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# Sistani's Future Role in Iraq

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## INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this report is to examine situations in which Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani would most likely change his current political disposition. Sistani's reclusive disposition and recent statements do not point to any likely change in his outlook. However, there are two possible scenarios in which events could prompt him to change his role. After a brief review of Sistani's background and political influence in Iraq, this report will look at the two scenarios and then conclude with four overarching themes.

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, 76, was born in Iran near the city of Masshad in 1930. He was raised in a family of noted religious scholars and began studying the Koran at age five. He continued his studies in the city of Qum, "The Motherland of Shiism," until 1952 when he left Iran for the religious center of Najaf, Iraq. There he studied with some of the most important Shiite clerics of the time, including Grand Ayatollah Imam Abul Qassim al-Khoei. When Khoei died in 1992, Sistani was selected by his peers to head the hawza, or network of schools, in Najaf.

During the reign of Saddam Hussein, the hawza in Najaf was all but shut down and Sistani had to maintain a low profile to avoid persecution. He spent long periods under house arrest and avoided overt political activity. Several attempts were made to assassinate Sistani by Saddam's security forces. Nonetheless, he chose to remain in Najaf and continued his role as a powerful figure in Iraq's Shiite community.

The low-profile approach to survival that Sistani maintained throughout Saddam's regime was often criticized by some of the more radical, often younger, Shiite leaders and clerics. Muqtada al-Sadr, one of the most vocal critics of Sistani, favored a militant approach to the Sunni-based regime. In April 2003 after the fall of Saddam's regime, members of Sadr's Madhi Army attacked Sistani's house in Najaf and demanded that he leave Iraq. Sadr also demanded that Sistani recognize him as a marjah. Sistani went into hiding and refused to grant Sadr the marjah status.

- A marjah is a Muslim scholar who has authority to interpret Islamic law and provide guidance to Shiites on day-to-day matters. Sistani received this authority at the age of 31, an extremely rare honor and testimony to his scholastic abilities.
- There are only five grand ayatollahs among the Shiite population, which accounts for about 20 percent of the world's 1.4 billion Muslims. Sistani is the most senior. His authority eclipses even that of Grand Ayatollah Ali Khamenei – the Supreme Leader of Iran.

## POLITICAL DISPOSITION AND INFLUENCE

Regardless of his often reclusive behavior and his recent vow to abstain from politics, Sistani's influence and support helped shape the current government in Iraq. After the fall of Saddam, he demanded that the governing body established to write the constitution be elected directly by the people, weakening the US-appointed Governing Council and forcing US leaders to expedite their schedule of elections.

Sistani is a conservative, traditionalist Shiite who favors an Islamic state but believes there should be a separation between religion and politics. He has said that no law in Iraq should conflict with Islamic principles. He strongly opposes the Iranian style of theocratic government, which claims that any government with authority over Shiites should be run by religious clerics in accordance with Islamic law. Instead, Sistani supports the more traditionalist, or quietist, position. This school of thought holds that clerics should not be involved in the political affairs of Shiites and should exercise their authority independent of politics.

Sistani continues to call for the cessation of sectarian violence and the preservation of a unified Iraq. He believes that his beliefs on non-aggression will stand the test of time and that his religious authority will prove to be his greatest asset. Statements and reactions from Sistani indicate that he has very low tolerance for aggressive action taken by younger, less-educated clerics, especially Sadr.

Regardless of opposition from Sadr and other militant clerics, Sistani is still one of the most influential leaders in the Muslim world. This is buffeted in part by a vast network of support that Sistani provides to millions of Muslims across the globe. Sistani oversees millions of dollars that is used to provide cash, housing, medical care, and humanitarian aid to the Shiite community. Sistani-backed charities support students and scholars in Qum, the religious capital of Iran, while also providing aid to other areas of Iran, Iraq, and elsewhere. Sistani and his organization also maintain a vast technology base that is used to provide education, news, and guidance to followers world wide. The hub of this global network is two large computer servers based in California. This information network sustains Sistani's influence with millions of his followers around the world. His dependence on this network is evident by the modern telecommunications equipment that exists in his humble Najaf home.

## OUTLOOK

It is nearly impossible to predict a person's likely future behavior. Still, the scenarios below attempt to depict an accurate response by Sistani based on his previous actions and comments.

### *Scenario 1 – Theocracy Gone Bad in Baghdad*

**Assumptions:** A heavy handed Iranian-type theocracy has developed inside the Iraqi government. Radical Shiite clerics seize control government and draft laws in the name of Muhammad that misrepresent the Koran. Sistani's clerical authority is publicly challenged. Sectarian and intra-Shiite violence continues.

**Implications:** Sistani's traditionalist beliefs are now being compromised by an emergence of a theocratic government. He not only feels a sense of betrayal, but decides he must act to defend the Koran and his quietist beliefs. He ends his seclusion and once again becomes a key figure on political reform. His emergence from seclusion would benefit factions who represent Shiites loyal to Sistani. At the same time, his increasing pronouncements would further divide the Shiite community. Sistani's platform likely would remain centered on the territorial integrity of Iraq, cessation of violence, unity within the Shiite community, and fair distribution of resources among all Iraqis.

## Scenario 2 – “Sadr the Marjah”

**Assumptions:** Sadr has gained support from ayatollahs other than Sistani in both Iraq and Iran. Sadr then proclaims himself a recognized marjah and makes interpretive pronouncements about the Koran. Sectarian violence continues to radicalize Shiite youth. Sadr rallies his supporters to continue fighting.

**Implications:** Sadr's eagerness to use his newfound religious authority – despite the absence of proper scholastic training – serves as the catalyst to inspire Sistani to become more publicly involved in the political process. Sistani would act to curtail Sadr's use of the Koran to justify calls for retaliation and revenge. Besides viewing this as a personal attack on his own religious authority, Sistani would also see it as a threat to the unity of the larger Shiite community.

Sistani's emergence from seclusion would set in motion a scramble among other clerics to align with one camp or the other. Indeed, the public battle between Sistani and Sadr would split the Shiite community, just as Sistani feared. Sadr's Mahdi Army could rampage out of control, attacking foreigners and “enemy” Shiites alike. This might be one of the few scenarios in which Sistani would implicitly endorse violence in the name of self defense. Sistani would not openly support attacks or aggression against Sadr but nor would he bow to intimidation.

## CONCLUSION

There are four common themes that emerge from the scenarios above regarding Sistani's possible return to active political life in Iraq. These include:

- ***Only Sistani's religious convictions would prompt his increased political involvement.***  
Sistani has successfully stepped out of the political arena without any sign of regret. Still, as grand ayatollah he is driven to provide guidance to the Shiite community and protect the proper interpretation of the Koran. Use of the Koran for political purposes – especially if the Koran is interpreted erroneously in Sistani's view – probably would compel him to act despite his expressed preference for seclusion in his old age.
- ***Sistani's increased political role probably would further divide the Shiite community.***  
Assuming the continuation of civil war (as defined in the recent National Intelligence Estimate), Sistani's pronouncements on matters such as power sharing and non-retaliatory violence would likely further alienate those who believe Shiites should seek revenge against Sunnis and grab Iraq's resources for themselves.

- ***There is no significant US role in either of the two scenarios.*** Given the extent of Sistani's anti-US sentiment, familiarity with US operations among Iraqis, and the difficulty of conducting covert operations in that environment, there is little the United States could do on its own to propel Sistani to act. It is only his life-long dedication to the Koran that would prompt him to act, assuming he felt the Koran was being used improperly to justify killing or seize resources.
- ***Sistani is more likely to end his seclusion than change his stance on violence.*** It is possible that Sistani could end his reclusive lifestyle if he felt the Koran was being challenged. It is less likely that he would support violence, even against his enemies. He is more prone to speak out against the dangers of division and faulty exegesis of the Koran than to support aggressive offensive operations.