

# THE PROTESTER PARADOX WHY DO ANTI-ISLAMIST ACTIVISTS LOOK TOWARD CLERICAL LEADERSHIP?

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### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Iraq has witnessed several protest movements in recent history, many of which have been explicit about their desire for a “civil state” (*al-dawla al-madaniya*) or even a secular state, which separates the religious realm from the political realm. Paradoxically, however, the latest youth-dominated protest movement (which took place from October 2019 to February 2020) looked toward the Shia religious establishment, the Marjaya, for support and legitimation. At the same time, these civil society activists and protesters advocated for a secular or civil state. How can their political goals be reconciled with their desire for recognition from a religious institution?

In this report, I present three complementary explanations for the protesters’ position. First, I argue that Iraqi protesters have developed and defined their stance on “secularism” and the “civil state” based on their rejection of the Islamist parties that have misruled Iraq since 2003. In other words, they advocate for a separation of religion and politics, and less so a separation of religion and the state. Second, although the Marjaya presents itself as being non-interventionist in politics, it has historically played a (mainly mediative) role in protest movements. The 2019 protest movement was no exception, as the Marjaya advocated for a resolution through existing political institutions, all while emphasizing the right to peaceful protest. The Marjaya’s name had been smeared by its assumed association with Islamist parties, and its positive reaction to the protest movement protected it from further reputational harm and was accepted by the protesters. Finally, civil society leaders recognized the value of clerical support and consciously decided to have allies among the clerics.

However, the arguments presented in this paper reflect the positions of mainly middle-and-upper-middle-class activists, and not of the working-class protesters. This research bias is mirrored in much of the analysis on the protest movement, which takes the experience and opinions of the most visible and public-facing activists as representative of the whole movement. Policymakers and analysts sometimes underestimate the complexity of class and religion in Iraq and future research should take note of this.

## INTRODUCTION

When nationwide protests broke out in Iraq in October 2019, putting the capital and other cities at a stand-still, observers were quick to point out both the anti-Islamist nature of the protests and the protesters' call for a secular state. These observations were also made of previous and smaller protest waves in Iraq and reflect a growing public dissatisfaction with Islamist parties and religious leaders, one that is well-documented in public opinion data.<sup>1</sup>

At the same time, it was during the “October Protest Movement” that the Friday sermons delivered by the representatives of Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani — the spiritual leader of Shia in Iraq — achieved a popularity that was perhaps only seen during the early days of the war against the Islamic State group (IS), when adherents turned to al-Sistani for guidance. Activists, politicians, and observers — secular and religious alike — tuned in to listen attentively as Ahmed al-Safi or Abdel Mahdi al-Kerbalai spoke on behalf of the Marjayya, the Shia religious establishment. Activists sought the support of the clerical establishment to their cause while state authorities hoped it would dampen the protest inferno. Given the prevalence of Shia Islamist parties in Iraqi politics, it comes as no surprise that politicians would be invested in the Marjayya's sermons. However, why were the protesters, who demanded a separation of religion and politics, seeking support from the religious establishment?

This report puts forth three arguments to explain this seemingly paradoxical stance. The first is that many protesters are opposed to Islamism and have developed and defined the concept of secularism and of the civil state<sup>2</sup> (*al-dawla al-madaniya*) through the lens of anti-Islamism. In other words, they support the separation of religion and politics, more so than the separation of religion and state, though the former can and does act as a conduit for the latter. Secondly and considering the first point, the Marjayya responded quickly and positively to the protests, in a bid to preserve its reputation, which was previously stained by the poor governing performance of Islamist parties associated with it. Thirdly and relatedly, veteran activists are savvy societal actors who recognize both the public authority and the incentive structure of the religious establishment and have made a conscious decision to use it to their advantage, through public and private messaging. In the past, many activists turned away from the religious establishment, but more and more, they have found shared interests and allies among the clerics. This was in turn aided by the fact that there was a leadership vacuum in Iraq that the Marjayya was able to fill.

Before laying out these arguments, the report begins by providing contextual information on the religious establishment: How does it operate? What authority does it possess? What has its role been in politics and how is it perceived by the public? Then it explores what secularism means in the Iraqi context. Following this, the report delves into a history of the events of October 2019 through March 2020 and describes the key sermons that served as critical points in the trajectory of the movement. It draws upon interviews with activists as well as public opinion data to weigh each of the explanations. Finally, the report concludes with a discussion of the limitations of the research and the complexity of the interplay of religion and class in Iraq.

## WHAT IS THE SHIA RELIGIOUS ESTABLISHMENT AND WHY DOES IT MATTER?

The Shia religious establishment is one of the most influential and least understood societal actors in Iraqi history, stretching across centuries and across geographic borders.<sup>3</sup> In contemporary Iraq, it can be described as a religious system that encompasses a set of shrines, spaces of worship, seminaries, libraries, and offices scattered throughout the country, but headquartered in the holy city of Najaf. It is organized in a non-bureaucratic but hierarchical manner in the form of two overlapping institutions: the Hawza and the Marjaya. The former term describes solely the spaces of learning associated with the religious establishment, wherein individuals are divided into students of various levels and instructors. The latter term describes the leadership of the religious establishment, the clerics who have achieved the highest levels of learning in the Hawza and who enjoy adherence from members of their community in matters social and personal.

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This adherence, known formally as *taqlid*, entails both a material and non-material aspect. On one hand, adherents choose to follow the religious rulings of an elite cleric in many social and personal issues. Critically, adherents direct their religious taxes (*khums*) toward the cleric that they follow, which — along with charitable donations and fees from various religious services — allows clerics to fund their seminaries and their students' stipends, and to run their clerical offices and careers. Because of this clear dependence on adherents for financial well-being, both scholars in the Hawza and scholars of the Hawza describe the system as being "democratic."<sup>4</sup> They also describe it as "meritocratic," rewarding high-achieving academics with titles that allow them to amass adherents and resources.

Throughout Iraq's recent history, the highest position of leadership of the Marjaya has been held by one cleric. In the past, there were instances of a duality of elite clerics at the helm. The shift from duality to singularity in leadership correlates with evolutions in communications technology and transportation. Whereas in the past, a cleric's influence could only extend to their immediate environs and holy cities that contained religious seminaries each had a leader of their own, today a cleric can spread his name and message around the globe effortlessly.

Today, the leadership is held singularly by Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, who gradually rose to prominence after the death of his mentor Grand Ayatollah Abu al-Qasim al-Khoei in 1992 and al-Khoei's successor, Grand Ayatollah Abd al-'Ala al-Sabziwari, in 1993. The succession — which is determined through the consensus of a council of elite ranking clerics — does not immediately confer upon new head of the religious establishment endless resources and public confidence. It entails the confidence of the religious community in him; the confidence of the public must be continuously earned.

Al-Sistani held his position through one of the most tumultuous phases in Iraqi history, that of the 2003 U.S.-led invasion and its aftermath. He was placed in a tenuous position when it came to the presence of the U.S.-led military coalition, one that he managed carefully. L. Paul Bremer III, the head of the Coalition Provisional Authority, wrote of al-Sistani that “the ayatollah believed that avoiding public contact with the Coalition allowed him to be more useful in ‘our joint pursuits,’ that he would forfeit some of his credibility among the faithful were he to cooperate openly with Coalition officials.”<sup>5</sup> Among al-Sistani’s most memorable interventions in political affairs was his 2003 fatwa (religious edict) demanding that the constitutional writing committee for Iraq be voted in by Iraqi citizens, who would also have right to vote on the content of the constitution in a referendum.<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps his most historic and most debated fatwa was his 2014 call to Iraqis to join the security forces in the fight against the Islamic State group. Inadvertently, it led to the creation of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), a set of formally state-affiliated paramilitary groups that have not dissolved, but only gained power after the defeat of IS. Their unmanageability has been one of the chief security challenges facing the Iraqi government and straining U.S.-Iraqi relations.<sup>7</sup>

Al-Sistani’s political performance has raised questions about the role of clerics in Iraq, particularly in Iraqi politics. Because a majority of the Iraqi population is Shia, these elite clerics are seen to possess a large degree of authority in the country. Scholars and analysts have been interested in how this authority translates into political influence, but they have largely focused on mobilization capacity (the role of clerics in creating militias), perceptions of government structure (theocratic versus democratic rule), and clerical relationships to Islamist parties. While the first is an area of current discussion, the latter two domains received more attention in the past. The debate about systems of governance has largely progressed from a simplistic one in which al-Sistani was cast as a “quietist” (in opposition to revolutionary Iranian leader Grand Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini’s activism) to one in which political involvement was seen to exist on a spectrum, rather than a dichotomy.<sup>8</sup> The topic of clerical relations with Islamist parties has continued to dominate public and media discourse, but has featured less prominently in academic discourse where it has been largely confined to the historic ties between key Islamist parties, like the Islamic Dawa Party, the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), and the Sadrist Movement, and figures in the Hawza.<sup>9</sup> Given the religious establishment’s closed-off nature, it has been hard for academics to conduct fieldwork and to write on the Hawza, but this has been slowly changing after Pope Francis’ visit to Najaf in March 2021.<sup>10</sup>

This report heads into a different direction and examines how everyday Iraqi protesters, largely Arab Shia youth, who possess newly forming opinions about the separation of religion and the state and the separation of religion and politics, seek legitimacy from the religious establishment. It raises questions about whether there are subliminal forms of social authority that the Marjayya possesses and how al-Sistani balances the credibility of the religious establishment at a time of high public dissatisfaction with religious actors.

Of course, the religious establishment itself has a firm opinion of its own role in society and politics. In my previous research on the religious establishment which relied on extensive interviews with clerics, I concluded that clerics view their role

as that of guardians of society, only stepping in to intervene when necessary.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, they are wary of political activity, though the public and Iraqi politicians tend to believe otherwise. The history of the religious establishment's involvement in politics predates the modern Iraqi state itself, with clerics acting largely as mediators between protesters and colonial authorities under Ottoman and British rule.<sup>12</sup> Of course, there were instances in which elite clerics were leaders of protest movements — like the 1920 Revolution — but even under these circumstances, the key goal was to maintain political and economic stability for their base.<sup>13</sup>

In light of this centuries-old history of protest involvement, this report examines how the latest iteration of Iraqi protests — those asking for a civic state or even for a secular state — views the role of the Shia religious establishment. But what exactly does a “civil” or “secular” state mean in the Iraqi context?

## THE “CIVIL” STATE AND THE “SECULAR” STATE IN IRAQ

The post-2003 Iraqi state has not fully separated religion from the state, nor from politics. Moreover, in contesting the interference of religious actors in political affairs, Iraqi activists and protesters are not united in their vision, opting to describe their ideal state vaguely as a “civil” state whose contours are defined primarily by opposition to Islamist parties, Iranian intervention, and religious armed groups. The precision of what they oppose suggests that many Iraqi activists are opposed to a separation of religion and politics, more so than a separation of religion and the state.

To separate religion from the state is to ensure that religious institutions do not have legal and constitutionally sanctioned mechanisms to impact any facet of public policy. To separate religion from politics is to prohibit the entry of religious discourse and symbols into political life, through religious-based parties, for example. A country can simultaneously separate religion from the state, but not from politics. For example, the Turkish state does not recognize an official religion and defines its identity around secularism, but its current ruling party, the Justice and Development Party (AKP), has Islamic roots (of course, the AKP officially does not describe itself as such).<sup>14</sup>

It is not just in the Islamic world that religion-state relations are complicated. According to Alfred C. Stephan, who dissects state-religion relations, many Western states had established churches up until the late 20th century.<sup>15</sup> Even after state churches were de-established, many countries still have flags with clear religious symbols, namely the cross (e.g. Sweden, Finland, Denmark, Norway, and Great Britain). Iraq's flag, too, has the Islamic slogan “God is Great” but the flag rarely emerges in protester discussions about the role of religion in the state.

The Iraqi state enshrines Islam in the constitution as the official religion of Iraq and as a “foundation source of legislation” so that “no law may be enacted that contradicts the established provisions of Islam.”<sup>16</sup> The recognition of Islam as the official religion is common in the Middle East, although its recognition as a source of legislation is less common. Historically, previous Iraqi constitutions recognized Islam as an official religion, but it was only in the 1964 provisional constitution

that it was made a foundation of legislation, a designation that the Baath party maintained in the 1968 provisional constitution.<sup>17</sup> Unsurprisingly, the secular Baath party's 1970 provisional constitution dropped both religion as a source of legislation and the requirement that the president swear loyalty to his religion (another vestige of the 1964 constitution).<sup>18</sup>

Like many other Muslim majority states, Iraq has official government bodies — specifically, independent commissions — that are tasked with overseeing religious spaces: the Shia Endowments Commission, the Sunni Endowments Commission, and the Christian, Yazidi and Sabian Mandaean Endowments Commission. The “endowments” refer to the unownable and untransferable property of religious institutions — holy shrines, sacred sites, mosques, monasteries, churches, and so on. The presence of the endowments' commissions, which are governmental bodies, generally suggests state control over religious institutions, and not vice-versa. Here it is worthwhile to remember that there are two intentions behind the separation of religion and the state, which can be demonstrated through the examples of the United States and France. As Rachel Donadio described in *The Atlantic*, “The United States, in guaranteeing freedom of religion, sought to shield religion from state involvement. France, in guaranteeing freedom of religion, sought to shield the state from religious involvement.”<sup>19</sup> Historically, secular Middle Eastern states have leaned closer to the French model, fearing religious influence.

Iraq has been defined by state and colonial institutions that feared religious involvement in the state (particularly that of elite Shia clerics) and behaved accordingly. Saddam Hussein had similar fears and experimented with different tools for control of religion, including the so-called “Faith Campaign”<sup>20</sup> as well as having a unified Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs which installed loyal state agents to oversee important religious sites.<sup>21</sup> These historical attempts at state co-optation of religion have resulted in religious leaders who fear state encroachment into religious affairs and who, in the aftermath of the American-led invasion, attempted to structure an Iraqi state which would not have the same capacity to monitor and control them.

This was particularly true for the Shia religious establishment, as al-Sistani was an instrumental actor in setting up the post-2003 state. His religious edicts quickened the transition from an American-led to an Iraqi-led governing authority, with elected officials drafting the constitution and with a nationwide referendum to legitimize it. The constitution writing committee included clerics, like Ahmed al-Safi, a representative of Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani who delivered many of the Friday sermons that communicated the Marjayya's views to protesters in 2019. The chairman of the constitutional writing committee was another Islamist cleric, Humam Hamoudi, who was a prominent member of ISCI at the time.

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According to Feisal Istrabadi, Iraq's former ambassador to the United Nations and one of the writers of Iraq's Transitional Authority Law (a precursor to the 2005 constitution), Shia religious leadership pushed for a system in which there was an ethno-sectarian allotment of political posts, having entered these deliberations with a history of being an oppressed majority. Moreover, Istrabadi argues that their push for democracy was premised on a majoritarian view of democracy that understood the demographic weight of the Shia in Iraq, he writes: "There is no doubt justification for the view that al-Sīstānī believed that the Shī'ah, being the majority, would dominate the constitutional deliberations, and that they would, therefore, be able to protect a majoritarian view of a constitutional order."<sup>22</sup> For their part, Kurdish politicians ensured that the constitution mandated a broad consensus for government formation, in order to protect against the tyranny of the majority.<sup>23</sup>

In the first parliamentary election in January 2005, the religious establishment encouraged adherents to vote for religious candidates, thus lending support to the Shia Islamist parties that have dominated Iraqi politics since 2003 and that have supplied more than half of the countries' prime ministers. It is the presence and performance of these parties that drives the discourse toward a separation of religion and politics, more so than the other aspects discussed in this paper.

Iraqis are not overestimating the presence of Islamist parties in politics. In January 2005, the United Iraqi Alliance — a group of Shia Islamist parties which included Dawa and ISCI — won 140 seats out of 275 in total. That was the parliament tasked with writing the new constitution. Since then, Islamists have continued to be well-represented in parliament. In Iraq's latest elections in October 2021, for example, the established Shia parties won 127 seats out of 329.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, from 2005 to 2018, Iraqi prime ministers were all, in one way or another, affiliated with the Dawa party. Adil Abdul-Mahdi, the first non-Dawa prime minister, was previously affiliated with ISCI and his offices included many ISCI advisors. The current prime minister, Mustafa al-Kadhimi, does not belong to a party, but enjoys the support of the Sadrists and was previously hired to head the Iraqi National Intelligence Service under the premiership of Haider al-Abadi, an Islamist from Dawa.

Therefore, the discourse amongst Iraqi protesters is one in which the chief grievance is Islamist parties, but it is extending to interrogating other aspects of state/religion and state/politics intersection. In recent history, two legal proposals provoked public anger toward religious interference in politics, and both proposals are tied to larger constitutional debates.

The first was the Virtue Party's proposed changes to the Personal Status Law, which would have stripped Iraqi women of many legal protections through the application of religious law in state courts.<sup>25</sup> The so-called Jafari Personal Status Law was first proposed in 2014 and then in 2018, in both cases ahead of federal elections. Iraqi women's rights activists were particularly alarmed by the proposal to lower the legal age of marriage from 18 to nine. The proposal ultimately did not pass parliament, but it served its purpose of appeasing a conservative base ahead of elections and pressuring the Parliamentary Women's Rights Committee to drop certain provisions in a domestic violence bill.



The second event that enraged the Iraqi public was the proposal to appoint four clerics to the Federal Supreme Court (out of a total of 17 judges) and to give them the power to veto any decision that they believed did not align with Islamic law. The potential impact on the Iraqi state and the authority this would give religious leaders is described by Abd al-Hussein Shaban, an Iraqi legal expert in an opinion piece for Al Jazeera:

“Naturally, submitting the Federal Supreme Court with its aforementioned duties [interpreting the constitution, ratifying the elections, adjudicating between the federal government and regional governments] to the rule of clerics means submitting the entire Iraqi state and its three authorities [executive, judicial, legislative] under their control, and behind them is the religious movement.”<sup>26</sup>

Currently, religious figures can serve in an advisory position in the court, but they do not have the right to veto the decisions of sitting judges. This proposal, which has not been successful, would have blurred religion and the state in Iraq – in the words of Iraq’s legal experts and civil society activists, it would have eroded the civil state.

Naturally, one looks to the leaders of a protest movement and to a country’s public intellectuals to examine how secularism and the elusive “civil state” (*al-dawla al-madaniya*) and “civicness” (*al-madaniya*) are defined and framed, but even amongst these elites, the definitions remain slippery. The definition of secularism as anti-Islamism is clear in the rhetoric of protest leaders. Take, for example, an interview that the Empowering Peace in Iraq Center did with Talal al-Hariri, the head of the October 25 Movement (a political party that claims to represent the October Protest Movement), where he says that because his friends and colleagues protested Islamist parties, the “tax we pay for secularism is huge.”<sup>27</sup> Al-Hariri is by no means the only activist to pit these two terms in opposition. In my own interviews with civil activists from the protest movement, their main grievance against religion in politics was Islamist parties, but oftentimes that translated into a desire for secular governance without a clear definition of each of these terms. The Emtidad Movement, a protest-based party which was able to unexpectedly win nine seats in the 2021 elections, maintains the view that there should be a single Ministry of Endowments (as under the pre-2003 state) and not separate endowment commissions for different religious groups.<sup>28</sup> Choosing to adopt an inclusivist message, rather than rejecting all religion, they also believe that all religions practiced in Iraq can be a source of legislation, and not just Islam.

In Iraq, “secularism” and “the civil state” are both defined in contrast to Islamism, particularly the Shia Islamist parties that ascended post-2003 and whatever policies they promote. This includes those policies that blur the line between religion and the state, like the proposed changes in personal status law or the presence of clerics in the Federal Supreme Court. However, there is little contestation of attributes of religion in the state when these features are not linked to an Islamist party. For example, despite the demands for constitutional revision, there is little push to remove Islam as a source of legislation (as noted, Emtidad merely wants to add more religions as a source of legislation). Therefore, the call for “secularism” and “the civil state” in Iraq is chiefly about the separation of religion and politics, which can then serve as a vehicle to protect against the encroachment of religion on the state. This demand of separation of religion and politics is rooted in a deep dislike and dissatisfaction with Islamism, one which was clearly expressed in the October Protest Movement.

## THE EVENTS OF OCTOBER 2019

From October 2019 to March 2020, Iraq witnessed the largest protest movement in its post-2003 history, spreading from the capital to encompass the entirety of the south. Today, it is referred to as the Tishreen Movement (or, by activists, the Tishreen Revolution) in reference to the month it started in, October (“Tishreen” in Arabic). This movement was the culmination of years of public discontent around corruption, poor public services, unemployment, and poverty. The movement is composed of multiple actors and leaders, containing both organic and engineered expressions of mass anger, and conveying a broad set of demands, ranging from reform to revolution. By the time the movement ended due to a combination of the COVID-19 pandemic, violence, and sheer fatigue, it had successfully removed a prime minister and garnered a promise for early elections with a new electoral law, which took place October 10, 2021.

For the average Iraqi participating in this movement, the structural causes had been in place for years and manifested by previous protest movements, including in 2011, 2015, and 2018. Furthermore, previous regimes — including the Saddam Hussein dictatorship — had left Iraq with a social contract in which employment by the state was accessible to most college graduates. The population of Iraq has nearly doubled since 2003, from 25.6 million that year<sup>29</sup> to 42.2 million in 2022,<sup>30</sup> which has made this practice impossible to continue. Over half the population is under 25 and confronts a job market where the public sector is oversaturated and where the private sector is small and often unregulated.<sup>31</sup>

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These structural causes ignited into protest movements in the past. In 2011, the Arab Spring in Iraq continued for months, with thousands of protesters, extending to the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. The protests were shut down through violence and through political and economic concessions.<sup>32</sup> In 2015, in the middle of the war with IS, protests broke out in Basra in southern Iraq, driven by the poor provision of electricity during the unbearably hot summer months. The death of a protester sparked widespread anger, and the protests reached nearly a million participants across Baghdad and the south. Faleh A. Jabar, an Iraqi sociologist, described this protest movement as signaling a shift from identity to issue-based politics in Iraq.<sup>33</sup> In 2018, protests reignited in Basra once more, the public infuriated with the polluted water and lack of electricity amidst the unbearable heat. These protests, which occurred during government formation, effectively put an end to Prime Minister al-Abadi’s bid for a second term.<sup>34</sup>

The 2019 protests were not sparked by an electricity shortage in the summer, but by three events that triggered anger amongst both veteran activists and everyday Iraqis, from the upper-middle-class urban elite to the working class. The first of these events was security forces hosing down female graduate students in late September.<sup>35</sup> Shortly after, the demotion of Lieutenant General Abdul-Wahab al-Saadi, the popular leader of Iraq’s counterterrorism forces, added fuel to the flames.

Al-Saadi is one of the few universally well-liked figures in Iraq, with supporters from north to south and among Iraq's diverse ethno-religious groups.<sup>36</sup> Finally, the government's policy of clearing off informal housing settlements as well as driving away unlicensed street vendors in downtown Baghdad infuriated the working class.<sup>37</sup>

Eventually, these policies of predation would transform into acts of indiscriminate violence against protesters by security forces through the misuse of tear gas canisters and live bullets. With each of these attacks, public anger swelled, as did the ranks of the protesters. In interviews, civil society activists reflected on the time preceding the protest movement and described their surprise at the size of the movement.<sup>38</sup> The scale and diversity of participation sets the October Protest Movement apart from previous events. For months, it kept the country at a standstill and posed a challenge to the existing political order, despite many of the demands being reform-oriented, rather than revolutionary. Many external observers describe the novelty of women's participation in the protests as well as that of students, both school children and university students alike.<sup>39</sup> In certain moments, the protest movement appeared as a carnival to which people took their families and were entertained and, in other moments, it was closer to a war zone.<sup>40</sup> Louisa Loveluck, the Baghdad bureau chief for the Washington Post, described the violence as the worst she had encountered outside of Egypt and in contexts which did not devolve into active war.<sup>41</sup> Outside the country, diaspora Iraqis were moved by the scenes before them, though they frequently romanticized the events and fixated on certain fragments of the protesting class while overlooking others.

One of the more overlooked participant groups in the protest movement were the followers of Muqtada al-Sadr, a populist cleric who leads the Sadrist Movement, which had won the largest number of seats in the 2018 parliamentary elections. Despite being key stakeholders in the government, the Sadrists followed their leader's directives to first join the protesters and later, to turn against them in violence. The Sadrist base consists of a large mass of individuals that are readily deployable to protest squares and have been directed to do so at different moments and for various political goals, including, for example, in support of the Palestinian cause. Their presence in the October Protest Movement certainly gave the movement higher visibility, but it also made it less cohesive ideologically.

To external observers, the upper-middle-class, well-educated, and urban civil society activists were frequently the ones who carried across the protest message and who articulated demands to wider audiences. Everyday Iraqis who were protesting for the first time adopted the ideas presented to them by these more seasoned activists. Some of the more popular discussions were around the suitability of Iraq's parliamentary system and whether a presidential one would be better. Other discussions were around electoral reform and how districts should be drawn. In private interviews with the author, some protest leaders emphasized the need for leadership of the protest movement and of curating ideas and debates for public consumption, suggesting accurately that the schism between citizen grievances and policy solutions was one that could only be bridged by experienced activists.<sup>42</sup> Accordingly, activists synthesized and unified their demands, and protest squares across the country called for improvement in public services and government performance.



Over the course of the protest movement, and as violence against protesters escalated, these demands evolved from better public services and employment opportunities to high-level political change, including early elections, the resignation of the government, and reform of the electoral system and even the constitution.<sup>43</sup> Additionally, as protesters were being preyed upon by security forces, demands for accountability, justice, and control over extra-state armed actors also arose. The academic definition of a state as having a “monopoly on violence” gained popularity amongst Iraqis. Civil society activists largely expressed these demands from a reformist perspective, hoping to work within the system to enact change, but much of the protester base viewed them through a more revolutionary lens, demanding change of the political system itself.<sup>44</sup>

These political demands, as opposed to service- and employment-oriented previous ones, set aside this protest movement from its predecessors, as did the large and diverse turnout. The successes of the protest movement also distinguished it from the past, as it was able to force the resignation of Prime Minister Abdul-Mahdi. This achievement was unprecedented in Iraq’s post-2003 protest history and highlights both the reformist aims of the elites of the movement as well as the important role the religious establishment played in shepherding those aims and constraining them within the confines of the Iraqi constitution and legal system. In the next section, I describe the reaction of the Shia religious establishment to the October Protest Movement through an examination of its Friday sermons.

## THE OCTOBER PROTEST MOVEMENT TOLD IN SERMONS

Previous quantitative research on the nature of Friday sermons during times of protest and during regular time reveals that the Marjyya does not capitalize on easily accessible Shia narratives of revolution and oppression to encourage protest activity.<sup>45</sup> Rather, during protest times, they toe a fine line by talking about the protection of public property and highlighting legal and constitutional mechanisms of change. In the paragraphs below, I describe some of the key sermons from the October 2019 through February 2020, when sermons were stopped due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The first relevant sermon was delivered on October 4, 2019 by Ahmed al-Safi of the Abbas Holy Shrine.<sup>46</sup> In it, he reminded the government of their duties toward citizens and reminded citizens that the religious establishment, in response to the demands of the 2015 protests, had suggested the formation of a non-governmental committee that would investigate corruption and provide a road plan for overcoming it. He suggested that it was not too late to form such a committee and that it might help overcome the difficulties of the present situation. Thus, this first sermon highlighted grievances as being corruption-related (including services and unemployment) and tied the protests to previous protest movements. This sermon was negatively received by the protesters who saw this attempt at even-handedness as, in effect, backing the government and hence the status quo.

The clerical solution-oriented rhetoric around the protests was quickly overtaken by concern about the safety of protesters and the security situation in Iraq overall. The Marjyya corrected its position, which was seen as far too timid and supportive

of the government. Thus, the sermon from October 11, 2019 was concerned with attacks on both protesters and media offices, and by extension freedom of speech.<sup>47</sup> A few days before, the offices of some media organizations like Al Arabiya, NRT, and Dijlah had been attacked by gunmen.<sup>48</sup> The attack prompted panic amongst other media organizations, causing many of them to flee Baghdad. As the protests hit their stride, on October 25, 2019, Abdel Mahdi al-Karbalai of the Hussain Holy Shrine warned both the protesters and the security forces to maintain the peace. He reminded security forces and government officials that the right to protest is guaranteed by the Iraqi constitution.<sup>49</sup>

By November, the religious establishment had begun to signal agreement with some of the political demands of the protesters, like early elections and change in electoral mechanisms and laws. Perhaps the most important sermon of the protest period was the one on November 29, 2019 in which al-Safi declared that “the parliament from which the current government came is invited to rethink its choices and to act in a way that benefits Iraq and in a way that protects the blood of its children.”<sup>50</sup> This was a direct call to change the government as well as to hold early elections. The following day, Prime Minister Abdul-Mahdi announced his resignation. In a manner typical of the tradition religious establishment, the possibility of change was cemented via existing state institutions. The following week, the Shia religious establishment urged a return to peace and, for those harmed to seek justice through the legal system.<sup>51</sup> As the process for deciding on a new prime minister began, it adopted deliberately reformist rhetoric in its sermons.

The sermons shifted to rhetoric about Iraqi sovereignty with the United States’ assassination of Qassem Soleimani, commander of the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps’ Quds Force, and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the deputy chief of the PMF, on Baghdad Airport Road on January 3, 2020.<sup>52</sup> As tensions escalated between Iran and the U.S. on Iraqi soil, the situation became difficult for the protesters, who began to receive accusations, particularly from paramilitaries, of being American agents. The issue of Iraqi sovereignty and U.S.-Iranian competition took center stage, detracting from the protest movement. In Baghdad, there were protesters celebrating the assassinations, seeing them as a blow to Iranian control over Iraq, while others worried about the potential escalation in violence on Iraqi soil.<sup>53</sup> Then U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo tweeted a video of Iraqi protesters celebrating the death of Soleimani with the caption “Iraqis – Iraqis – dancing in the street for freedom; thankful that General Soleimani is no more.”<sup>54</sup> The media attention on some of these celebrations made the environment for activists even more dangerous and marked the beginning of the end of the protest movement.

**As tensions escalated between Iran and the U.S. on Iraqi soil, the situation became difficult for the protesters, who began to receive accusations of being American agents. The issue of Iraqi sovereignty and U.S.-Iranian competition took center stage, detracting from the protest movement.**



On January 24, 2020, the religious establishment reiterated its concern for Iraqi sovereignty but also stressed that the government formation process was taking an unconstitutionally long time.<sup>55</sup> The process of selecting a new prime minister and forming a new cabinet took months. President Barham Salih first proposed

Mohammed Tawfiq Allawi, which due to his previous position in the government as the minister of communications was rejected by the Iraqi street, with protesters carrying posters with a large X over his face. Allawi's government was not ratified by parliament, either. The Allawi attempt took all of February. By mid-March, the new prime minister-designate was Adnan al-Zurfi, a former governor of Najaf, who also resigned after failing to form a government, due to the lack of sufficient political backing, in early April. On May 7, the Iraqi parliament confirmed the government of the third prime minister-designate, Mustafa al-Kadhimi. During this time, from early February to early May, the religious establishment had ended its Friday sermons due to the COVID-19 situation; it first alluded to the situation in a sermon on February 21 and dedicated its last sermon on February 28 entirely to health issues.<sup>56</sup> Due to the pandemic, public protests had also abated, giving al-Kadhimi an opportunity to form a government.

## WHY DO PROTESTERS BELIEVE IN THE MARJAYYA?

The section above reveals how responsive the sermons were to events on the ground and how committed they were to a reformist agenda, of seeking change through existing state institutions. These sermons were closely followed by protesters, activists, government authorities, and other observers. In my interviews with civil society activists, many of them described their commitment to following the sermons. Perhaps the most telling indication of how attuned activists were was in a conversation with a Christian Iraqi from Basra:

“After October, it was very necessary that we followed the speeches of the Marjayya because it was the engine of movement for many people. Each speech which supported the revolution was a source of strength for us. The sermons are important to us so that we can gain an audience.”<sup>57</sup>

At the same time, there was a minority of activists that I spoke with who were adamant about keeping religious figures away from the protest movement:

“I didn't listen [to the Friday sermons] before [the protest movement], and I didn't listen to them during the October Revolution. Honestly, I am not satisfied with them. We want a civil state, we shouldn't be directed by anyone – a man of religion or a man of politics.”<sup>58</sup>

The personal politics of activists were diluted in the charters of the political parties that emerged from the protest movement. These parties focused less so on the separation of religion and politics or religion and the state, and more so on inclusivity of different religions and concepts of “civicness” and “citizenry” to counter pre-existing concepts of sectarian and religious apportionment. For example, Emtidad, the only one of these parties to win any seats in parliament, included an entire section on their position toward religion in their charter. In it, they focus on respect for all religions and argue that “it is not permissible to draw the policies of the state and to take decisions and to differentiate between Iraqi citizens in rights or duties on a religious or sectarian basis.”<sup>59</sup> In another example, the Nazil Akhith Haqi (“I am going to get my rights”) Movement, which also ran in the elections, pit themselves



against the political powers that promote sectarian and religious apportionment. In other words, they pit themselves against Islamist parties and adopt the language of the “civil.”

The popularity of Islamists had waned in Iraq ahead of the 2018 parliamentary elections, which forced some once-Islamist parties to restyle themselves to appeal to Iraq’s young electorate, by using the language of “civil state” and “citizenship.” In public opinion polling in Iraq, these patterns are quite clear with trust in religious leaders and preference for Islamist parties declining steadily over the years. Many of the activists I spoke with described their dissatisfaction with Islamist parties, which they viewed as corrupt and sectarian:

“We heard about Islamist parties having corrupt ministers, like the Dawa party. The Sadrists also had a lot of corruption... the Dawa party was responsible and had eaten up all of Iraq and as youth in the beginning of our lives, we did not like the situation, so we decided to try to change as much as possible.”<sup>60</sup>

Along with this contempt for Islamist parties, many Iraqi youth also view the Shia religious establishment and clerics as being complicit in the rise of these parties. The religious establishment is aware of this criticism and has calibrated its position to maintain influence in society. Neither Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani nor other members of the religious establishment take their influence for granted, but carefully weigh up how that influence should be deployed in order to protect it. Sometimes, as in the run up to the January 2005 elections when they informally endorsed religious candidates, the Marjaya can get things wrong and suffer the consequences. Indeed, some protesters held al-Sistani partially responsible for some of the mistakes committed after 2003. At other times, as in their evolving attitude to the October Protest Movement, the religious establishment adjusted their position to reflect what they judged to be the dominant trends in Iraqi public opinion. In October 2019, activists respected Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani’s role, but they also understood their own power in doing so:

“I used to wait for what Sistani [through his representatives] would say and he did not disappoint. I spoke to Hawza teachers, and I said protesters are going out and they respect Sistani’s Marjaya, but if you abandon them, they are not going to respect you for long and the fire that looks far from you will touch you.”<sup>61</sup>

Another protester from Nasiriyah described his sentiment: “He [al-Sistani] is an important man, his sermon is important, we were very happy with his support for the protests, and we were prideful of the statements he made.”<sup>62</sup> In general, activists were satisfied with the involvement of the religious establishment in the protest movement and were avid listeners of the sermons. However, how did they reconcile these sentiments with their preference for a state which separates religion from politics?

The answer to this question is multifaceted. First, the Marjaya’s support for the protest movement, although carefully swathed in the language of reform and constitutionality, allowed the religious establishment to reclaim its position as being a neutral arbiter, rather than being associated with the state. The responses of activists to the role of the religious establishment clearly highlights this. On multiple occasions, the Marjaya not only rebuked government officials for their predatory behavior toward protesters but also reminded listeners of the many occasions it

had called on them in the past to fight corruption. In this way, it convinced protesters that it was on their side and that the fight was against corruption. Thus, even those whose views differed from the Marjaya still found themselves respecting it: “In a realistic manner, I can differ from the Marjaya in many things, but in general, it was an ally to the October protests.”<sup>63</sup>

The Marjaya was not only an ally, but it was able to capitalize on the fact that there was no leader in Iraq who was able to speak to the protesters, even though many politicians tried to paint themselves as being understanding and on the protesters’ side. Many activists described the religious establishment as a leader for all Iraqis, and not just the Shia community. This is more difficult to ascertain as the protests were largely occurring in the Shia areas of Iraq. In many ways, there was no other societal force to turn to for support. And, according to many activists in the holy cities of Najaf and Karbala, the religious establishment tried to reach out to activists to understand their demands. Even activists in Baghdad spoke of representatives of the Marjaya in Tahrir Square, the locus of the movement, listening to their demands. They emphasized that the religious establishment never failed to criticize the violence faced by the protesters and reemphasize their constitutional rights. Protesters did not have many powerful supporters and were skeptical of governmental figures who claimed to support them, rejecting entirely (for example) the speaker of parliament’s show of visiting them to discuss their demands and casting doubt on the intentions of the president, who supported their demands throughout.<sup>64</sup>

The respect for religious leaders, however, does not extend to other clerical figures outside the Marjaya. Seminary teachers in Karbala, for example, spoke to me of having to shut down their classes due to fears of protester anger directed at any figure wearing a turban.<sup>65</sup> For activists, it was the Marjaya and Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani himself who were respected but lower ranking clerics, and especially politicized clerics, were frowned upon.

These views were aided by the belief that the Marjaya itself (though not all clerics) did not harbor secret political ambitions and did not share a similar view of religion-state relations as the religious establishment of neighboring Iran. Interestingly, they equated al-Sistani’s leadership with Iraqi nationalism and sovereignty while viewing Iraq’s Islamist parties as more closely tied to Iran. One of the features of the protest movement was its strong anti-Iranian tones, and one of the ways in which activists reconciled support for the Marjaya with protesting against Islamism was by casting Iran’s religious establishment and seminaries as being the opponent of the religious establishment and seminaries of Iraq. The unstated assumption underlying this reconciliation of ideas is that the Iraqi religious seminaries, and particularly al-Sistani’s office, would not produce the type of predatory Islamism that led Iraq into disaster after 2003. Regardless of whether these assumptions are true or false, they demonstrate that the Marjaya remains a relevant actor in the Iraqi street, but only by calibrating its position toward the public.

**Interestingly, [activists] equated al-Sistani’s leadership with Iraqi nationalism and sovereignty while viewing Iraq’s Islamist parties as more closely tied to Iran.**



Even for those activists who admittedly fear religious authority in Iraq's future, many of them view collaboration with the Najafi Marjaya as being one of the only ways to enact change in Iraq. Their vision of a future Iraq does not include the Marjaya at the political helm, but they have become more cognizant of the benefits of collaboration with it and of their own power in conferring legitimacy upon the institution.

The nuances of this exchange of legitimacy are sometimes lost due to the primacy of certain voices in describing protests in contemporary Iraq, particularly the voices of upper-middle class elites and Iraqi expatriates in the West. Many external observers of 2015, 2018, and the 2019-2020 protest movements draw a sharp line between "Islamism" and "secularism" in the rhetoric of the movements and their demands. For example, Faleh A. Jabar writes:

"A remarkable aspect of the protests was the use of secular aesthetic festive forms as opposed to the prudish ceremonies of the ruling Islamist parties. The 2011 'Iraqi Spring' demonstration was preceded by the Valentine's Day celebratory demonstration. The 2015 protest demonstrations culminated in a huge New Year's eve party ever with millions taking to the streets. This unprecedented massive celebration of a non-Muslim anniversary was the expression of a relatively silent majority's aspirations. Taking to the streets and elevating the private domestic party to a mass festival is a sign of new, distinct cultural attitudes amongst most layers of the middle-class as opposed to the ruling elites' mentality."<sup>66</sup>

To imagine that this sharp line exists is to misunderstand Iraq. In 2019, online commentators (many of whom had never set foot in southern Iraq) celebrated the "taking back of religious symbolism" of the revolutionary figure of Imam al-Hussein away from Islamist parties and Shia armed actors. Imam al-Hussein is a historic Shia figure whose story of revolution, victimhood, and martyrdom has fueled Shia identity — and Shia protest movements — for centuries. His story — and parallels to it — are frequently evoked by Shia political actors, including figures as prominent as the late Grand Ayatollah Khomeini during the Iranian Revolution. In their own history of protest, including against Saddam Hussein in 1977, 1979, and 1991, the Shia of Iraq have also utilized this symbolism. In the October Protest Movement, this symbolism was also present in the form of banners as well as rituals.<sup>67</sup> But this was not necessarily "taking back" religious symbolism, which has historically belonged to the poor and downtrodden.

The use of this symbolism does not mean that an entire generation of Shia youth have shed their identity or repurposed it to achieve a secular goal. Rather, many of the cultural attributes of Shiism are expressed — unironically and not with the intention of subverting the system — by working-class protesters who joined these movements. The reason that there is a paradox for protester support of secularism is because there is a focus — even in this report — on the representatives of the movement from the urban upper-middle class. To this day, there has been little to no research conducted and published, particularly in English, on the working-class base of the protest movement.



## CONCLUSION

This report has merely brushed the surface of the question of religion and the state in Iraq. It has touched upon many key issues: What is secularism in Iraq? What is the civil state? Has Iraq separated religion from the state? Has Iraq separated religion from politics? Are Iraqi youth protesters secular or merely anti-Islamist? Is being anti-Islamist necessarily the same as being secular? Where does the Shia religious establishment fit into all of this and how do Iraqi protesters reconcile their own distaste for Islamism with acceptance of the religious establishment?

By drawing on research conducted during fieldwork and analysis of clerical and political texts, this report has made three arguments. First, the young Iraqi protesters who came out in 2019 and 2020 were primarily opposed to Islamist parties, and thereby the separation of religion and politics, more so than the separation of religion and the state, though they did not always articulate it as such. This general predisposition has revolved around the themes of the “civil state” and “citizenry” that are juxtaposed by activists against “ethno-sectarian apportionment.” An overview of Iraq’s political landscape and constitution reveals that there is neither a full separation of religion and the state in Iraq nor a separation of religion and politics.

Secondly, the religious establishment has had to calibrate its position carefully and deliberately to not pay a price for its informal association with Islamist parties and its previous support of them. Accordingly, its response to the protest movement was to protect the protesters but to simultaneously push a reformist message, focusing on change through elections.

Thirdly, although this supportive position was well-received by protesters, activists were also aware that legitimization was a two-way street. Therefore, in looking to Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani for support for their movement, they also understood that the religious establishment needed Iraqi public opinion on their side as well. In many ways, this made the relationship between the two less paradoxical and more practical, as neither party could afford to alienate the other. Governments come and go, but the Iraqi public and the Marjaya remain.

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