



A SHIFT AMONG THE SHI'A

WILL A MARJ'A EMERGE FROM THE ARABIAN PENINSULA?

ABBAS KADHIM & ABDULLAH F. ALREBH

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SUMMARY

The highest-ranking Shi'a religious authorities are known as *marj'as*. These clerics have large followings who “emulate” them, which entails adherence to the *marj'as*' legal decisions, spiritual practices, and often, political positions. Currently, most *marj'as* are Iranian and reside in either Qom, Iran or in Najaf, Iraq . Many of their followers, however, live in Sunni-majority Persian Gulf states. In light of the political tensions between Iran and the Gulf states, officials in the latter have expressed reservations about the relationship between Shi'a citizens and Iranian religious leaders.

This paper looks at the political implications of the relationship between Shi'a in the Gulf states and Iranian *marj'as*. It considers the historical background to these ties as well as the Gulf states' concerns surrounding the outflow to Iran of religious taxes, which are interpreted as a sign of possibly conflicting loyalties. The authors argue that the emergence of a *marj'a* who would be based in one of the Gulf states could quell these concerns. To inform policymakers and regional analysts, the paper identifies potential *marj'as* from the region and steps that Gulf states must take so that their Shi'a citizens will shift their allegiance from foreign-based *marj'as* to domestically based ones.

UNDERSTANDING SHI'A RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY

Shi'a Muslims follow a hierarchy of clerical leadership based on superiority of learning. The *mujtahids* (scholars with the power of legal reasoning - *ijtihād*) constitute the religious elite with the right to issue religious rulings (*fatwas*). A mujtahid may rise to the rank of a *marj'a al-taqlīd*, or reference point for laypeople's emulation. Any senior mujtahid could plausibly make a claim to *marj'aiyyah* (marj'a status), but that does not guarantee a strong following. The two most important criteria are extraordinary scholarly competence and impeccable personal character. Today, the major capital of Shi'a leadership is Najaf in Iraq, followed by Qom in Iran. Iranian ayatollahs are dominant in both schools. In Iraq, there are about 20 self-appointed marj'as, of whom five or six are widely recognized. In Iran, there are about 30 self-appointed marj'as, with about the same number being widely recognized as in Iraq. Most Shi'a Muslims around the world follow marj'as based in these two countries, seeking spiritual and jurisprudential guidance from them and paying *khums* (a form of tax) to their *wakils* (representatives).

The number of Shi'a Muslims around the world is estimated at between 200 and 250 million. They are the majority in Iran, Iraq, Azerbaijan, and Bahrain and a significant minority in India, Pakistan,

Afghanistan, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Yemen. Moreover, the Shi'a presence in the rest of Asia and in Africa, Europe, and the Americas is well-documented. More than 50% of the Shi'a live outside the heartland (Iraq and Iran) where the marj'as reside. Shi'a emulation of the marj'as varies in focus and scope depending on the views of each marj'a and the general traditions of each community. The most common form of emulation involves imitating the marj'as' spiritual and worship practices and following his legal decisions, mostly as they relate to civil status laws and certain aspects of economic and financial transactions. But it is also common for individual and group emulation to extend to political orientation and militancy.

Since the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran, some Arab countries with considerable Shi'a minorities have expressed their concerns regarding such transnational religious leadership by Iranian ayatollahs. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) member states in particular have had great anxiety regarding the relationship between Shi'a citizens and their religious transnational leaders. The Shi'a populations in the GCC countries have a long history that predates Persia's conversion to Shi'a Islam in the 16th century. The rise of Shi'a theocracy in Iran, coupled with the dominance of Iranian ayatollahs in Iraq, increased the concerns of GCC monarchies, especially in light of clear Iranian influence in Lebanon since the 1980s and in Iraq

since the overthrow of the Ba'ath regime in 2003. Recently, regional communities and religious scholars renewed their calls for local marj'as to nationalize the religious authority of Shi'a citizens. These preferences were even expressed privately to the authors by some GCC officials. This paper aims to investigate the possibility that one or multiple marj'as from the Arabian Peninsula might emerge in the near future.

We examine the potential of a marj'a (the term "grand ayatollah" is also used) emerging in one of the GCC states that has a sizable Shi'a population (particularly Saudi Arabia or Bahrain) in the coming few years. In the past 100 years, the highest Shi'a religious authorities have resided in Qom (Iran) or Najaf (Iraq). With the exception of Grand Ayatollah Fadhlullah of Lebanon, no leading marj'a has emerged in any Shi'a community outside Iraq and Iran.

The obligation of Shi'a citizens in the GCC states to follow foreign ayatollahs (especially Iranians) and to send them money as part of their religious duty (*zakāt* and *khums*) often runs against state laws and is treated as a sign of double loyalty. The emergence of a local Arab marj'a who is a citizen of a GCC state may not end the religious prejudice against the Shi'a, but it might help dispel doubts about their national loyalties

Given the rapid pace of political and social change in GCC states, it might not be long before a local marj'a starts to assert his authority. This is particularly true as we approach the post-Sistani era (Grand Ayatollah Sistani is 90 years old). At the

present time, Grand Ayatollah Sistani is a towering figure of Shi'a religious authority and, as long as he is alive, all his potential successors will be reluctant to announce their candidacy for the marj'aiyyah out of respect for him. Sistani's passing will leave an opening for several potential successors, some of whom are citizens of Bahrain or Saudi Arabia. In light of the tensions between Iran and the GCC states, which places their Shi'a citizens in the crossfire, this will not only be a succession of religious authority, but also a major political event that will impact Iran's ability to influence Arab Shi'a. Policy makers in the region and beyond need to understand this geopolitical dynamic, which can come into play at any time.

COMPLICATED LOYALTIES: RELIGION AND THE STATE

Since GCC countries were first formed as nation-states, the Shi'a communities living in them have faced a predicament. On the one hand, they are the citizens of polities that were established on lands where their genealogical roots often date back many centuries. On the other hand, Shi'a are underrepresented in state decision-making processes across the Gulf. This sectarianism is aggravated by the Gulf Shi'a's emulation of foreign marj'as who reside in Iraq or Iran. GCC monarchies are particularly concerned about the emulation of marj'as in Iran, a country that they view as an expansionist



Muslim Shi'a clerics study at the Imam Khomeini Education and Research Institute in the holy city of Qom. Qom is one of Shiite Islam's holiest sites and is home to several marj'as. (ATTA KENARE/AFP via Getty Images)

rival. Some public figures have gone as far as to accuse Shi'a of disloyalty and hostility toward the homeland.

The second source of concern is the transfer of funds under the title of khums. This money is viewed in some countries of origin as a form of support for a foreign entity, even though it is an Islamic duty according to Shi'a jurisprudence and it is paid to the marj'a, who distributes the contributions to religiously sanctioned charitable causes as he sees fit, with no state involvement. Concern is elevated significantly when the money transfer is undeclared or sent in cash. Gulf States have clear laws and regulations around financial activities as a part of the fight against money laundering and financial support for terrorism. This might affect their Shi'a citizens who pay their khums to marj'as

residing in Iran and Iraq. Thus, Shi'a citizens often face a hard choice: either violate state laws and risk severe punishment or violate their religious obligation. However, followers of Grand Ayatollah Sistani have been relieved from this dilemma. His ruling on khums and other religious dues is that they ought to be spent in their country of origin. He lets local representatives decide how to spend significant amounts of money on projects and services to the benefit of their communities that contribute the funds. Therefore, money transfers do not drive a wedge between his constituents around the world and the governments of their home countries.

The emergence of a marj'a from one of the GCC countries will present a reasonable solution to both problems: foreign connections and money transfers.

Regardless of whether he is a resident of Saudi Arabia or Bahrain, he will present all GCC States with a political solution to their worries about the ties their citizens currently maintain with Iran or Iraq. One problem it will not solve is the problem of suspicion and sectarian prejudice prevailing inside religious and public opinion circles against the Shi'a. However, the silver lining is that sectarian prejudice will be exposed when a major pretext is removed. GCC rulers will have to embrace the idea of a local marj'a as a better alternative to the status quo. Decades of heavy-handed policies have failed to accomplish anything other than increasing the alienation of an important section of their population, and their expressions of fear about foreign sympathies have become a self-fulfilling prophecy in certain cases.

At a global level, the rights of religious minorities are increasingly viewed as a priority by the international community. States that subject wide segments of their populations to religious discrimination are publicly criticized. All countries, including those in the GCC, should remain cognizant of this norm.

THE MARJ'AIYYAH IN THE ARAB GULF: A BRIEF HISTORY

For a long time, Shi'a on the Arab side of the Persian Gulf (Khalij) followed their local clergy. Indeed, the local marj'aiyyah dominated the region until its decline in

the second quarter of the 20th century. The death of those last local marj'as on one hand, and the new wave of the students, who returned from Najaf as the wakils of the major marj'as in Iraq, on the other hand, led to the shift toward the emulation of the transnational grand ayatollahs. Among those last marj'as in the region: (1) in al-Ahsa: Sayyid Hashim al-Salman (d. 1892), Sheikh Muhammad Abu Khamsin (d. 1901), Sheikh Muhammad al-Aithan (d. 1913), and Sheikh Musa Abu Khamsin (d. 1932). (2) in Qatif: Sheikh Ali Abu Abd al-Karim al-Khunayzi (d. 1943) and his nephew Sheikh Ali Abulhassan al-Khunayzi (d. 1944), and Sayid Majid al-Awami (d. 1948). (3) in Bahrain: As the mainstream school was Akhbari, which does not necessarily require the emulation of a living marj'a, people used to follow a number of their old marj'as who passed away in the 18th century such as Sheikh Hussein al-Asfour (d. 1801) and Sheikh Abdullah al-Sitri (d. 1851). Indeed, there are people still emulating them, but the number has declined in favor of emulating the contemporary marj'as in Najaf and Qom. Although Muhammad Amin Zainuddin (d. 1998) was born and raised in Iraq, some scholars count him as a Bahraini marj'a because of his family origins (grandfather migrated from Bahrain). Zainuddin and al-Asfour still have some followers in Bahrain and Qatif, however, the number of their emulators is gradually shrinking, as the new generation tends to follow mainstream marj'as.

During that period, those local marj'as enjoyed a great deal of respect from the region's social leaders and governors. From

their marj'as' last names, one can discern that most belonged to noble families who could afford to sponsor them as full-time religious students in a pre-oil period when most households, in order to survive, needed all their sons to join the labor market and contribute to family income. That explains the social hegemony of certain families among the Shi'a communities. Members of noble families share power: landlords and merchants have social and economic power, while clergy possess religious authority. Gradually, the circle of those able to attend religious school expanded to include ordinary people. Some migrated to Najaf to study in its *hawza* (seminary), returning as wakils of the major marj'as of Najaf. In the meantime, the elder local marj'a were passing away.

GCC SHI'A AND THE TRANSNATIONAL MARJ'AS

The new wave of Najaf alumni who returned to Saudi Arabia and Bahrain territories in the first half of the 20th century included a number of well-educated clergy who were advocating for the grand ayatollahs in Iraq such as Sayyid Abu al-Hasan al-Isfahani (d. 1946), Sheikh Muhammad Ridha al-Yasin (d. 1951), and Sayyid Muhsin al-Hakim (d. 1970). When the marj'aiyyah was split between Najaf and Qom after his passing, the tradition of following the Grand Marj'a

in Najaf continued as the faithful followed Sayyid Abu al-Qasim al-Khoei (d. 1992). After al-Khoei's death, most of the GCC Shi'a followed Sayyid Mohammad-Reza Golpaygani, who died a year after al-Khoei. Since 1993, Sayyid Ali al-Sistani became the dominant transnational marj'a emulated by the majority of world's Shi'a, including those who live in the GCC. However, a considerable number of Shi'a in the GCC follow other marj'as such as Sheikh Wahid Khorasani and Sayyid Sadiq al-Shirazi in Qom, and the Iranian Supreme leader Sayyid Ali Khamenei, in addition to those, who continue to follow the late Sayyid Mohammad Hussein Fadhlullah of Lebanon (d. 2010).

The relationship between the local clergy (the wakils) and the transnational marj'as is based on what we can call a "mutual legitimacy." While the marj'a proves his superiority in seminaries (*hawzas*) in Iraq, Iran, or Lebanon, the local wakils advocate for him and persuade their people to follow him. The local clergy who enjoy popularity in their communities derive their legitimacy from being the representatives of the deputies of the Hidden Imam (who, according to Shi'a doctrine, went into occultation in 874 C.E. and will return at the end of this world to restore justice and peace). However, the marj'a who has influence in the traditional *hawza* still needs adherents who follow his lead and put his religious rulings (fatwas) into action. For an aspiring marj'a, the key to gaining adherents is having the right wakils to promote and

empower him over others. This explains the success of marj'as based in Qom or Najaf among the Shi'a of the GCC.

In the GCC, some of the wakils are well-educated clergy. Indeed, some have reached the rank of mujtahid. Those clergy enjoy high respect in their communities and states. For example, Sheikh Muhammad al-Hajri (d. 2004) was a well-known Ayatollah and the a *qādhi* (judge) of the Department of Endowments and Family Affairs, which administers personal status laws (marriage, divorce, inheritance, and religious endowments) for the Shi'a community exclusively in al-Ahsa (there is another one in Qatif). al-Hajri did not proclaim his marj'aiyyah, even though some of his Iranian and Iraqi students did and attracted followers in Saudi Arabia such as Sayyid Sadiq al-Shirazi in Qom and Mohammad Taqi al-Modarresi in Karbala. In Medina, Sheikh Muhammad Ali al-Amri (d. 2011) was the Shi'a community leader in western Saudi Arabia beginning in 1952, and the major wakil of the transnational marj'as until his death. Some sources refer to him as a mujtahid, but he did not proclaim himself to be more than a representative of the major marj'as. Al-Amri's funeral reflected his status as a highly respected religious figure in the Shi'a community, not only in Saudi Arabia but worldwide. The Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei and Grand Ayyatollah Ali Sistani issued profound eulogy statements for Amri and arranged consolation gatherings for his memorial. This is not a surprise, as most of the ayatollahs who went to pilgrimage in

Saudi Arabia during this time visited Amri's modest mosque - located on his personal farm - and prayed under his lead. Another example lays with Sheikh Abdul Hadi al-Fadhli (d. 2013), who was well-respected by the Islamic Dawa Party - the largest Shi'a party in the Arab world. After Khamenei declared himself a marj'a in 1993, al-Fadhli became his general wakil until his own passing. In Bahrain, the Shi'a majority has included and continues to include a number of well-educated clergy who support the Bahraini royal family, such as Sheikh Sulaiman al-Madani (d. 2003), a mujtahid and a government-appointed Jafari qādhi, and others, such as Sheikh Abdul Amir al-Jamri (d. 2006), who oppose it. Kuwait, where the Shi'a make up approximately 30% of the population, has few notable Shi'a clergy aside from Sayyid Muhammad Baqir al-Musawi al-Muhri (d. 2015), who is well-known as the only Kuwaiti ayatollah. He did not, however, proclaim himself marj'a and was - as most of his national Shi'a clergy - in favor of the Kuwaiti royal family

HOW DOES A CLERIC BECOME A MARJ'A?

An ayatollah can be elevated to marj'aiyyah if several mujtahids determine that he is worthy of the status based on his piety and superior knowledge of jurisprudence. Thus, clergy who live away from these major religious capitals are unlikely to gain the esteemed position of marj'a. However, the process might take a different direction after Sistani. First, it will be hard for a single grand ayatollah to emerge as dominant in Najaf, where many co-equal and highly-qualified candidates are locked in tight competition in an era of political and social upheaval. Furthermore, the local mujtahids might ultimately declare their marj'aiyyah but limit their ambitions to gaining influence and adherents within their own communities.

Still those Gulf mujtahids who teach in Najaf and Qom, and have already established their names in the traditional hawza, have significantly greater odds of becoming marj'as than those who have remained in their homeland. Thus, recognition from Najaf and Qom remains the best way to reach the position of marj'a. However, local influence may support those mujtahids who live in their communities and make claims to the position, especially if Najaf fails to fill the gap after Sistani by naming a single marj'a to be the grand ayatollah and the major leader of the hawza. Such a scenario is in fact likely.



Saudi Shi'a men attend a morning prayer on the eve of Ashura in Qatif (Mohammed al-NEMER/AFP via Getty Images)

Today, there are some well-known Saudi and Bahraini ayatollahs, some live in their homeland and others in Najaf or Qom. To the best of our knowledge, there is no ayatollah from other GCC states. There are, however, several strong candidates for the marj'aiyyah in the near future.

THE POSSIBLE CANDIDATES

BAHRAIN

Sheikh Muhammad al-Sanad:

Born in Bahrain in 1961, Sheikh Muhammad al-Sanad received his degree in engineering in London, and moved to Iran in 1980 in pursuit of traditional religious education in the seminary of Qom, where he studied with leading scholars, such as Ayatollahs Mohammad Rouhani, Jawad Tabrizi, Wahid Khorasani, and Mirza Hashim Amoli. He was arrested by Bahraini authorities in 2005 for calling on the United Nations to force the Bahraini government out and hold a referendum on the country's form of government. His Bahraini citizenship was later revoked. In 2010, he relocated to Najaf and became one of the pillars of its seminary. He is the only native of the GCC who has already declared his marj'aiyyah, and who has the potential to gain more support from the traditional, non-politicized, clergy in the region. Given his fraught history with the Bahraini government, he may not be able

to return to his native country and settle there as a local marj'a, unless the condition of Shi'a in Bahrain changes.

Sheikh Isa Qassim:

Born in Bahrain 1941, Sheikh Isa Qassim studied in Najaf with grand ayatollah Muhammad Baqir as-Sadr (d. 1980). In Qom, he studied with Mohammad Fazel Lankarani (d. 2008) and Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi (d. 2017), and Kadhimi al-Haeri. He was elected a member of the first Bahraini parliament and the National Assembly of Bahrain, which was held right after the end of the British Mandate. He was known as the spiritual leader of al-Wefaq National Islamic Society, the major Shi'a political bloc in Bahrain. On June 20, 2016, the Government of Bahrain revoked his citizenship following a long siege of his residence. In 2018, he departed to London for medical treatment, then he visited Najaf, before finally settling in Qom. He is very popular among those emulating the Iranian Supreme Leader Khamenei. Like Sheikh al-Sanad, his return to Bahrain and assuming the position of a local marj'a is highly unlikely under the current political conditions in the kingdom. Furthermore, his close association with Ayatollah Khamenei and support for the concept of *wilayat al-faqih* (theocratic rule by clerics) are likely to make him less appealing to GCC authorities.

Sayyid Abdullah al-Ghuraifi:

Born in Bahrain 1939, Sayyid Abdullah al-Ghuraifi studied in Najaf with grand ayatollahs Abulqasim al-Khoei (d.1992), Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr (d. 1980), and Mohammad Hussein Fadhlullaah (d. 2010).

It was al-Ghuraifi who officially announced the death of Fadhlullah, which reflects his high status among the latter's followers. He was in exile until 2001, returning to Bahrain soon after the National Action Charter was approved by referendum. He objected to the 2002 Constitution, claiming it violated the public promise given by the Bahraini monarch to expand political participation and ensure a truly accountable government. Politically, he is a believer in wilayat al-faqih, theocratic rule by clerics. Since he is still in Bahrain, he is the most prominent figure among the Shi'a clergy in the monarchy. If he were to declare his marj'aiyyah, it might be a welcome move by the Bahraini government and other GCC authorities, as he has already managed the religious endowments in Dubai, recently made efforts to reconcile with Bahrain's government, and called for easing sectarian tensions. The followers of Fadhlullah in the GCC would appreciate his marj'aiyyah, given his former residency in Dubai and Kuwait, when he was an active Shi'a scholar in exile..

SAUDI ARABIA

Sheikh Hussein al-Imran:

Born in Qatif in 1940, he is the son of Sheikh Faraj al-Imran, a local social and religious leader. He studied in Najaf for ten years, then in Qom for five years before returning to his hometown after his father's death in 1978. He studied with the leading scholars in both cities such as Sayyid Muhammad Said al-Hakim and Sheikh Mohammed Taher al-Khaqani. For many years, he has been

a pillar of Shi'a seminary education. Many leading scholars in Qatif attend his lessons and are considered to be his students. Generally, his final word mobilizes clergy and laypeople in Qatif to select their marj'a. A considerable number of distinguished social figures continue to join the services in his mosque, which was targeted by a failed terrorist suicide bomb attack on July 4, 2017. His introvert personality might, however, preclude him from declaring his marj'aiyyah. But if he does, he would have a great advantage, given his prominent status in the community. He could also play a decisive role in supporting a local marj'a if he so chooses.

Sayyid Muneer al-Khabbaz:

Born in Qatif in 1964, he is a nephew of Sheikh Hussein al-Imran. He moved to Najaf at the age of 15 and studied there for four years before moving to Qom and has continued to move between the two cities. He studied with grand ayatollahs Abulqasim al-Khoei (d.1992) and Ali al-Sistani in Najaf, and Abulqasim al-Kokabi (d. 2005) and Jawad Tabrizi (d. 2006) in Qom. His classes in *al-bahth al-khārej* (the most advanced seminary teachings) are considered the most popular in Arabic and attended by many prominent hawza students. Thus, he has a considerable number of important current advocates who might promote his name as a potential marj'a. Saudi authorities may welcome him as a non-politicized marj'a, who combines solid knowledge and steadfast adherence to the Najaf School and its advocacy for limited involvement of religious scholars in political affairs. He may withhold any decision on his future as

a marj'a as long as grand ayatollah Sistani is alive, out of respect for his teacher and mentor.

Sayyid Jafar al-Namer:

Born in al-Ahsa in 1969, he is a member of a wealthy family based in Dammam, the capital city of Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province. The majority of this family follows Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Al-Namer moved to Qom in 1987, and from 1992, he started to attend al-bahth al-khārej with the most important grand ayatollahs in Qom such as Hossein Vahid Khorasani Mohammad Fazel Lankarani (d. 2008) and Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi (d. 2017). He began teaching advanced lessons in jurisprudence in 2001. As custom in al-Ahsa dictates, he would enjoy solid support from his family and allied families if he decided to declare his marj'aiyyah. Nonetheless, given al-Namer's

allegiances, the Saudi government might have concerns and suspicions of its citizens emulating the Iranian supreme leader.

Sheikh Ali al-Jaziri:

Born in al-Ahsa in 1969. He was a student of several major marj'as in Qom and Najaf, such as Muhammad Rohani (d. 1997), Hossein Vahid Khorasani, Bashir al-Najafi. He is an adherent to the Najaf School and its philosophy of limited clergy involvement in political affairs. He wrote a number of scholarly books in addition to teaching advanced lessons in jurisprudence. He returned to Saudi Arabia in 2008 to teach advanced jurisprudential students and preach to the public. He is a popular figure in his community, which might encourage him to declare his marj'aiyyah after the death of Sistani.



Shi'a cleric and potential marj'a Sayyid Abdullah al-Ghuraifi leads a procession on the Shi'a holiday of Ashura. (STR/AFP via Getty Images)



OBSTACLES TO A LOCAL MARJ'AIYYAH IN THE GULF

The rise of a local marj'aiyyah in any Shi'a community outside Iraq and Iran is not only a matter of will or the attainment of sufficient credentials by a local scholar. There have been limited examples of success in the recent past of such marj'aiyyahs. Most notable among these is grand ayatollah Mohammed Hussein Fadhlullah in Lebanon, who established his credentials in Iraq first and then moved back to his native country to build on the scholarly tradition centered in Jabal 'Amil, Lebanon's historical Shi'a stronghold in the south of the country. He was also aided by the tolerant Lebanese political and social environment that allowed him to practice his marj'aiyyah with minimal restrictions. Most of the socio-political elements that worked in favor of Sayid Fadhlullah are not

present in the GCC region at the current time, although there are signs of openness and pragmatism on the horizon.

There are also other important considerations to bear in mind. One such issue is money. A successful marj'aiyyah requires substantial funding that must come from private sources – government support is the kiss of death to the legitimacy of the marj'a. There are sufficient funds in the Gulf to sustain a local marj'aiyyah, if these funds are diverted to it from their current destinations (Najaf and Qom). But it will be very difficult to convince the Shi'a of the Arabian Peninsula to turn away from the current major Shi'a seminaries, especially Najaf, to which they maintain a great emotional and historical attachment. As one Shi'a scholar told the authors, "people will continue to exhibit emotional bonds with the Najafi marj'a." He also cited "the intra-communal rivalries and envy, which are likely going to hinder the rise of a local



marj'a." For that purpose, a great effort and consensus building are required for the rise of a local marj'aiyyah in GCC countries.

Given their long history of attachment to the transnational marj'aiyyah, Shi'a in the GCC would need time to grow accustomed to a marj'a who lives in their midst, prays in a local mosque, and addresses their concerns based on personal experience. This would be a change from the current situation in which wakils defer to grand ayatollahs in Najaf and Qom. Furthermore, any native marj'a will have to contend with the transnational marj'as' wakils, who enjoy social and economic power based on representing the grand ayatollahs. A serious challenge for any aspiring marj'a, is to blunt or co-opt the power of these wakils. This can be achieved either by a bottom-up approach that builds a broad base of popular support or a top-down approach that generates support among wakils currently aligned with transnational

marj'as. Both options would subordinate the wakils to him. It is likely that any scholar who proclaims his own marj'aiyyah will face a serious – perhaps brutal – resistance from the leading clergy in their communities.

GCC societies are crossed with divisions, especially by tribes/families and religious background. Inside Shi'a communities, people are categorized by the marj'a they emulate. It is very common to hear the terms "Sistanis," "Shirazis," or "Khameneis" in reference to a certain family, village, or at least a mosque. This form of identification builds and sustains social alliances, which make it difficult to siphon support away from already established marj'as. Adherence to a certain marj'aiyyah entails a history of accumulated connections, networks, and alliances that are resistant to change. A native marj'a who is embedded in the local context would need to issue fatwas regarding a critical situations, such as military conflict or protests. Whereas



Muslim Religious woman praying inside Holy Shrine in Karbala (Jasmin Merdan via Getty Images)

transnational marj'as usually avoid issuing fatwas addressing security or political incidents in other countries, a local marj'a would not be able to ignore a major incident related to his community; and if he does, he would open himself to harsh criticism.

We highlight the role of clergy, both senior and junior, as they are key to mobilizing the emulation of marj'as. The masses would follow their leaders (i.e., imams and preachers in the local mosques who have their alliances). Thus, a potential local marj'a would need to establish a strong network of highly educated students who serve as local imams and preachers. Such a step would help mobilize people – especially the youth – to adopt his new marj'aiyyah. Yet, it would require considerable time, funding, and efforts.

A local marj'aiyyah will also necessitate the establishment of a seminary, where students can study and rise in the ranks of scholarship. For this to happen, at least one government in the GCC must make a conscious decision to permit such an endeavor. This would include changing current practices vis-à-vis Shi'a clergy and communities in some GCC countries. A new seminary cannot thrive in a country where religious scholars and their students are routinely surveilled and harassed.

The hawza acts as a private school that sets its curriculum independently, regulates its internal affairs without state interference, raises its own funds from the Shi'a community and allocates them without state regulation. Unless the GCC states grant these powers to the Shi'a seminaries,

we are not going to see a thriving Hawza in the Arabian Peninsula and, there the chances are slim that any viable local marj'aiyyah could emerge as a counterpart to those in Najaf and Qom. while keeping their theological and jurisprudential leadership in a large portion of the worldwide Sunni communities.

The presence of a credible local hawza is not a luxury for the marj'a. It must exist to perform three functions for the marj'a: (1) provide him with a platform for scholastic and intellectual activities; (2) cultivate a generation of students and disciples who can carry his teachings and rulings to their communities, including an advanced cadre that serves as his wider network of wakils in the community and beyond, and (3) instruct local students, at all levels, to minimize the need for travel to Iraq or Iran for the acquisition of high credentials. Indeed, with the passage of time and the increase of credibility, the opposite is likely to happen: students from outside the region will join the new hawza.

When the local hawza development reaches a sufficiently advanced stage of authority and establishes its independent credentials, its host country (i.e., Saudi Arabia or Bahrain) will be able to exert its own influence on Shi'a, not only within its territories, but perhaps even in Shi'a countries (Iran and Iraq). An important political investment would be to send Saudi and/or Bahraini Shi'a preachers to various countries with considerable Shi'a population out of the traditional Shi'a heartland, such as Azerbaijan, India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. That would be a sea change in the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, as the Saudis compete with the Iranians head-to-head in Shi'a theology,

ENDNOTES

1. To understand the role of the marj'a in Shi'a theology, one needs to consider the sect's founding historical background. Since the Prophet Muhammad passed away in 632 CE, Muslims have divided into two major groups, Sunni and Shi'a. The Shi'a identify Ali b. Abi Talib as the legitimate successor to the Prophet and consider all other caliphs as illegitimate rulers. Even when Ali was selected to be the fourth caliph (656–661 CE) based on the Sunni norm of consensual selection, his adherents did not see this procedure as the source of legitimacy. Rather, they argued that he finally was allowed to exercise "his right" to lead the Muslim body politic. However, some figures – who are well-respected in the Sunni literature – fought Ali until they attained de facto rule and established their monarchy. In the Shi'a mind, Ali's eleven descendants enjoy the same status as Ali as the legitimate guardians of Muslims. Basically, the Shi'a believe that early Muslims ignored the Prophet's testament and spurned the legitimate leader Ali and his legitimate successors. From the Shi'a perspective, the ideal leader for Muslims is a man of piety and religious knowledge. If such a figure is unable to rule, good Muslims should at least adhere to his example until he – or one of his successors – attains political rule. The marj'a in the Shi'a context is precisely that: an example to emulate. It is an interim position of Muslim leadership that will last until the twelfth imam appears and claims his rightful position. For more details, see: Abdullah F. Alrebh (2019). *Muslims, Secularism, and the State*, pp. 5–6.
2. The khums (fifth) is a payment amounting to one fifth of annual income after deducting a full year's expenses. It is a religious duty established by the Qur'an (8:41). The Shi'a pay it to the marj'a they follow or to his authorized representative.
3. Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani is one of the world's most influential Shi'a religious authorities. Although he is an Iranian national, his lengthy residence in Iraq — he has resided in Najaf continuously since 1951 — and position as the highest marj'a in the Najaf seminary (the Hawza) granted him legitimacy in assuming a central role in Iraqi public affairs. His style of limited interference into the state's political affairs and his support for a civil, democratic, and non-theocratic state adds more legitimacy to his role.
4. This accusation is often voiced in the media, social discourse, and political debates. It has become normalized that even outside the GCC region. Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak publicly stated that "most of the Shi'a in the region are more loyal to Iran than to their own countries." (<https://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2006%2F04%2F08%2F22686.html>)
5. Before the formal declaration of the Saudi Kingdom, the eastern province used to be called al-Ahsa and al-Qatif. These names came from two major oases, the northern one is al-Qatif and the southern is al-Ahsa. Today, al-Ahsa and al-Qatif are two Shi'a majority counties within the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia.
6. While merchant/noble families do not hold a monopoly on joining the clergy, these families are disproportionately represented. In fact, noble families are eager to have one of their members become a religious scholar or a local imam to augment their social prestige and conduct their own religious affairs, particularly private ceremonies (e.g. marriage), divorce, as well as inheritance and other social status affairs.
7. We do not mention GCC countries where no local marj'as reside. Even in Kuwait, which has a considerable Shi'a population, Shi'a always follow marj'as in Iraq and Iran. This strong link to the major marj'as might be because of geography, as Kuwait is only 360 miles from Najaf, in addition to the spiritual connection between the Shi'a and Najaf, their most holy city.
8. There are a considerable number of Bahraini Shi'a who follow Grand Ayatollah Fadhlullah. Sayid Abdullah al-Ghuraifi read the formal obituary statement of Fadhlullah's death. Although we don't have statistics, we are confident that there are more followers of Fadhlullah in Bahrain than in Kuwait. In addition, there is a considerable number of Saudi Shi'a who are still following

Fadhlullah. These assessments are based on the authors' field research on the Shi'a population in the region.

9. In addition to his traditional religious education, Al-Fadhli held a PhD from Cairo University and was the chair of Arabic Language Department at King Abdulaziz University in Jeddah, the major city in the western region of Saudi Arabia. He turned to be more active about social issues after he retired from academia in 1989. He retired a few years before Khamenei declared his marj'aiyyah. He spent the last years of his life in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia.
10. A mujtahid is a religious scholar; a qādhi is a government-appointed official. Bahrain has a mixed court system that allows the appointment of Shi'a judges in civil status courts.
11. Kuwait hosts the marj'aiya of Sheikhism (an independent movement within Twelver Shi'a doctrine), and it lays exclusively within the al-Ihqaqi family that originally came to the city of Osku in Iran's Azerbaijan province. Mirza Ali Mousa al-Ihqaqi was the first marj'a of this school who came to Kuwait in 1916. After his death in 1967, his brother Mirza Hassan followed him as the marj'a until he died in 2000. Mirza Abdulrasool – son of Hassan – inherited the marj'aiyyah until his death in 2003, when the marj'aiyyah was passed to Abdullah the son of Abdulrasool who is the current marj'a of the group. Sheikhism is considered to be a closed group, as the followers do not switch to emulate a marj'a who does not follow the principles of Sheikh Ahmad ibn Zayn al-Din ibn Ibrahim al-Ahsa'i. The circle has been more exclusive since the marj'aiyyahh became exclusively appropriated to the al-Ihqaqi family. The followers of al-Ihqaqi exist in many parts of Shi'a communities, including al-Ahsa in Saudi Arabia. We did not include Sheikhism in the discussion because it is a closed circle which is not a competitor to transnational marj'a of Najaf and Qom.
12. For more details, please see: Abbas Kadhimi and Barbara Slavin (July 15, 2019) After Sistani and Khamenei: looming successions will shape the Middle East.

13. A grand ayatollah has to make the claim of being a marj'a, by authorizing the publication of his collection of fatwas (al-risala al-'amaliyya). Then, it is the role of his students and supporters (junior and mid-level clergy) to advocate for him among their respective communities.

14. Jabal 'Amil refers to the region of southern Lebanon measuring some 3,000 square kilometers. It is also mentioned by authoritative Arab historians such as Ibn al-Atheer (d. 1233 CE) and al-Baladhuri (d. 892 CE). The Shi'a have lived there since the seventh century CE.

PHOTO CREDITS:

Cover Photo: A mosque in Awamia, a town of under 30,000 inhabitants in the al-Qatif region of the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia (Courtesy of Abdullah Alrebh)

Contents Photos: Iraqi Shiite Muslim pilgrims arrive in the holy city of Karbala ahead of the Arbæen religious festival on October 3, 2020 (Asaad Niazi/AFP)

Photo on Pages 11-12: A handout picture provided by the office of Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei delivering a speech, March 22, 2020. (AFP PHOTO / HO / KHAMENEI.IR)

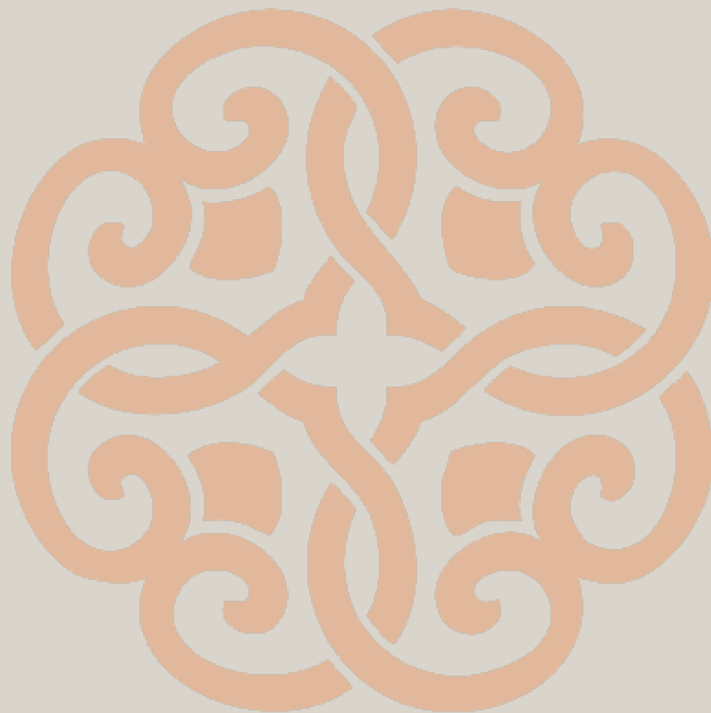
ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Dr. Abbas Kadhim is the Director of the Atlantic Council's Iraq Initiative. Most recently, he was a senior foreign policy fellow at Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS). He was formerly an assistant professor of Middle Eastern Studies at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, California, and a visiting assistant professor at Stanford University. He also previously held a senior government affairs position at the Iraqi Embassy in Washington, DC. His books include *Reclaiming Iraq: The 1920 Revolution and the Founding of the Modern State*; *Governance in the Middle East and North Africa*; and *The Hawza Under Siege: Studies in the Ba'ath Party Archive*. He earned a Ph.D. in Near Eastern Studies from the University of California, Berkeley.

Dr. Abdullah F. Alrebh is Assistant Professor in Sociology of Religion and Sociological Theory at Grand Valley State University. His research focuses on politics, culture, religion, and authority of Saudi Arabia, Persian Gulf, and Islam. He earned a Ph.D. from Michigan State University, East Lansing. During 2015, Dr. Alrebh served as a Visiting Scholar at Michigan State University. He has published a number of articles (peer-reviewed and think tank) spanning several issues pertaining to religious, authority, and education with a primary focusing on Middle Eastern countries in general, and Saudi Arabia in particular. His upcoming book is titled, *Covering the Kingdom: Saudi Arabia in Western Press during the 20th Century*.

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