand Ayatollah from the mid 1950s until his death in 1970. Sayyid Muhammad Sa'id's position can be decribed as moderately quietist.

Lastly, Grand Ayatollah Sayyid Ali al-Husayni al-Sistani, who was born in 1930 in Mashad, in eastern Iran—reigns supreme as the current head of the seminaries in Najaf. Throughout the Shi'ite world, including Iran, he has still the largest numbers of followers (in terms of purely religious matters, as discussed earlier with regard to

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[63] Source: www.aimislam.com/ulama/hakeem.html, accessed on 5 December 2006.

taqlīd), and he is still the unchallenged head of the *hawzah* in Najaf. Sistani is still the most highly regarded senior Shi'ite scholar among the Iraqi Shi'ites. This is mainly due to his network of junior clerics who disseminate his rulings. Moreover, with the establishment of his Qom-based Āl al-Bayt Global Information Centre[64], he has become the virtual electronic Grand Ayatollah par excellence. This organization has been referred to as the heart of Shi'ite proselytizing.[65] The official website of Sistani's office (www.sistani.org) is one of the most visited Shi'ite sites on the Internet. In spite of his reclusion, he was thus able to influence current political events in Iraq. In particular, he was able to enforce a compromise on the constitutional process upon the Coalition Provisional Authority, and issued in return a *fatwa* urging the Shi'ite faithful—women in particular—to participate in the elections and calling on his coreligionists not to retaliate to acts of terrorism carried out by Sunnites against them. As mentioned earlier, Sistani's strong stand was also instrumental in bringing about a settlement of the August 2004 Imam 'Ali shrine crisis following its occupation by Muqtada al-Sadr and his militiamen. In the same month, ailing Sistani went to London for medical treatment, causing speculations about his general health condition and the question of his successor as head of the Najaf seminaries.

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[64] The most comprehensive feature of the Centre in English is available online at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Aalulbayt_%28a.s.%29_Global_Information_Center, accessed on 11 December 2006.

[65] Pepe Escobar, "Sistani.Qom: In the Wired Heart of Shi'ism" in *Asia Times*, 31 August 2005, available online at www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle_East/GH31Ak03.html, accessed on 11 December 2006.
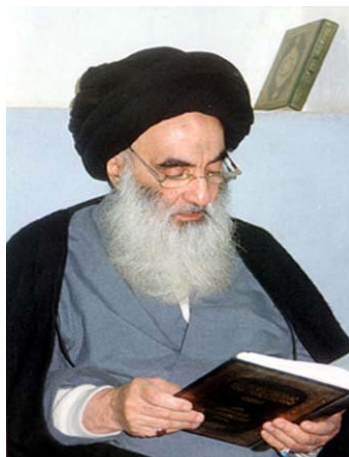
Figure 8

Grand Ayatollah Sayyid Ali al-Husayni al-Sistani[66]

Sistani himself is the successor of likewise quietist Grand Ayatollah Al-Khu'i, perhaps the most eminent Shi'ite scholar of the 20th century. In line with Al-Khu'i, Sistani rejects the notion of universal vicegerency by a single Shi'ite jurist, although he does accept *wilāyat al-faqīh* as a responsibility of the entirety of Shi'ite clerics. He expressed his views in the following manner in a *fatwa* that had been widely publicized on his multilingual website:

Question: What is Ayatollah Sistani's definition for it [i.e. *wilāyat al-faqīh*]?

Answer: Every jurisprudent (*faqīh*) has *wilāyah* (guardianship) over non-litigious affairs. Non-litigious affairs are technically called *al-umūr al-hisbiyyah*. As for general affairs with which social order is linked, *wilāyah* of a *faqīh* and enforcement of *wilāyah* depend on

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[66] Source: website of Ayatollah Sistani, available at www.sistani.org/img/sistani/large/2.jpg, accessed on November 2006.

certain conditions one of which is popularity of acceptability of *faqīh* among majority of the faithful (*al-mu'minīn*).[67]

Understandably, Sistani's supposed cooperative attitude *vis-à-vis* the situation following the occupation of the country in 2003—as well as the question of his successor as the head of Najaf's Shi'ite establishment (due to Sistani's health)—have attracted the attention of international observers, in particular in the United States.[68]

Another important player—although not as a potential candidate for Sistani's succession—is Grand Ayatollah Sayyid Kazim al-Husayni al-Ha'iri. His *a'lamiyyah,* or supreme expertise, a main requirement for being considered the most senior *marja',* is apparently not recognized by the majority of the Iraqi Shi'ites. Al-Ha'iri lived in Najaf during the Saddam era, before being exiled to his native Iran. After the end of Baathist rule in 2003, he went temporarily back to Najaf and was for some time the main mentor and backer of firebrand cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, who reputedly asked him to head the *hawzah* instead of quietist Grand Ayatollah Sistani.

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[67] Source: Sistani's official website, English version, available online at www.sistani.org/html/eng/menu/4/?lang=eng&view=d&code=221&page=1, accessed on 12 December 2006 [wording and transliteration slightly adjusted].

[68] See, for instance, Babak Rahimi, "Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani and The Democratization of Post-Saddam Iraq" in *Nathan Hale Foreign Policy Society Working Paper* [no date; after 2005], available online at www.foreignpolicysociety.org/workingpapers/WP6--Rahimi.pdf; Mehdi Khalaji, "Religious Authority in Iraq and the Election" in *Policy Watch* #1063, 14 December 2005, available online at http://washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=2420 [both published by the Washington Institute for Near East Policy]; Patrick Clawson, "Iraq's Future: A Concept Paper" in *Middle East Review of International Affairs* 10, No. 2, (June 2006), available online at http://meria.idc.ac.il/journal/2006/issue2/jv10no2a4.html; Vali Nasr, "When the Shi'ites Rise" in *Foreign Affairs* (July–August 2006), available online at www.foreignaffairs.org/20060701faessay85405/vali-nasr/when-the-shiites-rise.html; idem, "Regional Implications of Shi'a Revival in Iraq" in *Washington Quarterly* 27, No. 3 (Summer 2004), pp, 7–24; Yitzhak Nakash "The Shi'is and the Future of Iraq" in *Foreign Affairs* (July–August 2003), available online at www.foreignaffairs.org/20030701faessay15402/yitzhak-nakash/the-shi-ites-and-the-future-of-iraq.html; Juan Cole, "The Ayatollahs and Democracy in Iraq" in *ISIM Review* 17 (Spring 2006), pp. 34–35; Ester Pan, "Backgrounder, Iraq: Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani", available online at www.cfr.org/publication/7636/ [published by the Council of Foreign Relations]; W. Andrew Terrill, "The United States and Iraq's Shi'ite Clergy: Partners or Adversaries", February 2004, available online at www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/report/2004/clergy.pdf; all accessed on 11 December 2006.

Figure 9

Grand Ayatollah Sayyid Kazim al-Husayni al-Ha'iri[69]

Al-Ha'iri was also one of the top leaders of the *Da'wa Party*, which was the main reason for him being exiled to Iran by the Baath regime in the 1970s. He is considered the successor of the assassinated Grand Ayatollah Sayyid Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr. Contrary to the other potential candidates referred to above, Al-Ha'iri, who can be considered staunchly opposed to any kind of cooperation with the U.S.-led coalition forces, rejects the quietist model—although not the clerical establishment in Najaf embodied in the *hawzah*, in contrast to Muqtada al-Sadr—and is said to advocate the Iranian-style theocracy in Iraq.[70]

As we have seen earlier, prior to the 1979 revolution in neighbouring Iran, Najaf and the other Shi'ite seminaries in Iraq—rather than those in Iran—had been considered the most eminent study centres by the faithful as well as their leadership. Apart from the Baathist terror against any form of opposition, the Iraqi Shi'ite

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[69] Source: www.islamicdigest.net/v61gallery/displayimage.php?album=70&pos=186, accessed on 3 December 2006.

[70] Fanny Lafourcade, "Political Forces and Alliances in Iraq" in *NGO Coordination Committee in Iraq*, p. 12, dated August 10, 2005, available online at www.wadinet.de/news/dokus/Political_Forces%20in%20Iraq.pdf; for Al-Ha'iri's official website [in Arabic], see www.alhaeri.org/, both accessed on 11 December 2006.

leadership and religious establishment suffered from another disadvantage. Many of them were considered as foreigners due to their often Iranian background. Most of their ancestors had been residents in Iraq since several centuries. However, many of them had no Iraqi citizenship, a circumstance that the Baath used against them, by deporting tens of thousands of them to Iran. They were forced to march—often during winter—through the snowy mountains of Kurdistan that separate Iraq from Iran. This forced exodus led to a further brain drainage of the Iraqi Shi'ah—to the further benefit of Qom and other seminaries in Iran.

Qom, however, seems to be aware of a possible revival of the *hawzah* of Najaf. The number of Shi'ite clerics resident in Qom in the middle of 2003 was estimated at about 40,000 to 50,000, whereas their number in Najaf amounted to about 2,000, down from c. 10,000 in the 1960s, before the Baath took over Iraq. Several thousand Iraqi clerics living in exile in Qom can be expected to migrate back to Iraq some time soon. Although it is true that many of the Shi'ite Iraqi exiles in Iran joined Tehran-sponsored Shi'ite opposition movements—the most prominent of them being SCIRI—not all of them can be considered stooges of Iran, having in mind the copy of the Iranian Khomeinist model in the lands between the Euphrates and Tigris rivers.

The main worries of Iran with respect to these developments, however, might be more ideological in nature. Being situated in a country that had been controlled during most of the Islamic part of its history by more or less hostile Sunnite rulers, the Iraqi *hawzah* had never been in the position to acquire secular power. This circumstance sets it apart from developments within the Roman Catholic Church, for instance, that had led to the establishment of the State of the Church—and, ultimately, the Vatican. On the other hand, the Shi'ite faithful looked always to Iraq—the land

hosting the most revered Shi'ite sanctuaries—for religious (!) guidance. The establishment of the principle of *taqlīd*, emulation of a senior religious authority, which had already been discussed above, further strengthened the position of Najaf in the past. Moreover, Najaf and its seminaries enjoyed financial independence, due to the canonical taxes paid directly by the faithful to their leaders.

The shift of the centre of Shi'ite learning from Najaf to Iran in the course of the second half of the 20th century had, however, some more consequences. This shift meant that now—after the 1979 revolution—Iran understands itself as the political and religious-scholarly centre of Shi'ism—whether this is accepted by (non-Iranian) Shi'ites outside Iran or not. It is thus no coincidence that an aspiring Shi'ite scholar today has to be equally well-versed in Persian (*fārsī*) as well as in Arabic, as there are today more works written in the former language compared with the latter, although the primacy of Islam's main sources, Qur'an and *hadīth*, continue to be studied in Arabic. As I could observe for myself during my own time in Qom during the mid 1980s, this had led to a quasi chauvinistic attitude from the part of many revolutionary Iranians vis-à-vis their non-Iranian coreligionists whose supposed lukewarmness is often lamented.

It may be argued that it had been the brutality of the Baath regime and—from the perspective of classical Shi'ite thought—deviant interpretations of the nature of the relations between the state and religion in neighbouring Iran that had led to a radicalization of segments of the Iraqi Shi'ite lay people. This, in turn, has resulted in the erosion of traditional Shi'ite leadership in the aftermath of the 2003 liberation of the country. Thus, it would be crucial for the seminaries and scholars at Najaf to reassert their authority over the faithful in order to achieve some degree of future political stability for Iraq. As classical Shi'ite Islamic thought does not ascribe to any

particular political system or theory of government, quietist Iraqi Shi'ism—within the setting of a secular and multi-denominational political order—could thus become a viable alternative to the Khomeinist model, a model that is aiming at political domination of the Middle East by Iran.[71] Elsewhere, I have argued that in classical Twelver Shi'ite theology and quasi political thought, from the formative period in the 10th century C.E. onwards, the concept of *taqiyyah*, prudent dissimulation in times of danger has been advocated.[72] According to Ibn Babawayh al-Shaykh al-Saduq, for instance, an early Twelver Shi'ite authoritative scholar, who is until now highly respected among Shi'ites of any aspirations due to the circumstance that he is one of the compilers of the four canonical Shi'ite *hadīth* collections—*taqiyyah*, a concept which could be translated into the context of our times as abstention from involvement in political affairs and is even regarded as an article of faith.[73] Accordingly, during the time of the absence of the *Mahdi*—the eschatological Shi'ite saviour that is to reappear at the end of time—any kind of ruler and system of government that had not been endorsed by the Hidden Imam could be considered illegitimate. However, as life goes on for the faithful even during the occultation of the *Mahdi*, and as the *Mahdi* himself is not supposed to contact the faithful during that time, they will have to run their daily affairs. This, in turn, opens, in practice, the door to many opportunities, including that of a secular parliamentary system, which, nevertheless, would safeguard the basic principles of Islamic law and civilization. This reasoning would also be in line with what had been expressed by the earlier

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[71] At the time of writing, I have also been working on a separate IDSS working paper where I was trying to develop my own thoughts on the nature of Iran's recent resurgence as a regional power.

[72] See my "Twelver Shi'ite Islam: Conceptual and Practical Aspects", pp. 29ff.

[73] Muhammad b. 'Ali b. Bābawayh al-Shaykh al-Sadūq (tr. A. A. A. Fyzee), *A Shi'ite Creed*, Tehran, 1982 (reprint), pp. 97–98. On Shaykh Saduq and his significance during the formative period of Twelver Shi'ism, see my "Twelver Shi'ite Scholarship and Buyid Domination: A Glance on the Life and Times of Ibn Babawayh al-Shaykh al-Saduq (d. 381 A.H./991 C.E.)" in *Islamic Quarterly* 45, No. 2 (2001), pp. 199–222, republished under the same title in *Islamic Culture* 76, No. 1 (Jan. 2002), pp. 69–99.

quoted *fatwa* of Grand Ayatollah al-Fayyadh, for instance. As we have also seen, most senior quiestist Ayatollahs in Iraq do want an Islamic identity for Iraq, but they hesitate from running the country themselves—a clear contrast to the deviant Khomeinist model of vicegerency of the clerics. Thus, the *hawzah* of Najaf sees itself rather as a supervisor and adviser to any government, rejecting any *direct* intervention of the religious sphere in politics. This classical and quasi orthodox understanding of the role of the clerics in Shi'ite Islam clashes also with what is the current official policy in Iran, namely the principle of supreme leadership (*rahbariyyat*) which is claimed by Ayatollah Sayyid 'Ali Khamene'i.[74] According to this view, the *direct* involvement of clerics in state affairs is their legitimate right and even a moral obligation.

It would be difficult to predict who would succeed Sistani as supreme Shi'ite cleric. On the first glance, Afghan-born Grand Ayatollah al-Fayyadh and his Indian-born colleague Bashir al-Najafi might be the first choice in terms of their scholarly credentials, but the ordinary Shi'ites, the man on the street, who is looking for quick solutions to the present drama in Iraq, might look to the Sadrists and their leader Muqtada al-Sadr, instead. Muqtada al-Sadr, however, is not considered an Ayatollah, not even a *marja'*. He would need the endorsement of one of the Grand Ayatollahs in Najaf. This seems to be a rather unlikely scenario, given their earlier outlined rather quietist preferences.

A quick solution to the current leadership crisis among the Iraqi Shi'ites is thus not in sight, unless the general security situation does improve, in the event of which the voice (and ultimate authority) of quietist senior clerics could again gain acceptance among the Shi'ite masses. In spite of this rather bleak outlook, there seems

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[74] On the issue of Khamene'i being a *marja'* or not, see GlobalSecurity.org, "Grand Ayatollah Ali Khamenei", available online at www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/iran/khamenei.htm, accessed on 2 December , 2006.

to be one spot of hope: every Shi'ite is obliged to exercise *taqlīd*, emulation of a senior cleric and most of the Iraqi ones are quietist, as we have seen. Accordingly, Muqtada al-Sadr and his movement might be only an episode during the current civil warlike setting in Iraq.

Internal and external factors: Effects on Iraqi Shi'ism

Regardless of how the political future of Iraq will actually look like, the removal of the tyrannical Saddam regime did open—for the first time in Iraq's history—new avenues for a more appropriate representation of the country's Shi'ite majority and for a re-emergence of the country's Shi'ite institutions of higher learning at Najaf and Karbala'. In a decade or so, this might well result in an output of a new generation of clerics with a different, more progressive worldview, than it had been the case in the past. Moreover, these scholars might in their majority be local Iraqis, having in their minds the needs and requirements of the local, Iraqi people. As already pointed out earlier, Najaf and the other Iraqi shrine cities had in the past all too often been controlled by clerics of Iranian origin and provided at times even the stage for conflicts pertaining to the religious establishment of neighbouring Iran.

A re-emerging reformed but nevertheless politically non-assertive *hawzah* could thus well serve as a counterbalance to the Khomeinist seminaries in Qom, thus re-establishing the originally quietist tradition of Twelver Shi'ite scholarship. This revival, however, should be open to the challenges and opportunities offered by modernity and this should also be reflected in the curriculum. In this manner, the Iraqi *hawzah* could develop towards a full-fledged university that incorporates also secular subjects of learning, thus enabling its students to face the challenges of modernity without giving up cultural and religious identity. As Iraq happens to be a

predominantly Arab country, a general revival of Islamic intellectual thought there could also have positive results for the Sunnite Arab world at large. Progressive Islamic thought and learning, based on the classical heritage, could thus also function as a stimulator for moderation. As stated by me earlier, in spite of the post-1979 Iranian experience, something like an Islamic theocracy is rather an anomaly in the history of Shi'ism, which had been characterized by quietism and political non-assertiveness. Iraqi history prior to the establishment of the Baath regime has shown that Shi'ism can very well exist and even thrive in a secular political setting. *Traditional* Twelver Shi'ism could even be described as quasi-secular as it is still expecting the return of its hidden Twelfth Imam, the *Mahdi*,[75] a messianic eschatological saviour-figure that is believed to herald an age of justice. During his period of absence, every temporal authority is lacking legitimacy, a very important factor in terms of which particular form of government would be most appropriate to Islam, as it opens several (constitutional) opportunities for the running of the daily affairs of the faithful.

However, there are several factors that might affect negatively the future course of the Iraqi Shi'ites and the seminaries, some of them are internal, while some others are external. Most of them appear to be interrelated, although only some of them can be mentioned here: The violent activities of Muqtada al-Sadr—who has no credentials for being a *mujtahid* whatsoever—can be considered a serious threat to the authority of the traditional senior Shi'ite clerics, such as demonstrated in the clashes in and around the Najaf shrine. Nevertheless, contrary to Sunnite Islam, Shi'ism is in

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[75] See W. Madelung, "al-Mahdī" in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd Ed., Vol. 5, Leiden, 1985, pp. 1230–38. For the specifically Twelver Shi'ite context, refer to Mohammed Ali Amir-Moezzi, *Le guide divin dans le Shi'sme originel aux sources de l' ésotérisme en Islam*, Paris, 1992; Jassim M. Hossain, *The Occulation of the Twelfth Imam. A Historical Background*, London, 1982; and Hossein Modarressi-Tabataba'i, *Crisis and Consolidation in the Formative Period of Shiite Islam*, Princeton NJ, 1993.

the position of having a full-fledged quasi-hierarchical clerical establishment at its disposal, with its *mujtahid*s and *marja'*s or grand ayatollahs and clear-cut responsibilities. This particular feature should be considered a factor of stability and an asset when looking for authentic and representative dialogue partners. The United States and its allies would be well-advised to reinforce their initially not unfriendly relations with the leading grand ayatollahs, such as Sistani.

Leading quietist Shi'ite scholars (the *mujtahid*s and grand ayatollahs) should be encouraged to reassert their religious authority over the faithful, within the framework of Iraqi democracy. Moreover, they should also be encouraged to play a somewhat more active public role, even at the price of temporal disagreements with the Allies over certain daily issues. This is not thought to be in contradiction to what I have been trying to say earlier: I am not suggesting that they should run the country as in the case of neighbouring Iran. I am referring here to a purely advisory function. One might think back to the discussions on a suitable role for them during the Iranian Constitutional Revolution of 1906, issues that were also hotly debated in Iraq at that time, as already mentioned earlier. How this advisory function should actually materialize in present-day Iraq—whether constitutionally sanctioned or not—is difficult to say. The majority of Iraqis happens to be traditional Shi'ites—although not necessarily in favour of an Iranian-style Islamic republic—and the implantation of secular models in the past might have been perceived by wide strata as alien and unsuitable to the Iraqi context. Whether this apparent rejection of the purely secular model is deplorable or not shall not concern us here. Nevertheless, it seems to be obvious that, after almost four years of civil warlike fighting, Iraq's cultural and denominational context should be taken into consideration. In the past, in particular the senior Iraqi Shi'ite clerics have hardly ever constituted a monolithic block in

terms of the issue of a supposed political role for Shi'ite clerics. This could be a fitting starting point for the revival of a pluralist and enriching political culture, as well as within Shi'ism at large.

It is often forgotten, that after the 1991 Gulf War against the Saddam regime, the United States were widely seen as encouraging Iraq's Shi'ites to rise against their Baathist oppressors. However, when they did rise, American support was not forthcoming, apparently out of fear that this could shift the balance of power in the region toward the favour of Iran. The Anglo-American invasion of Iraq during March and April 2003   thus did not result in much enthusiasm from the part of Iraq's Shi'ites, since they could not be sure whether Saddam would not be allowed to stage a comeback, as the case in 1991, after the bloody crushing of the Shi'ite uprising against the dictator, known as *intifādah*. Perhaps it is about time that in particular the U.S. administration (and perhaps also the wider public) frees itself from what I would like to refer to as the ghost of Khomeinism—the result of its traumatic experiences during the Iranian hostage crisis—and to see that Shi'ism (as well as any other religious or cultural tradition for that matter) features a kaleidoscope of different views. Theories that assume a threat of a Shi'ite crescent stretching from Iran to Iraq, the Arab littoral states in the Persian Gulf region to Lebanon, and according to which local Arab Shi'ites are merely satellites in the orbit of Tehran (and thus potential fifth columns) are not really helpful when looking for solutions to current issues. The issue of a Shi'ite revival that we are witnessing today has to be considered a predominantly Arab phenomenon with no bearing whatsoever among the Turkic-speaking Shi'ites of Azerbaijan or the large Shi'ite minorities on the Indian subcontinent, for instance. This essentially cultural and religious phenomenon is to be clearly distinguished from that of a nationalist resurgent Iran, which appears to be aiming at hegemony over the

Middle Eastern region by taking advantage of events that are unfolding among its neighbours—a scenario that indeed should be a matter of grave concern.

Admittedly, the above considerations in terms of the future fate of Shi'ism and the Shi'ite seminaries in Iraq are dependent on and interrelated to the overall development of the country in the post-occupation period. Issues to be addressed convincingly are the maintenance of Iraq's territorial integrity, the independence and credibility of its foreign policy (vis-à-vis Iran as well as the United States), its constitutional framework (federalist or centralist; secular or communal/denominational), and above all, the restoration of peace and order. The last mentioned issue should prove the most difficult one to solve as the distrust between the Sunnites on the one hand and the Shi'ites and Kurds on the other might prove an insurmountable barrier. It will be crucial to strike a balance between doing justice to those guilty of atrocities during the Saddam era and of acts of terrorism after the liberation on the one hand, and those responsible for cold-blooded acts of revenge on the other. Whether or not reconciliation will be possible (taken into account Iraq's recent violent history) will also decide the question whether a more moderate Iraqi brand of Shi'ism will be able to re-emerge and counterbalance Iranian ambitions of hegemony over the region.[76]

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[76] Perhaps some thoughts by this writer from 2003 are still somehow valid: "[The] future might (and … should) not result in a theocracy of more recent example, with clerics necessarily having the last say, but should take into account the ethnic and religious structuring of the country. A federal structure might suit best, but it is up to the people to decide for themselves. … The dignity of the Iraqi people with its Shiite majority should be safeguarded in the future. If this will be the case—and not much more they do expect themselves—than there should be a rather stable future for the country in the medium range. It is hoped that the U.S. administration will be well-advised in this regard. … It should have become clear by now that a country with a Shiite majority must not necessarily be a threat to the West (or to anyone else, for that matter). To be more precise, it would be sheer rashness from the part of Washington to consider a democratic government in Baghdad that represents for the first time in its history the *actual* ethnic and religious situation of the country as automatically prone to be taken over by likewise Shiite Iran, i.e. by a country with an entirely different political and ethnic structure" (Marcinkowski, *Religion and Politics in Iraq*, p. 107).

On the larger screen, however, internal developments in the United States, too, will influence the fate of Iraq's Shi'ites, the seminaries, and the future of Shi'ite leadership. The November 2006 midterm elections in the United States, for instance, have resulted in the control of both, the House of Representatives and the Senate, by the oppositional Democrats. How this will affect the Iraq policy of President George W. Bush and his Republican Party remains to be seen. Perhaps the period until the 2008 U.S. presidential elections will see rather more cooperation between the two political parties than expected by the wider public in trying to solve the Iraq issue, as the outcome of the elections should be considered a protest vote against Mr. Bush's open end Iraq policy, rather than a sign of trust in any kind of improvement in this regard from the part of the Democrats.

A crucial role, also in terms of the future U.S. policy towards the Iraqi Shi'ites, was expected to be played by the bipartisan Iraq Study Group (ISG), also known as the Baker-Hamilton Commission or simply the Baker Commission. The ISG, organized by the United States Institute of Peace, is a ten-person panel appointed in March 2006 by the U.S. Congress, and is led by co-chairs James Baker III, a Republican and former Secretary of State, and Democrat Representative Lee Hamilton. In the months before the 2006 Congressional elections, public speculations circulated in terms of possible recommendations to be made by the ISG. Among these are the beginning of a phased withdrawal of U.S. combat troops from Iraq and direct American dialogue with Syria and Iran, including a possible deal over Iraq and the Middle East. In early December 2006, right after the Congressional elections, the ISG came up with its report on future U.S. Iraq policy.[77] As expected by many observers

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[77] The ISG report is available on the Internet at www.usip.org/isg/iraq_study_group_report/report/1206/iraq_study_group_report.pdf, accessed on 11 December 2006; the printed version was published in December 2006 by The Random House Inc./Vintage, New York.

and as also pointed out by myself in a recent television interview[78] (together with my IDSS colleague Dr. Douglas Crow), it combined two main alternative policies: the first one, which could be subsumed under the headline redeploy and contain, would call for the phased withdrawal of U.S. troops to bases near Iraq (apparently in the Persian Gulf region) where they could be redeployed against new threats, such as terrorism or any eventualities arising from the regime in Tehran. The other recommendation emphasized the need for maintaining a military presence in Baghdad and look for a political solution by encouraging insurgents of any denomination to enter the democratic process, while, at the same time, inviting Iraq's neighbours, including Iran and Syria, to some sort of international conference in order to help end the fighting.

Whether the change of U.S. Iraq policy, as recommended by the Baker Commission, will actually be put to work or not, it will only affect positively the position and future course of Shi'ism in Iraq if it results in a pacification of Iraq. At the end of 2006, at the time of writing, there were no indications as to whether the U.S. Administration is intending to follow the ISG recommendations, and an increase of the number of U.S. troops was actually announced in order to regain some sort of initiative. Perhaps Washington would do good to learn from the experiences made by its junior partner Britain during its own first occupation of the lands between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers following the Ottoman defeat in World War I. Britain's hasty pullout then resulted ultimately in several bloody coups and, ultimately, in the horrors of Saddam's dictatorship.[79] The present situation appears to show parallels between the way Britain handled its stay in (and exit from) Iraq in the aftermath of the country's first experience with Western occupation following World War I. From its

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[78] Studio interview on 7 December 2006, for Singapore-based pan-Asian news network ChannelNewsAsia in its "Prime Time Morning" programme.

[79] See Marcinkowski, *Religion and Politics in Iraq*, p. 106.

inception, the British post-World War I occupation drew heavy criticism at home. A withdrawal campaign focusing on large British expenditures gained force year by year. In response to these criticisms, the United Kingdom began reducing its troop levels in Iraq. This, in turn, led to increasing violence within the country.[80] One does not necessarily have to agree entirely with the general direction of the Middle East policy taken by the current U.S. administration in order to see that the international community needs to stay by the side of the young Iraqi democracy and should not be allowed to run away from its obligations. Whether deadlines for a retreat from Iraq prior to a pacification and political solution for the country will be useful in discouraging foreign terrorists, local insurgents, and certain neighbouring countries, from their activities that are perceived by some as destabilizing is rather doubtful. A hasty change of policy or even retreat at this point of time would perhaps send the wrong signal to insurgents of any denomination and to rogue neighbouring countries—a signal that might be perceived by them as weakness and indecisiveness.

Concluding remarks

More relevant to the future of Shi'ism in Iraq than the security issues referred to above seems to be that the ISG report has also advocated some sort of shift in U.S. Iraq policy away from tacit support of moderate Shi'ite leaders and political organizations towards courting even Sunnite insurgents, while at the same time trying to reach an agreement with Iran in order to be able to achieve a face-saving exit from the Iraq adventure. However, it has been mainly this shaky and wavering U.S. Iraq policy that has brought about the present lamentable situation in the first place.

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[80] For a similar evaluation, see J. Rayburn, "The Last Exit from Iraq" in *Foreign Affairs* 85, No. 2 (March–April 2006), p. 39.

Strong political support for traditional and moderate Shi'ism as embodied in the *hawzah* of Najaf and its senior quietist scholars could have prevented the erosion of Shi'ite leadership that we are witnessing presently in Iraq. I have tried to argue that traditional Shi'ite leadership as embodied in Iraq's Shi'ite seminaries should be considered more carefully as an additional contributing factor to a purely secular model, in particular in the light of the high respect enjoyed by the senior clerics resident at the *hawzah* in Najaf. Although it is true that their quietism should not necessarily be mistaken for unquestioning collaboration, their integration into the post-insurgency Iraqi setting should be a pressing issue to be dealt with, especially because of Grand Ayatollah Sistani's advanced age and the already referred to foreign status of his potential successors. Policymakers should perhaps also consider, more than in the past, the fundamental difference in status enjoyed by Shi'ite clerics, compared with that of their Sunnite colleagues. The independent status and authority of a Shi'ite *marja'* as the quasi representative of the Hidden Imam, the *Mahdi*, is diametrically opposed to that of a Sunnite *mufti*, for instance, the latter being basically a state employee and more or less government-bound in his *fatwas*, a circumstance that might affect negatively his acceptability among the faithful.

Lastly, the restoration of the authority of Iraq's senior clerics—reminiscent to the pre-Borijerdi period of the early 1960s when Najaf ruled supreme—could also have a positive, moderating effect on the Shi'ite world at large, as a paramount Shi'ite authority based in Iraq could well function as a counterweight to Iran. This would not only be interesting in terms of searching for *political* strategies, but also for the development towards more pluralism within the Shi'ite community at large.

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