

# The quiet ayatollah of peace

In the sectarian maelstrom of Iraq, one voice has spoken up for moderation and restraint, Hayder al-Khoei writes

After the overthrow of Saddam Hussein in April 2003, Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani emerged as one of the most powerful men in Iraq. Sistani was already known to Shia Muslims worldwide as the somewhat reticent leader of the religious establishment in Najaf. The fall of the Ba'ath regime thrust him on to the national and international stage.

Despite his strong influence on Iraqi politics, Sistani, now 84, gets involved only in exceptional circumstances on strategic issues – such as the need to hold a general election during the early stages of the Iraq occupation and the need for an elected assembly to draft Iraq's first permanent constitution.

More recently, he has called for Iraqis to mobilize and join the armed forces in their fight against the jihadists of Islamic State and he has moved to block former prime minister Nouri al-Maliki from clinging to power for a third term.

Sistani's influence in Iraq is the result of a decades-long process that saw him rise up the ranks of the religious hierarchy in

Najaf, which alongside Qum in Iran constitute two of the most important centres of Shia scholarship.

The school of thought that prevails in Iraq is often referred to as the 'quietist' school in Shia Islam. Scholars debate whether Sistani is actually quietist given his powerful interventions in politics. There is no consensus on what quietism actually means, but it is radically different to the Iranian model of theocracy. In Iraq, Sistani has explicitly called for a civil state and not a religious state.

This position does not only reflect his personal ideology but that of orthodoxy in Shia Islam, which will continue long after Sistani. The belief that a religious cleric should not and cannot run a state does not stem from a secular viewpoint but is in fact a jurisprudential argument based on Islamic scripture itself.

This school of thought is dominant among the Shia clergy and in religious institutions, but is often overshadowed by Iran due to the latter's political, economic and military power. While the clerics in

Iran control the state, the clerics in Iraq shun political power in favour of spiritual leadership.

Sistani's influence was apparent from the start of the American occupation. When the United States invaded Iraq, they planned to appoint an Iraqi assembly to draft the permanent constitution of Iraq. Sistani condemned their plans and said that they had 'no authority' to appoint an assembly that was incapable of drafting a constitution which would reflect the 'interests of the Iraqi people'.

In November 2003, the Americans abandoned plans to appoint the constitutional assembly. Instead members of this assembly would be chosen using an American-style caucus plan. Sistani declared this to be illegitimate, and called on the United Nations to send a team of experts to study the mechanism of an early transfer of sovereignty to Iraq and smooth transition to

**An Iraqi carries a picture of the powerful Shia cleric Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani as he takes part in a protest**



permanent governance. The resulting UN report said the caucus system was ‘not a viable option’ because it was ‘totally alien to Iraqis’.

Eventually, Iraq’s first nationwide general election was held in January 2005, thanks to the pressure from Sistani. With the Sunnis largely boycotting the political process and the Kurds united in one coalition, Sistani played a key role in bringing together the disparate Shia political parties to form the United Iraqi Alliance – and he even nominated his own representatives to join them to be part of the first Iraqi national assembly.

During the second general election in December 2005, Sistani withdrew his representatives from the Shia coalition and was less involved in the politics.

Larry Diamond, a Stanford University professor who was an adviser to the Americans on the constitution, argues in his memoirs that Sistani repeatedly assumed positions that were more pro-democratic than the United States itself.

For his part, Sistani has always stressed that the future of Iraq must be in the hands of the Iraqis. When asked what his biggest fear was, the answer wasn’t terrorism, corruption or civil war, but rather that Iraq’s cultural identity – of which Islam is a core tenet – might be undermined. He was concerned that the US would try to change the very fabric of Iraqi society.

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## ‘Although Sistani had scored political victories against the US, the security situation was deteriorating rapidly’

ation was deteriorating rapidly. There was a steady increase in car and suicide bomb attacks across the country and armed groups were out in force on the streets engaged in sectarian bloodshed that would later take Iraq into a full-blown civil war.

From 2003 to 2006, wave after wave of car bombings and suicide attacks were directed at Iraqi civilians – mostly Shia. In February 2006, these sectarian tensions reached boiling point after Al-Qaeda-linked jihadists blew up a sacred Shia shrine in the northern Sunni-dominated city of Samarra. This attack claimed no lives but it was seen as a powerful symbolic attack on Shi’ism itself.

The Shia masses were in uproar. Tribal leaders who could command hundreds of thousands of tribesmen rushed to Najaf and begged Sistani to allow their men to march through Baghdad and into the city of Samarra to retake control. Sistani could not single-handedly prevent the sectarian retaliations from Shia militias in Baghdad,

but he did stop that cycle of violence from turning into genocide when he forbade the Shia tribes to march into the Sunni-dominated north.

Since the fall of Mosul in June 2014 and the rise of the so-called Islamic State, Sistani is once again at the forefront of the political scene. The collapse of the Iraqi army in the north and the rapid gains made by jihadist groups in Iraq forced Sistani to act. He called on Iraqis to mobilize and to join the Iraqi security forces in their fight against terrorism. It had been almost 100 years since the Shia religious establishment issued a similar call to arms – the last such call was directed against the British invasion of Iraq in 1914 – and morale among the Iraqi security forces was suddenly lifted.

In addition to his support of Iraq’s security forces, Sistani also played a critical role in allowing Iraqi politicians to break the deadlock imposed by Maliki’s insistence on holding on to power for a third term, allowing the formation of the new government of Haydar al-Abadi. He did so because he felt that Maliki was willfully leading Iraq to the abyss while wanting to divide the country along ethno-sectarian lines. He is reported to have said: ‘Maliki wants to divide Iraq while I’m still alive’.

Sistani’s oft-quoted line that ‘Sunnis are ourselves, not [just] our brothers’ reflects his belief that peaceful coexistence can and must be achieved in Iraq. Even as he called for Iraqis to mobilize against terrorists, he called for arms to be carried exclusively by official security forces – a not-so-subtle reference to the Iranian-backed militias in Iraq. He also called on these forces to exercise restraint, especially in areas with mixed sectarian populations.

No one in Iraq is under any illusion as to how deep Iraq’s sectarian tensions are, but with thousands of displaced Sunnis living peacefully in the Shia-dominated south, and Sunni tribal forces risking everything they have by fighting alongside the Shia-dominated security forces, the hope is that the new Iraqi government – with the support of local, regional and international friends – may begin to turn things around.

In the end, a spiritual leader may not have a strong enough voice to save Iraq but, whatever happens, Sistani will continue to be a powerful moderating force in a country that is tearing itself apart.

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Sistani helped break the deadlock that allowed Haydar al-Abadi to become prime minister