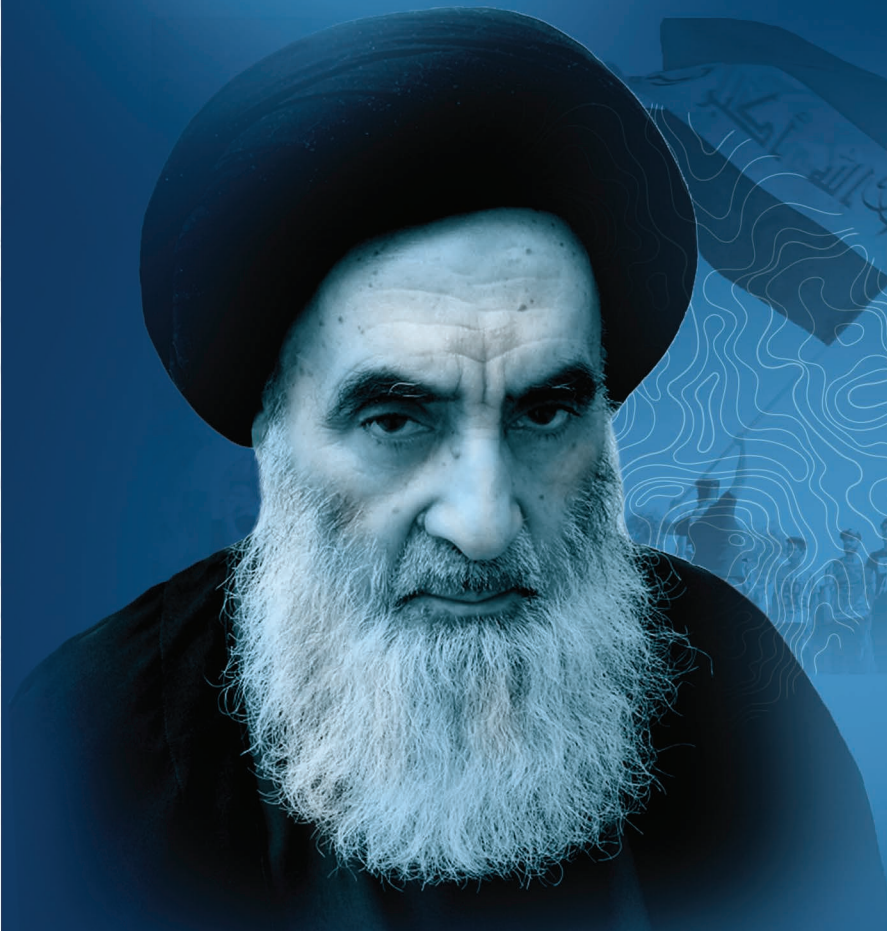




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Analytical study



## Post-Sistani Najaf Reference

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# Preamble

The relationship between Iran and the Najaf authority was one of the most important tracks affecting the nature of the Iranian role in Iraq, because of the political and jurisprudential overlaps that this relationship contains, which made it the subject of increasing attention.

The importance of this relationship is clear as it will enter an important juncture at some point, after the Supreme Shiite Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani.

Although Iran has tried during the past period to prepare many names and references for the succession of Sistani, at this moment there is no clear name on which Tehran can bet in the next stage, due to the interference of many internal and external variables affecting the selection process of the next Reference. This raises many questions about the nature of the possible Iranian role in this selection process, especially since Tehran is today trying, within a broader political vision related to its role in Iraq and the Middle East, to move beyond the Sistani phase, which has witnessed many disagreements over a number of issues and files, which gives it more than one reason for direct or indirect interference in the Reference selection process.

## First: Al-Sistani and his role in establishing the independence of Najaf from Iran

Sistani is the highest religious authority at the level of the Shia of Iraq, and the reference for many Shia Muslims in various countries of the world.

He is an Iranian from the city of Mashhad in the province of Khorasan, where he was born in 1930, while his origins belong to an immigrant family from Iraq.

He has resided in the city of Najaf since 1951 and has been the heir to the Imam Al-Khoei School and the possession of the Najaf.

He was singled out for the highest Najaf reference in the late 1990s, specifically after the departure of the senior Najaf scholars: Abu Al-Qasim Al-Khoei, Abdul-Ala Al-Sabzwari, Ali al-Gharawi, Morteza al-Burujerdi, Muhammad al-Sadr and Hasan Bahr al-Aloom.<sup>1</sup>

Al-Sistani is one of the most prominent influential figures in Iraqi political affairs. Through his influential role, he has created a clear distance between the reference of Najaf and Iran. Through his repeated call for the constitutional state, state sovereignty and democratic elections, along with his clear position on the theory of the absolute jurist state, he has been able to establish an influential position in Iraq and curb Tehran's efforts to achieve greater control over the country. Despite his stance of rejecting direct interference in political affairs, his views and positions played an important role in resolving many of the political crises that Iraq experienced after 2003.

From the reference of Sheikh Hassan Kashif al-Khat, in 1846, to the reference of al-Sistani, many files related to the role, identity and position of the reference in the context of relations with Iran overlapped, a period that saw these relations rise to the effect of the reference of Najaf at the expense of the decline of the reference of Qom, and at other times there was a decline in the impact of the reference of Najaf in exchange for the rise of the reference of Qom.

(1) Ali Al-Mu 'min, «Shiite Religious Reference after Sistani and Khamenei», Shafak News website, on 08/09/2021: <https://bit.ly/3OUKove>

In both cases, Iran was unable to surpass the authority and centrality of Najaf in the Shia world, especially as it was able to maintain its traditional view of the special mandate of jurists and non-interference in political affairs.

It can be said that the post2003- Sistani phenomenon represented an attempt to combine the existence of the national state with the supranational character of Shiism, but this attempt was affected by the weakness of the national state and its lack of legitimacy, and by internal and regional competition between two models of political Shiism.

The first model was identified with the existence of the national state and became more committed to it and its institutions, without being able to solve the problem of the discrepancy between its ideological and cultural principles and the nature of the existence of the national state and the determinants of its existence; while the second model fell into a network of "communism" above a fighting nationalism, expressing a new radicalism that challenges the pluralist state model that was approved after 2003, and has not yet been established.<sup>2</sup>

This indicates that the current tension between the two trends will escalate in the post-Sistani phase, as Iran will try to manipulate it well to enhance its influence within the Najaf reference, by supporting the second current at the expense of the first.

In addition to many positions that showed a clear political disagreement between Sistani and Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, specifically with regard to the Iranian role in Iraq, the fatwa of the "efficient jihad" announced by Sistani in 2014 to confront ISIS clearly highlighted the size of the existing tensions. Despite the emergence of a military structure known as the "Popular Mobilization" based on this fatwa, al-Sistani was careful not to allow Iran to use this fatwa to serve its policy in Iraq and Syria, specifically in the post-war phase on "ISIS", as the "Mobilization" was divided into two currents, one of which follows Iran and is known as the "loyal factions", and the other follows the reference of al-Sistani and is known as the "sacred mobilization". A clear distinction was made between the crowds in terms of positions and policies.

(2) Group of Authors, 'Arab Shia: Identity and Citizenship' Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, Doha, February 2019, p. 37.



The areas of disagreement between Iran and the Najaf authority extend beyond politics, jurisprudence, and intervention in the field of security, which adds to the sensitivity of relations between the two parties.

Moreover, al-Sistani succeeded in distancing al-Najaf's reference from the tracks of the "American-Iranian" conflict.

He also succeeded in keeping this reference away from the criticisms directed at Iranian interventions in the region, as al-Najaf usually avoided adopting escalating speeches against Saudi Arabia, in addition to its failure to adopt positions in support of the escalating events in Syria, Yemen and Bahrain, and its refusal to support the idea of sending Shiite fighters, or even arming them, while Iran supports this.

This centrality, which Sistani has succeeded in entrenching in the behavior and attitudes of Najaf's referentiality, will thus most likely push many Iraqis to demand a new Sistani-style Shia leader; first, to provide religious advice and play a role in local politics and governance, if Sistani suddenly passes away; and second to maintain the centrality of Najaf, which Sistani has established in the Shia world.

The pivotal role played by Sistani in Iraqi politics and issues during the past period has uplifted the authority of Najaf to a more important level, as the issue of Sistani's succession is no longer just a matter of doctrinal or spiritual leadership, but a matter of political leadership with a wide audience.

While the references who preceded Sistani in the leadership of Najaf were reluctant to intervene in political affairs for internal and external reasons, Sistani's role and pivotality changed the nature of the stereotype taken from the supreme reference in Iraq, which will put his successor in front of a major challenge with a greater impact in shaping the future of Iraq, and removing the Reference of Najaf from Iran's attempts to dominate it, and make it part of the absolute general mandate of the guardian jurist.



**In general,** and away from the current conflict between Sistani and Iran, which is centered on many issues, not only political and jurisprudential, but also related to the seat of the estate and its origin, as well as the centrality of the Shiite personality in the Shiite world, whether he is Khamenei or Sistani, the role played by the latter in establishing the independence of the Najafy Reference from Iran, allowed the birth of this duality, which Tehran has not been able to resolve in favor of the guardian jurist so far.

This may give clear indications that Iran can play an influential role beyond the Sistani phase, and consolidate its centrality in the Shia world.

## Second: The conflict over the leadership of the Shiite world

The Islamic Republic of Iran has not been able to establish a stable and good relationship with the Reference of Najaf since its establishment until today. There is an Iranian concern that surfaces from time to time, due to the failure of Najaf to change its traditional opinion on the subject of the mandate of the jurist, which is a new opinion in Shiite jurisprudence created by Khomeini, the leader of the Iranian revolution, to provide a basis for his absolute rule over the country; and this has put the Iranian regime in a state of apprehension towards Najaf continuously.

In addition, there are other differences in governance approaches between the authorities and the political system, which led the Iranian regime to impose house arrest on a number of authorities and prevent them from stating their opinions and ideas while continuing their teaching and religious work.

The position of the Iranian regime since its inception has been one that denies the centrality of Najaf, considering it the representative of the backward, non-revolutionary and complacent Islam.

The reasons for this are the background to the conflict between Khomeini's revolutionary approach and the Najafy approach that calls for separating religion from politics.

This position reached its climax after the arrival of Sistani to the Ras al-Najaf reference after the death of Abu al-Qasim al-Khoei, as the preacher of Friday prayers in Tehran, Ahmad Janti, at the time, described Sistani as an English reference, warning of what he called the departure of the reference from Iran, and the danger of this to the Islamic system in the country.





In the second phase, after Sistani was able to prove his broad authority in the entire Shia world, including Iran and Qom's estate, the Iranian regime ended up with the option of dealing positively with the phenomenon and attempting to embrace representatives of Najaf's estate in Qom, including the official representative of Sistani Jawad al-Shahristani, who enriched the estate of his scientific and research institutions, publishing houses and other possessive activities, given that Najaf's estate was at the weakest of its life eras, which explains why a conflict between it and the Iranian regime did not emerge<sup>3</sup> at that time.

After the strong Iranian intervention in the Iraqi affairs in 2003, the dispute between Najaf and Tehran emerged, and we cannot say between Najaf and Qom, because the latter did not remain representative of the Reference, as was the case during the time of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, but the official reference became an existing authority in Iran, with its center in Tehran, with the presence of religious references who do not recognize the reference of Khamenei, and they think of the reference of Najaf itself to separate religion from the state, that is, to move away from the practice of direct politics, noting that this aspect in Iran was represented by Muhammad Kazem Shariahmadari, who remained imprisoned after the confiscation of his<sup>4</sup> school in Qom.

Today, there are many political and security files that Sistani and Khamenei view differently, related to the nature of the political system in Iraq, or to political changes in the Islamic<sup>5</sup> world.

Numerous problems and differences arise between Iran and the Najaf authority, across many areas that Tehran is trying to exploit, to influence the Najaf reference, as in the case of the divergent positions of the parties or currents, or even in issues and matters related to the Iraqi internal affairs, many of which showed great differences between the two parties.

(3) Ali Mamouri, "Iran on Quest to Legitimize Velayat-e Faqih in Iraqi Seminaries", Al-Monitor. 12/08/2013: [bit.ly/2pG3bTZ](http://bit.ly/2pG3bTZ)

(4) Guardian of the Jurist"... A Principle Most Shiites Don't Believe in, Al-Arab, 17/09/2015: [bit.ly/3FzMix5](http://bit.ly/3FzMix5)

(5) Habib Mustafa, Sistani and Khamenei... Historic Conflict Exploding Politically, Shaqar, 3/09/2015, [bit.ly/3339oYC](http://bit.ly/3339oYC)

While the differences between Sistani and Khamenei are not new, today they are more pronounced than they were secret and invisible, and there are dialogues on religious, ideological, and political issues away from the media, between Sistani supporters and Khamenei supporters.

These disagreements are ripe for future escalation, which could have a negative impact on Shia geography.

As it gained influence across the Middle East, Tehran sought moral leadership for more than 200 million Shiites around the world.

As Sistani reaches the age of 90, Khamenei and his allies see this as an opportunity to control Najaf, the spiritual capital of the Shia world.

As a result of the clash between two dominant figures in Shia power, it portends serious consequences both for the future control of the clergy within Iran, and for their continued ability to exert influence over the Shia throughout the world.

However, the immediate impact of this clash will be decisive with regard to Iraq's ability to continue to chart its political path under neighboring Islamic<sup>6</sup>theocracy.

The two characters, Sistani and Khamenei, play different roles. While Khamenei leads the Islamic Republic of Iran, makes important appointments, and commands the Iranian armed forces, Sistani confines himself to religious and jurisprudential affairs, avoiding any direct political role in Iraq.

There is also an international dimension to their disagreement, as Sistani followers bypass Iraq, with the majority of Shiites, at least outside Iran, following it as a non-political cleric.

Even if Shia communities in different countries of the world have local imams, when asked who they follow, they say Sistani.

In general, many local Shia clerics in the Arab and Muslim world support Sistani, in contrast to others supporting Khamenei. Khamenei's religious status is reportedly disputed within Iran, which became clear in 1994 when the Association of Teachers of the Estate in Qom made a statement that he should not be regarded as a religious authority, prompting him to abandon this role inside Iran.

(6) Ali Mamouri, "The dueling ayatollahs", Al-Monitor, 11/04/2018: [bit.ly/2PHNVzt](https://bit.ly/2PHNVzt)



However, he did not abandon the role outside Iran, which is clearly reflected in the so-called "axis of resistance", which includes Hezbollah, Lebanon, Syria, the Houthis in Yemen, Iraqi, Afghan and Pakistani groups, as well as Palestinian factions, and some Shiite political movements in the Arabian Gulf region.<sup>7</sup>

This indicates the extent of the strategic risks arising from Iran's control over the post-Sistani Najaf reference, as it will make Tehran a single leader in the Shiite world.

The struggle for the leadership of the Shia world is not a spur of the moment, but dates back to the moment when Khomeini came to power in 1979, and perhaps even further.

However, the contours and lines of conflict became clearer after this date.

After Khomeini became the leader of the Iranian revolution and the absolute ruler of the country, the supreme Shia authority in Iraq, Abu al-Qasim al-Khoei, did not send him a congratulatory message on the occasion of the establishment of the Islamic Republic, nor did he participate in the "Iraq-Iran" war.

The Khoei, who is dedicated to non-political Islam, remained a religious scholar and passed on this tradition to the Sistani.

In other words, Qom and Najaf differed in their view of Islam, as Najaf was apolitical, while the situation changed with Qom after 1979, when Khomeini not only led the Islamic Republic but became the leader of the Iranian armed forces, which had not previously been allowed for Shia clerics.

Arguably, with Khomeini's rise to power, political Shi 'ah emerged in its entirety as a version of the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood.

It is no accident that Khamenei translated two books for Mr. Qutb into Persian, when he was a young cleric.

Interestingly, the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt welcomed the establishment of the Islamic Republic in Iran, while many Shia clerics in the Islamic world, including the<sup>8</sup> authorities of Najaf, did not.

(7) Gareth Smyth, "Shia leadership struggle ahead after Khamenei and Sistani", The Arab Weekly, 16/02/2017: [bit.ly/35fGsyd](http://bit.ly/35fGsyd)

(8) Hossein Alizadeh, "Why Khamenei and Al-Sistani Did Not Exchange Greetings?", Radio Farda, 19/03/2019: [bit.ly/2qPvKiU](http://bit.ly/2qPvKiU)



Recently, disagreement has also arisen between the scientific holdings and the Shia religious elites in Iran and Najaf over the protests that erupted in Iraq in October 2019.

Indeed, the attitudes of the Shia religious elites towards these demonstrations have deep connotations related to the historical disagreement between the terms of reference of Najaf and Qom, and between the reformists and the traditionalists.

It is striking that the mounting protests in the central Shia capitals against Iranian hegemony and its local arms constitute the first challenge to the mandate of the Iranian jurist from within the Shia embrace, which may constitute a strong blow to the strategy of Iranian hegemony within <sup>9</sup> the Shia world.

(9) Mohammed Al-Sayyad, «The Shiite House Crisis: The Position of Religious Elites on the Protests of Iraq and Lebanon», «International Institute for Iranian Studies», Riyadh, 18/11/2019: [bit.ly/3ssZmPz](https://bit.ly/3ssZmPz)

## Third: How is Iran working to control the Reference of Najaf?

No one can hide the extent of Iranian influence in Iraq, not only at the political level, but also at the religious level, and therefore it is not possible to talk about a future Reference post-Sistani, without talking about the Iranian role, whether in the process of selection or even in approval, especially in light of the political instability in Iraq today, in addition to the diversity of political positions adopted by the references of the tradition in Najaf, including those close to Iran, and others attached to the Iraqi state.

In this complex scene, an important question arises about how Iran will control the post-Sistani Najaf Reference.

In fact, Tehran has many solid political and economic paths to influence any decisions regarding the process of choosing the next reference in Najaf, especially since the relationship between Iran and the Najaf reference is based on the state of imbalance, specifically on the equation of "state – religious institution."

On the other hand, Iran may try to resolve the issue of the Reference, either by marginalizing the Reference of Najaf in favor of the center of Qom and the guardian of the jurist, or by polishing and coding a Najafi Reference affiliated with its line, which owes loyalty to the guardian of the jurist, and there are many references such as Sheikh Kazem Al-Hairi, who belong to Najaf on the surface and do not see a problem in their belief in the absolute mandate of the jurist, with the necessary work of the Reference of Najafi under the guardian of the guardian of the jurist and his guardianship.

There is no doubt that this is an Iranian option and a possibility that might be resorted to; however, its success rate is uncertain, as there are unforeseeable overlaps and complexities on the scene.

Another rational option remains for the Iranian decision maker, namely, to strengthen the Najaf and enhance its independence in a way that preserves the reputation of the estate and the doctrine, preserves the Shiite heritage and the soft power of the doctrine, without politicizing the history of the estate, while preserving other traditional options for the insurgent incubators of the guardian jurist, or those who are not comfortable taking<sup>10</sup> this path.

Decision makers; however, do not expect Iran to resort to such a rational choice, because it is monopolistic and introspective.

It just believes in decisiveness and competitiveness rather than participation; and it likes to see itself as the basis of the doctrine, and that Qom is the origin and Najaf is an emergency for it, in addition to that the guardian of the jurist believes in the comprehensiveness of his mandate until the peer jurists are generalized. Thus, talking about the rational choice in light of the presence of the conservative state religious elite is unlikely, and a small possibility.

If we want to understand the determinants of the Iranian strategy in Iraq, it is based on two parallel dimensions, the first is penetration by possession, similar to the soft penetration through loyal clerics, and convincing the students of the possession to read the state, and the second is penetration through the creation of armed militias that impose the policy of *fait accompli*, without paying attention to the interest of the state or integration into its official institutions. In the second dimension, Sistani's hard power surpassed its own when it refused full integration and loyalty to the Iraqi State and the Iraqi army, repeatedly demanding that the authority confine the weapons to the hands of the State, which has not happened so far, and is not expected to happen after Ibrahim Raisi's arrival in Tehran as a hawk of the Iranian regime and a supporter of the export of the revolution and the extension of the hegemony of the guardian of<sup>11</sup> the jurist.

Iranian tools are undermining al-Sistani's de facto authority, while at the same time displaying a great deal of respect, but without pledging allegiance to him by virtue of his tradition.

(10) Mohammed Sayyid Sayyad, "Post-Sistani Supreme Reference and the Future of the Hegemony," International Institute for Iranian Studies, Riyadh, 31/03/2022: [bit.ly/3w13gl3](https://bit.ly/3w13gl3)

(11) Previous source

Those factions that make up the PMF mostly imitate Khamenei's authority, contrary to the claim made by some that the PMF derives its legitimacy from the Sistani (who is the only watchdog influencing the actions of the crowd), and this constitutes an exaggeration and misplaced generalization.

Indeed, the Sadrist current, which is closer to the Najaf and the Iraqi reference than the crowd, cannot be described as such, given the historical political and doctrinal dispute between the Sadrist<sup>12</sup> and Sistani.

Since 2003, Tehran has sought to limit the influence of the Shiite authority in Najaf, with the aim of reducing the influence of Sistani, who does not believe in the mandate of the jurist, and his religious influence worries Iran inside and outside Iraq, as %80 of Shiites around the world consider him the religious authority, not the Iranian guide, and his decisions are sacred to millions of his followers who donate religious tax to him.

Therefore, Tehran supported Iraqi clerics of lesser religious rank than Sistani, in order to limit his influence and prepare to take his place.

To extend their influence, Iranian institutions have established religious schools, mosques and clinics in Najaf and Baghdad, and since 2011 have equipped one of the regime's closest figures, Ayatollah Mahmoud Hashmi Al-Shaherudi, an Iranian cleric and former head of judiciary, and a senior cleric in Shiite Islam; but he died in 2018.

Iran has consistently tried to turn Najaf into a religious center of political activity under the control of Qom. Therefore, work is under way to attract Sistani students and provide them with benefits and grants, while jurists expect the Estate of Najaf to fall under the control of Qom after the death of Sistani. However, despite these Iranian efforts, the escalation of popular Iraqi, and specifically Shiite, discontent with Iran's role in Iraq could hamper Tehran's<sup>13</sup> efforts in this regard.

(12) Mohammed Sayyad, «Beyond Sistani and Khamenei», «International Institute for Iranian Studies», Riyadh, 26/12/2019: [bit. ly/3uogGaf](https://bit.ly/3uogGaf)

(13) Huda Raouf, «Challenges Facing Iran's Attempt to Choose a Sistani Successor and Increase Its Influence, »The Independent Arabic Website, 11/12/2020: [bit. ly/3LE0NCr](https://bit.ly/3LE0NCr)



Iranian procedures show that Khamenei realizes that he cannot easily appoint a successor to the Sistani in Najaf; therefore, he resorted to a strategy aimed at creating a division in the Estate of Najaf, where there is a party that supports him and defends the doctrine of the wilayat al-Faqih (jurisdiction of Khamenei), and another party is the traditional Shiites who support Sistani and his approach, and through these efforts, the Iranian leader takes several ways to strengthen his position among his supporters.

Finally, despite the obstacles and resistance he faces in Najaf, the vacuum that will inevitably occur in the absence of the Sistani, will provide Khamenei with a great opportunity to expand his dominance over Najaf. Of course, if he survives until then.<sup>14</sup>

(14) Ali Mamouri, Mehdi Khalaji, "Shia Leadership After Sistani", The Washington Institute, 10/09/2019: [bit.ly/3kB-BIBK](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/shia-leadership-after-sistani).



## Fourth: The future of the Najaf Reference after the Sistani

The process of selecting the next reference after Sistani will be subject to many internal and external variables; and it may not only depend on the Iranian role, but may also extend to circumstances related to the status of the Najaf Reference and the nature of the balances that govern it.

The system of succession in this reference is essentially based on the state of inertia.

Although the history of the Reference was mainly based on the emergence of candidate names before and after the vacancy of the position of the Reference, on the other hand, it was the decisive circumstances that ultimately made the Reference, which is what Najaf followed.

And this is what Iran is trying to bypass.

In this context, the post-Sistani jurists can be divided into three main layers.

This division based on the hierarchy of age, study and participation in research; and it does not mean that any of them is favored over the other scientifically, nor equalizing them.

This is a matter in the hands of "people of experience and specialization", not the lay observers. The first layer includes senior jurists, namely Sistani, Isaac Al-Fayad and Bashir Al-Najafi, while the second layer includes jurists such as Muhammad Baqir al-Irani, Hadi al-Radi, Hassan al-Jawahri and Muhammad Jaafar al-Hakim, while the third layer includes jurists such as Muhammad Reza al-Sistani, Riyadh al-Hakim, Ali al-Sabzwari and Sadiq al-Kharsan.

Despite the presence of this number of professors of "external research" and jurists, the most prominent names that the talk is now about are three prominent names, namely, Muhammad Baqir al-Irani and Hadi al-Radhi and Hasan al-Jawahri.

These figures can achieve Iranian consensus – Najafi, for reasons related to their positions and opinions, without neglecting the References Bashir al-Najafi and Ishaq al-Fayyad, who are mainly professors and religious symbols, and who have many Imitators in different <sup>15</sup> countries.

Another possibility remains that the weight of the Reference could shift to Iran, as happened after the death of Iran's Supreme Shi 'ite leader, Ayatollah Hossein al-Burujerdi, and its transformation into Najaf, or after the death of Shi 'a Shi 'a Sheikh Fathalla al-Isfahani and its transformation into a summit, specifically to the Iranian guide to lead the Shi 'a Reference without a rival.

But this scenario is complex and not easy to pass.

On the other hand, there is another scenario, which is the Khamenei's departure before the Sistani.

In such a case, the sectarian and the Estate (Hawazi) vacuum may arise in Tehran and not in Najaf; because the stability of the religious Reference of any Iranian guide, unlike his political leadership, needs time.<sup>16</sup>

In any case, it can be said that any Reference coming after the Sistani, will be part of a transitional phase that the Najaf Reference is going through, for many reasons, the most prominent of which is the extent to which the Reference is able to deal with the challenges of the post-Sistani, especially the issue of preserving the centrality and independence of the Najaf established by Sistani. It also depends on the extent of the heir's ability to preserve balances within the Najaf, and his success in controlling the course of the relationship between the Najaf Reference and the Najaf influential families and institutions, namely the Al-Hakim family, the Al-Sadr family, the Al-Khoei Foundation and the Sistani family, as well as the Iranian responsiveness with the next Reference.

All these factors give a clear perception that the next reference will face major challenges, which he may not be able to interact with.

On the other hand, the next Reference may face two important variables that are no less important than the other variables mentioned.

(15) Hassan Al-Mustafa, "The Future of Religious Reference in 'Post-Sistani'", Al-Arabiya Website, 0725/2021: [bit.ly/3LVsFSR](http://bit.ly/3LVsFSR)

(16) Muhammad Sayyid al-Sayyad, "Post-Sistani Supreme Reference and the Future of the Estate," op. cit.



The first variable is the relationship with the Sadrist movement and its leader, Muqtada al-Sadr, who, although not presenting himself as one of the candidate options in the post-Sistani stage, will certainly have an influential position on the selection process of the next Reference; especially since he is one of the most important advocates for the next Reference to be an Iraqi, and he has decisive positions on the nature of the Iranian role in Iraq.

Al-Sadr today enjoys a great political influence in Iraq, and he has influential economic, military and social networks in the Iraqi street.

The second variable is represented by the armed factions that divide themselves today, between the successive groups of Sistani and Khamenei, which may put the next reference in front of a complex scene in how to contain this duality.

# Conclusion

There is no doubt that the post-Sistani phase will witness a great vacuum not only at the level of the Reference of Najaf, but also at the level of the general situation in Iraq; because of the influential role played by this Reference; especially when there is no clear mechanism for his succession, nor a consensus on the personality that can succeed him.

Iran, specifically Khamenei, will be the most influential party in the process of organizing the Sistani caliphate, supporting a sympathetic candidate or at least not criticizing or standing in the way of Iranian behavior in Iraq and the region, as this is important at the level of Iranian influence, or even at the level of the future of the armed factions loyal to Tehran, which will be the biggest winner of any vacuum that arises in Najaf, and the coming of a high Reference close to it.

So the post-Sistani phase will see a transition period until a new Reference takes over. Many internal and external variables will play a role in that, especially since the transformations that the Middle East region is going through today, will be present in this context as well.

The absence of Sistani will cast a shadow over Iraq, Iran and the region. The role played by Sistani has spared Iraq many crises and has downsized many Iranian ambitions.

The uncertainty of the succession process in terms of form and system, as well as in terms of names and variables, will make it a very complex case, along with its political and security repercussions inside and outside Iraq.



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