The Shi'i Clergy and Perceived Opportunity Structures: Political Activism in Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon

Mohammad R. Kalantari
Royal Holloway University of London

Department of Politics and International Relations
Royal Holloway University of London
Egham Hill, Egham
Surrey, TW20 0EX
mohammadreza.kalantari@rhul.ac.uk

The Shi'i Clergy and Perceived Opportunity Structures: Political Activism in Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon

During the last four decades, the Middle East has witnessed the rise of Shi'i political activism, through the direct engagement of clerical elites in socio-political arenas. With the re-emergence of activism on the part of Shi'i mujtahids and its impact on the ascent of Shi'i community in Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon, scholars have defined a distinct strategic difference between what they characterise as 'quietist' and 'activist' Shi'i mujtahids. This paper argues that this distinction is based on a misunderstanding of Shi' doctrines and practices, and that, in the varying political contexts which arise in the Middle East, Shi'i mujtahids are always potentially active. It first introduces an analytical scheme for the study of Shi'i clerical political practices. It then uses this schema to explore recent Shi'i clerical political activism in the region.

Keywords: Shi'i clergy; political Islam; political activism; opportunity structures.

For some time now, observers of ideological contentions in the Middle East have been drawn to the key role that political Islam has played in shaping these contentions. However, while much has been written about Sunni Islam doctrine, few studies have focused on the Shi'i community, especially the political activities of its clerical elite. Although, Shi'is constitute a minority within the Islamic community, they represent a majority of the population in the heart of the Middle East, in the strategic Persian Gulf sub-region.[1]

The underlying core of political Shi'ism is derived from the two interrelated principles of the Imamate and the Occultation. The belief in Imamate rests mainly on the idea of the permanent necessity for a divinely guided persona, an Imam, to act as the authoritative leader of the community of the faithful in all matters. In fulfilling this, the imam represents 'the legate successor of the Prophet [Mohammad]' and is 'infallible in

---

[1] See Pew Research Center, 'Mapping the Global Muslim Population', *Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public Life*, (October 7, 2009), http://www.pewforum.org/2009/10/07/mapping-the-global-muslim-population/ (accessed June 30, 2015).

all his acts and words'; thus, whoever obeys the imam is 'a true believer,' and whoever opposes or rejects him, 'an infidel'.[2] The Occultation belief in Shi'i Islam holds that the Twelfth Imam (the Mahdi) is alive but that he invisible to us for now and will re-appear at an unknown time and establish a 'just Islamic order'.

This is where the socio-political leadership of the clergy becomes central. Since the Occultation of the last Shi'i imam, qualified Shi'i mujtahids have acted as his general deputies, and they remain responsible for leading the community until the promised day of the re-emergence of the infallible imam.[3] This doctrine implies that it is incumbent upon Shi'i mujtahids to protect the community from threats during this period of transition from Occultation to the re-emergence of the Mahdi, the twelfth Imam. The question here is, when does a high-ranking Shi'i mujtahid become politically active and when does he remain quiet?

This paper first considers the notion of Shi'i 'activism' and 'quietism'. It then develops the concept of political opportunity structure to clarify the context in which Shi'i mujtahids are able and willing to become politically active. Finally, it applies this argument to the Shi'i clerical elites in Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon.

Shi'i Mujtahids' Political Activism

The term 'Shi'i activism' emerged in the early 1980s in the aftermath of the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Observers, attempting to understand the phenomenon of political Shi'ism, defined two different factions of clerics or Islamic doctrines: those

---

[2] Wilfred Madelung, 'HiŠHĀm B. Al-Ḥakam', in *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 1971), 497.

[3] This is the view of Usuli Shi'ism concerning the role of mujtahids during the Occultation Era. This paper focuses on those clerical elites who are proponents of this school of Shi'i Islam. Unless stated otherwise, the terms 'clerical elite', 'the clergy', 'religious scholars', 'ulama', and 'mujtahid' refer to this category of clergy, which represents the majority of Shi'i clerical elites in modern time. For a background on Usuli and Akhbari schools of thought in Shi'i Islam see Juan Cole, 'Shi'i clerics in Iraq and Iran, 1722-1780: the Akhbari-Usuli conflict reconsidered', *Iranian Studies* 18, no. 1 (1985): 3–34.

characterised by quietism and those characterised by activism. However, as this section will argue, the distinction that has been defined between these two factions or doctrines is not doctrinal. Since the 1980s and the rise of the power of Iranian clerics, many scholars have attempted to apply this distinction to an understanding of what they assume to be Shi'i disillusion with the modern world. However, a review of the literature that invokes this distinction demonstrates that its use has caused further confusion, not only in attempts to explain political Shi'ism, but for understanding Middle East politics, more generally.

One school of thought assumes that there is a fundamental difference between these two types of clerics or doctrines and has classified Shi'i mujtahids according to one or the other of them. These seemingly new Shi'i doctrines have been variously labelled as 'quietism-activism', [4] 'quietism-revolutionary', [5] 'quietism-resistance', [6] 'silent-speaking',[7] or 'quietism-Islamism'.[8] Within this dichotomy, quietism is viewed as a deliberate withdrawal from direct involvement in politics and, it is claimed, is mainly rooted in traditional Shi'ism.[9] Proponents of this school, state that mujtahids generally believe that during the Occultation era, their main duty is to await the re-emergence of the imam, to stay quiet politically, and to avoid active confrontation with unjust rules. Therefore, for example, they label the mujtahids of Najaf seminary in Iraq, such as Ayatollah Khoei (1899-1992) and Ayatollah Sistani (b. 1930), as advocates of Shi'i quietism; while at the other spectrum of this dichotomy are clerics such as Ayatollah

---

[4] Yitzhak Nakash, 'The Shi'ites and the Future of Iraq', *Foreign Affairs* 82, no. 4 (2003):17–26.

[5] Nikki R. Keddie, *Religion and Politics in Iran: Shi'ism from Quietism to Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983).

[6] Christoph Marcinkowski, *Twelver Shi'ite Islam: Conceptual and Practical Aspects* (Singapor: Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, Nanyang Technological University, 2006).

[7] Juan Cole, 'The United States and Shi'ite Religious Factions in Post-Ba'thist Iraq', *The Middle East Journal* 57, no. 4 (2003): 543–66.

[8] Haider A. Hamoudi, 'Between Realism and Resistance: Shi'i Islam and the Contemporary Liberal State', *Journal of Islamic Law and Culture* 11 no. 2 (2009): 107–20.

[9] Ernesto H. Braam, 'All Roads Lead to Najaf: Grand Ayatollah Al-Sistani's Quiet Impact on Iraq's 2010 Ballot and Its Aftermath', *Journal of International and Global Studies* 2 no. 1 (2011): 1–21.

Khomeini.[10] In a further modification of this dichotomy, Haider Hamoudi has suggested four distinctive Shi'i doctrinal categories: Islamism, quietism, semi-quietism and ambiguous liberalism.[11] In his view, Islamist or activist Shi'i mujtahids are those who propagate the idea of the 'Guardianship of the Jurist', *Wilayat al-Faqih*; they believe that the government desired by God involves a state ruled by Shi'i mujtahids on the basis of their interpretations of Sharia (Khomeini and Mohammad Baqir al-Sadr [1935-1980] were two leading advocates of this view). The quietist Shi'i mujtahids, according to Hamoudi, deliberately avoid any sort of interference in politics as, for example Ayatollah Khoei. Semi-quietist Shi'i quietists are those who fit between the Islamists and quietists; as they prefer to choose a more ambiguous position in terms of their political involvement, these semi-quietists neither pursue the establishment of the Shi'i state nor do they absent themselves from the political scene (Ali Sistani is an example). Finally, ambiguous liberal Shi'i quietists, such as Mohammad Hussein Fadlallah (1935-2010) in Lebanon, believe in a sort of religio-political pluralism that promises a secure co-existence even with non-Muslims 'with whom there are disagreements' as part of 'a Muslim's cultural and human responsibility'.[12]

A second school accept that there are different levels of political inclusion for the Shi'i quietist throughout the abode of Islam—from Pakistan to North Africa, with Iran and Iraq at its heart— and they consider the impact of different contexts when analysing activism and quietism in, for instance the contexts of the 1979 Iran Revolution and post-Saddam Iraq. The proponents of this school, Jelle Puelings for example, advised policy makers to include Shi'i mujtahids as one of the main influencers in Middle East politics

---

[10] Some add a third category, the 'whispering jurisprudent', to this understanding of Shi'i political doctrines. See Ibid., 14.
[11] Hamoudi, 'Between Realism and Resistance', 111.
[12] Ibid., 118.

as they 'can and will play a role in the socio-political developments of their community, even if they are known as being quietist'.[13] Some observers have also dismissed the view of the renowned orthodox Shi'i centre, Najaf Seminary, as a politically quiet institution. This, they argue, led wrongly to the belief that the seemingly quiet, or reticent, mujtahids of Najaf are apolitical. They go further and note that the role of the Ayatollah Sistani in his second phase of political life since 2003 is a clear indication that the mujtahids, regardless of the political posture they assume from time to time, should not be overlooked in future strategic developments in the Middle East.[14]

A third school comprises those who do not define a distinction between Shi'i activism and quietism. Proponents of this school believe that Shi'i Islam is, in its very essence, political and if some clerics seem more active than others, it is solely a matter of the context in which they operate.[15] Reviewing history, they conclude that whenever conditions permit, mujtahids have been activist. They suggest that, even if there were a distinction between Shi'i quietism and activism, it is quite nebulous and that distinguishing two different factions within Shi'i Islam is a complicated task.[16] Developing this interpretation, Abdulaziz Sachedina observes that

> [w]hat is primary is to understand quietism in relation to its supposed contrary: activism. Both respond to the existence of injustice in the Muslim polity; both are seen as part of the long-term attempt to establish a just polity in historical time; and both are sanctioned in religious texts. However, the exponents of the quietist posture have often, in practice, been supporters of authoritarian politics and have

---

[13] Jelle Puelings, 'Fearing a "Shiite Octopus". Sunni – Shi'a Relations and the Implications for Belgium and Europe', *Egmont Paper* no. 35 (2010): 40.

[14] Søren Schmidt, 'The Role of Religion in Politics: The Case of Shia-Islamism in Iraq', *Nordic Journal of Religion and Society* 22, no. 2) (2009): 123–43.

[15] Graham E. Fuller and Rend R. Francke, 'Is Shi'ism Radical?', *Middle East Quarterly* (March 2000): 11–20, http://www.meforum.org/35/is-Shiʿism-radical (accessed March 22, 2012); Reidar Visser, 'Sistani, the United States and Politics in Iraq: From Quietism to Machiavellianism?', *NUPI Paper* 700 (2006)

[16] Jacob Lassner, 'Whither Shi'ite Islam? Authenticating a Shi'ite Future Based on Reading the Islamic Past', *Bustan: The Middle East Book Review* 1, no. 1 (2010): 3–19.

offered unquestioning and immediate obedience to almost any Muslim authority that publicly adhered to the Sharia.[17]

Therefore, according to this school, the distinction between quietism and activism is not fundamental, as both factions seek to protect the community from external threats. They argue that mujtahids may take different approaches, sometimes moderate and sometimes more radical, consistent with the contexts they face. Like two common Shi'i practices, namely 'taqiyyah'[18] and 'martyrdom', it seems that quietism and activism are two sides of the same coin. While advocates of quietism seek to find the safest way through the Occultation Era, their activist counterparts take a more extroverted approach to preserve the faith in the face of external threats.

The last school of thought goes a step further in defining quietism and activism. It presents a series of historical events to prove that when faced with different contexts, a Shi'i mujtahid could act as a quietist, but when the situation changes, he may become an activist. Hence, it questions the very existence of two identifiable factions or doctrines within Shi'ism. Instead, this school explains differences among clerics with reference to their personal characteristics.[19]

A review of these four schools indicates that defining two poles within Shi'ism is more likely to obscure than illuminate political dimensions of the faith. First, in contrast to mainstream Sunni Islam, the gate of ijtihad in Shi'ism—the right of personal reasoning and perception for a mujtahid — has been open since the early history of the faith.[20] To underpin the internal dynamism within Shi'ism and its seemingly quietistic and/or activist

---

[17] Abdulaziz Sachedina, 'Prudential Concealment in Shi'ite Islam: A Strategy of Survival or a Principle?', *Common Knowledge* 16, no. 2 (2010): 237.

[18] In Islamic lexicon, 'taqiyyah' means and act of precautionary dissimulation of the faith as a reaction to a hostile threat. See Ibid.

[19] Rahimi, Babak. 2008. The Discourse of Democracy in Shi'i Islamic Jurisprudence: The Two Cases of Montazeri and Sistani. European University Institute.; Sachedina, 'Prudential Concealment in Shi'ite Islam', 237.

[20] Wael Hallaq, 'Was the Gate of Ijtihad Closed?', *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 16, no. 1 (1984): 3–41.

postures by the clergy, it is necessary to note that mujtahids must rely on their personal perceptions when confronted with different circumstances; it seems, therefore, that for example, some researchers have confused the theory of the Guardianship of the Jurist. The majority of Shi'i mujtahids have to varying degrees believed in the theory of Guardianship of the Jurist.[21] While some mujtahids believe in a restricted version of the theory, others extend this guardianship to the right of establishing an Islamic government. Therefore, to assume that the Guardianship of the Jurist is a radical Shi'i political theory propagated by activist clerics like Khomeini and Mohammad Baqir al-Sadr is inaccurate, as it does not reflect correctly on the practice of mainstream mujtahids throughout the history.

Second, dichotomous models such as quietism, activism, Islamism, and semi-quietism in Shi'i Islam are confusing. They cannot serve as a heuristic to analyse given situations. To give an example, different studies, using different approaches, have characterised the prominent Shi'i mujtahid, Ayatollah Sistani, as quietist, a semi-quietist, or an active Machiavellian.[22] Clearly, categorising mujtahids as quiet and active is arbitrary. Those who seek to draw a sharp line between these political tendencies have failed to provide a robust rationale or basis for doing so. Thus, applying different labels

---

[21] Almost all Shi'i usuli mujtahids, the subject of this study, subscribe to the principles of Guardianship of the Jurist. While some established figures, like Ayatollah Khomeini (1902-1989), advocates the absolutist camp other figures like Ayatollah Khoei (1899-1992) behold a delimited version of the guardianship of the jurist. The absolute guardianship of jurist theory entails that the fully-qualified Shi'i jurist, *mujtahid jami' al-sharayit*, has the exact rights and guardianship of that of the prophet and infallible Imams in leading and ruling the community during the occultation era. At the other side of the spectrum lies the mainstream guardianship of jurist that reserves for Shi'i jurists an exclusive responsibility to undertake non-litigious affairs, those which social order is linked with. For further clarifications on the theory and its different interpretations see Abdulaziz Sachedina, 'The Rule of the Religious Jurist in Iran', in *Iran at the Crossroads*, eds. John L. Esposito and R. K. Ramazani (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001): 123-147; Hamid Mavani, 'Ayatullah Khomeini's Concept of Governance (Wilayat Al-Faqih) and the Classical Shi 'I Doctrine of Imamate', *Middle Eastern Studies* 47, no. 5 (2011): 807-24. For Ayatollah Khoei's viewpoint on the theory seeAbu al-Qasim Khoei, *Minhaj Al-Salihin* (Beirut: Madinat al-Ilm, 1989): Vol 1, 365-366.

[22] Visser, 'Sistani, the United States and Politics'.

to mujtahids is unhelpful and only causes further confusion in attempts to understand political Shi'ism.

Third, various mujtahids' personalities and their approaches to varying political situations in the modern era have contributed to this simplistic dichotomisation used by researchers. It is worth noting that a mujtahid may act differently depending on the circumstances in which he finds himself. The opposition of Ayatollah Khomeini to the Pahlavi monarchy does not indicate that Shi'i Islam is radical; the quietism of Ayatollah Khoei in the face of Iraq's regime and Saddam's tyranny, does not indicate that the faith is apolitical. However, studies have advanced widely different and often misleading understandings of the merely apparent dissimilar political practices of Shi'i mujtahids in the contemporary Middle East.

This confusion suggests the need for a more nuanced analysis of Shi'i mujtahids as political actors in the region. What is needed is a new methodology for studying high-ranking Shi'i ulama. Only a handful of studies of the Shi'i political ascendancy in the Middle East have explored the role and perceptions of clerics who engage in politics; and few of these have employed interviews in order to understand the perceptions that led to this clerical engagement. The next section addresses this gap by triangulating secondary data with data gathered through interviews with Shi'i high-ranking clerics and their close affiliates in Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon, and with historical archives, and clerics' manifestos.[23] It focuses on three cases of Shi'i clerical elite political engagement in the contemporary Middle East -- three examples of transformative events in which the Shi'i

---

[23] The pool of interviewees range from elite informants (e.g. teachers of Shi'i seminaries, and local politicians) to prominent individuals at the forefront of contemporary Middle Eastern politics (e.g. the Grand Ayatollah Sistani in Najaf, and former President Hashemi Rafsanjani of Iran). Further elaboration of these interviews and their implications for understanding Shi'i clerical elite politics is in Mohammad Kalantari, *The Clergy and the Modern Middle East: Shiʿi Political Activism in Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon*, Royal Asiatic Society, forthcoming 2019.

mujtahids played an important political role. These cases allow us to explore both the political opportunity structures that mujtahids confronted at specific times and places, and how the perception (ijtihad) of high-ranking Shi'i ulama led to their taking an activist political stance in response to unfolding circumstances.

Political Activism and opportunity structure

Mujtahids, with their authority to interpret the faith's principles and within the contingencies offered by varying contexts, claim to preserve the integrity of the Shi'i community by taking a more contentious posture. They believe that sovereign power over humanity belongs to God, who asserts this through His Prophet and the twelve infallible imams. They posit that during the Occultation of the Twelfth Imam, the duty of mujtahids is to lead and safeguard the integrity of the community.[24] It is their responsibility, according to Shi'i doctrine, to protect the 'citadel of the faith'[25] and to engage in a vigilant process of ijtihad.[26]

Therefore, when mujtahids perceive a threat to the community and a permissible context for protecting the community against it, they ask for the active involvement of religious authorities and attempt to mobilise followers. They believe that to preserve the citadel of the faith, Shi'is should be obliged to undertake broader social responsibilities, including resisting threats to the community. At the same time, they reserve for the

---

[24] It is believed that when the twelfth imam was serving his minor occultation (873–941), a Shi'i laity wrote a letter to him asking for his guidance concerning a series of issues that had arisen for his followers. In response, a deputy of the Imam provided a signed script, *tawqi*, stating, '[a]s for the events which may occur in future, refer to the transmitter (*ruwat*) of our traditions (*hadith*); who are my proof (*Hujjat*) to you, and I am the proof of Allah to you all'. Saduq, *Kamal al-Din wa Tamam al-Ne'mah*, Vol. II: 483.

[25] Citadel of Islam, in Islamic jurisprudence, means the 'Muslim community' and the 'essence of Islam'. In Usuli Shi'ism, mujtahids are believed to be the protectors of the citadel of Islam. See Mirza Qummi, *Jami' al-Shattat* (Tehran: Kayhan, 1992), Vol I, 376.

[26] The Shi'i doctrine entails that those mujtahids qualified to serve as 'transmitters of the imams' hadiths', have the divine responsibility and authority to exercise ijtihad. See Saduq, *Kamal al-Din wa Tamam al-Ne'mah*.

general deputies of the Imam, the mujtahids, the role of leadership during the absence of the Imam.

To understand when a mujtahid is more inclined to holding a politically active posture and engage in contentious politics, it is necessary to address the political context. Context here is defined as the specific objective political opportunities structure coupled with a mujtahid's interpretation of that structure.

The concept of the 'political opportunity structure' (POS) furnishes the grounding from which to explain and sometimes predict the 'periodicity, style, and content of activist claims' within a political context.[27] It provides a 'consistent but not necessarily formal, permanent, or national signals to social or political actors which either encourage or discourage them to use their internal resources to form social movements'.[28] Although social movement theorists may not necessarily have a common understanding of a POS, they tend to focus on determining the extent to which such structures are open and/or closed, and their institutional and substantive location.[29] An 'open opportunity structure' encourages political actors to engage in collective actions and form a social movement; while a 'closed opportunity structure' impedes the emergence of contentious politics. While different dimensions of political opportunity structures have been the focus of the social movements literature, it appears that the recognition of an open/closed structure is crucial in the formation of social movements.

---

[27] David S. Meyer and Debra C. Minkoff, 'Conceptualizing Political Opportunity', *Social Forces* 82, no. 4 (2004): 1457–92.
[28] Sidney Tarrow, 'States and Opportunities: The Political Structuring of Social Movements', in *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements: Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Cultural Framings*, ed. Doug McAdam, John D. McCarthy, and Mayer N. Zald (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 54.
[29] William A. Gamson and David S. Meyer, 'Framing Political Opportunity', in *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements: Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Cultural Framings*, ed. Doug McAdam, John D. McCarthy, and Mayer N. Zald (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 277.

In fact, the concept of POS has been criticised on the grounds that scholars tend to emphasise objective political opportunities without any reference to perception. The overall argument is that an opportunity is only an opportunity if it is perceived to be one by an agent. [30] Prior to undertaking mobilisation, political actors must perceive opportunity structures to be open, although their interpretation 'will not always mirror reality'.[31]

How mujtahids, as political actors, perceive an opportunity, stems from their ijtihad. Ijtihad is the maximum 'exertion of mental energy' by a mujtahid, to search for and apply the faith's principles to discover the divine law applicable to a given circumstance.[32] A mujtahid's actions, opinions, and assumed political postures are rooted in his interpretation of the situation he is facing in light of the Shi'i principles. A mujtahid, as the title implies, acts and lives based on his ijtihad. Hence, ijtihad is determinative in his political positioning in response to a given circumstance.

Whether mujtahids adopt an activist or relatively quietist political postures depend on their interpretation of given (objective) political opportunity structure. The 'political context' for Shi'i mujtahids' activism is, therefore, defined as the interaction of an objective POS and the perception of the mujtahid of that structure. The different postures taken by mujtahids in different contexts can be shown to be attributable not to doctrinal differences but, at least in part, to the actors' different perception of the POS at the time. Thus, a mujtahid's seemingly quietist posture in a given context may, in fact, represent

---

[30] Doowon Suh, 'How Do Political Opportunities Matter for Social Movements? Political Opportunity, Misframing, Pseudosuccess, and Pseudofailure', *The Sociological Quarterly* 42, no. 3 (2001): 437–60.

[31] Lee A. Banaszak, Why Movements Succeed or Fail: Opportunity, Culture, and the Struggle for Woman Suffrage (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 31.

[32] Hallaq, 'Was the Gate of Ijtihad Closed?'.

the utmost political activism possible at a time and place and even be part of a trend of activist political strategy.[33]

In general, a decision by the mujtahids to assume an activist political posture depends on the political context: (1) the multi-levelled political opportunity structure which focuses on the ability of the Shi'i mujtahids to mobilise their followers and (2) their perception of that structure. If the context is permissive, the mujtahid may be more likely to become actively engaged in politics to fulfil his divine responsibility vis-à-vis the community; in restrictive contexts, he would more likely remain politically quiet (see Figure 1).
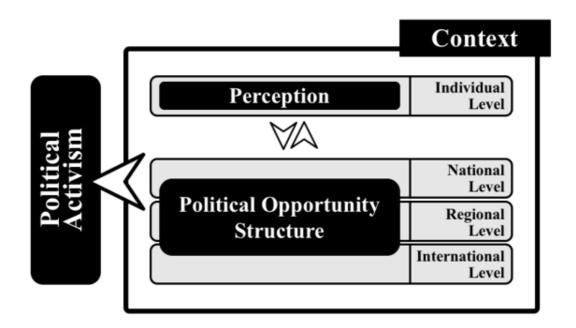
Reviewing Shi'i history through the lens of this framework provides a means of understanding Shi'i mujtahids' tactical political practices under what has been labelled by researchers as 'quietism' and 'activism'. Mujtahids, as with any other political actors, might perceive a POS as being open or closed, or the context to be either permissive or restrictive. Accordingly, whenever he perceives an open structure, he is more likely to engage in politics by giving legal opinions or engaging in legal arbitration, either individually or through an alliance with other mujtahids. Some argue that there is the possibility of a mismatch between the objective and perceived political opportunity structures and believed that as political opportunities are subjective, actors may either fail

---

[33] A case in point is that of Ayatollah Boroujerdi's seemingly quiet posture while he served as the leader of Qom Seminary. He preferred to deal in private with the state apparatus and Mohammadreza Shah in order to advance his goals and fulfil his socio-political responsibilities vis-à-vis the community. Therefore, while he was the main force behind suspending the Shah's social reforms in the late 1950s through covert political bargaining with the state, in the eyes' of public he remained a politically quiet mujtahid. For a detailed notes on Boroujerdi and Shah Relations see Mohammad Ghochani, 'Zendegi Siasi –e Ayatollah Boroujerdi: Shah wa Faqih', *Grand Ayatollah Boroujerdi Portal*, (January 2004), http://www.broujerdi.ir/index.php/2016-03-25-16-38-40/2016-03-25-16-40-41/392-2016-03-26-07-10-30 (accessed July 21, 2014).

to perceive opportunities which might objectively exist, or perceive opportunities where none exist.[34]

Figure 1. Context and Shi'i Political Activism

In sum, as with any other political actor, mujtahids cannot seize a political opportunity unless they perceive there to be an opportunity: Thus, four distinctive outcomes may be identified.

(1) If the opportunity structure is relatively closed and mujtahids perceive it accurately, they remain quiet;

(2) If the opportunity structure is relatively closed and they misperceive it, they engage in activism, but will fail to mobilise a popular movement towards achieving their goals;

---

[34] Charles Kurzman, 'Structural Opportunity and Perceived Opportunity in Social-Movement Theory: The Iranian Revolution of 1979', *American Sociological Review* 61, no. 1 (1996): 153-170.

(3) If there is a relatively open political opportunity and mujtahids misperceive it, accordingly they remain quiet and miss an opportunity; and

(4) If the opportunity structure is relatively open and they have an accurate perception of it, they become active and lead a successful social mobilisation to fulfil their asserted goal, to protect the integrity of Shi'i community.

All four potentialities have occurred and been practised by Shi'i mujtahids throughout history. The major Shi'i political trajectory from the commencement of the Occultation Era until the rise of Shi'i Safavid in Persia (from 941 to 1501 CE) represents an example of the first category. The mujtahids perceived accurately that the structural political opportunities for Shi'i activism were relatively closed, so they stayed out of politics and focused on developing and strengthening the foundations of the faith.

A notable case of the second category—a relatively *closed* opportunity structure and an *inaccurate* perception of the clergy—was the engagement of the Najafi mujtahids in the Persian Constitutional Revolution,[35] in which an alliance between religious and secular elites from 1905 to 1911 constituted the leadership of the revolution. However, the course of events and the outcome of the revolution were by no means what the mujtahids had predicted. The execution of Sheikh Fadlallah Nuri as a result of a verdict by his fellow colleague was the first and most notorious of its kind in the history of Shi'ism and, along with other outcomes, clearly showed that the clergy had misperceived

---

[35] For an account on the background of clergy involvement in the Persian Constitutional Revolution, see Abdul-Hadi Hairi, 'Why Did the ʿUlamā Participate in the Persian Constitutional Revolution of 1905-1909?', *Die Welt des Islams* 17, no. 1/4 (1976–1977): 127–54.

the nature of the political opportunity structure.[36] When the dust from the turmoil settled, they had lost a great deal of their legitimacy, a situation that continued for many decades.

The 1991 Shi'i Uprising in Iraq is an example of the third category as it illustrates a circumstance in which the political opportunity structure was relatively open, yet the clerical leadership missed the opportunity because of their misperception of it. Overwhelmed by Saddam's adventurous yet disastrous wars, the Shi'is and Kurds in Iraq orchestrated a popular uprising in March 1991 against his regime. The Shi'i mujtahids of Najaf, which had previously felt abandoned by their laity followers, misperceived the relatively open opportunity structure and delayed in becoming active—a misperception that was eventually seen to be one of the main reasons for the failure of the uprising and the subsequent government crackdown on revolutionaries in Iraq.[37]

The current political ascendancy of Shi'i communities and mujtahids in the Middle East appears to be in line with the fourth category. This is linked to a situation in which the structural political opportunity has been open, and the clerical leadership has perceived it accurately and has succeeded in mobilising the masses towards the achievement of their goals. This 'permissive' context was instrumental in the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979, the rise of Shi'is in post-2003 Iraq and the Shi'i triumph in Lebanon in 2006. For their part, at an individual level, Khomeini, Sistani and Nasrallah accurately perceived the relevant opportunities at the time and seized them, to the benefit of their political movements.

---

[36] Abdolreza Kefayi, interview by the author, August 12, 2011, Qom, Iran. Najaf, Iraq. Ayatollah Sheikh Abdolreza Kefayi is the grandson of Akhond Khorsani (1839-1911), the leader of pro-constitutionalist Ulama during the Revolution.
[37] Falah Abd al-Jabbar, 'Why the Uprising Failed?', in *The Iraq War Reader: History, Documents, Opinions*, ed. M.L. Sifry and C. Cerf (New York: Touchstone, 2003).

Mujtahids, open opportunity structure, accurate perceptions, and permissive contexts

The establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran based on Khomeini's political ijtihad represented the most salient example and culmination of the practice of Shi'i activism in the modern history of the Middle East. Born and raised in Iran, the Ayatollah's early life was concurrent with the rise of the Pahlavi Dynasty. At the same time, in the early 1920s, the Shi'i Seminary was founded in Qom by Ayatollah Abd al-Karim Haeri Yazdi (1859–1937). Despite some scattered opposition to the rule of Reza Shah Pahlavi (1925-1941), most mujtahids in Iran, striving to institutionalise the new-born seminary, chose to stay out of politics. [38] However, when Reza Shah stepped down for his young son Mohammadreza, the Seminary had already passed through its foundation stage and some years later, had become even more formidable under the leadership of Ayatollah Boroujerdi (1875–1961). Under his leadership, the Qom Seminary became the main religious centre of the Shi'i world—a position that the Najaf Seminary had held for centuries.[39] When Boroujerdi passed away, Mohammadreza Shah initiated a series of socio-economic reforms. Known as the 'White Revolution', these reforms led to a hostile encounter between the state and the clergy, and most notably Khomeini.[40] The criticism of the mujtahids became so caustic that the government banished the Ayatollah from the country. He later settled in Najaf, and it was there that he developed the doctrine that formed the basis of the Islamic government of Iran. His fellow followers in Iran were simultaneously endeavouring to change the political opportunity structure by forging the

---

[38] Shahrough, Akhavi, *Religion and Politics in Contemporary Iran: Clergy-State Relations in the Pahlavī Period* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1980): 40.
[39] Ibid., 91.
[40] Mohsen, Milani, *The making of Iran's Islamic Revolution: from Monarchy to Islamic Republic*. (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994): 50.

foundations of an underground movement using a simple but effective medium, the Mosques' pulpits.[41]

During the 1970s, Khomeini started lecturing on his ideas about the Islamic government as well as his take on the *Guardianship of the Jurist* theory. His perception at the time was that Shi'i politics during the Occultation should be based on the rule of Islam; therefore, a mujtahid, in a permissive context, should be able to establish a government to prevent any dilution of Islamic teachings. An open opportunity structure existed in the wake of February 1979, which he perceived accurately and seized it, in order to pursue his political goal.

Some decades later, and under the influence of the 1979 Revolution of Iran and the abolition of the Baath government of Saddam, a Shi'i government took power in Iraq. The objective political opportunity structure in post-2003 Iraq was somewhat different to that which existed in Iran on the eve of its revolution. Although the Shi'i community constituted the majority of the population, it had existed under Sunni supremacy since the creation of the country in the early 1920s. The fall of the Baathists in Iraq offered the clerical leadership an opportunity to safeguard the rights of the community. As a first step, Sistani insisted on a 'one-man-one-vote' standard for the 2005 election and asked Iraqi Shi'is to participate. He pragmatically sought a way for the Shi'i community to make the most of its numerical majority in Iraq.[42] Perceiving the POS to be relatively favourable, the Ayatollah became active in politics—albeit with some reservations as he was of Iranian descent—and sought to strengthen and protect the community at that critical moment. Seyyed Mohammadreza Sistani, the eldest son of the Ayatollah and his

---

[41] Shaul, Bakhash, *The Reign of the Ayatollahs: Iran and the Islamic Revolution* (London: Unwin, 1986): 40.
[42] Vali Nasr, The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006), 175.

aide, implied that the endeavours of his father were mainly focused on lobbying elected members of the Provisional Assembly to prevent the ratification of 'anti-sharia laws' in the new Iraqi constitution.[43] As the clerical leadership in Iraq had been witness to the experiences of its colleagues in Iran over the previous three decades, this was the reason for the seeming divergence of views between Khomeini and Sistani, two of the most distinguished Shi'i mujtahids of their times. Eventually, the pragmatism pursued by Sistani rewarded the Shi'i community and its religious leadership in Iraq with the highest level of Shi'i authority since the birth of the country.[44]

Since 2005, the clerical leadership in Iraq, though not directly active in mundane executive political affairs, has been the source of state legitimacy to which most people have referred. In a handful of cases, and whenever requested, Sistani and his entourage in Iraq have issued rulings or mediated conflicts between different parties to stabilise the country's internal and foreign affairs. However, perhaps the most significant move in post-2003 Iraq was made on the eve of the fall of Mosul to the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, in June 2014. In the most exceptional political act in almost a century of Shi'i history, Sistani issued the 'fatwa of jihad', calling on all Iraqis, Shi'is and non-Shi'is 'to defend the country, its people, the honour of its citizens, and its sacred places'.[45] The fatwa represented the greatest degree of political activism that has ever been exhibited by a Shi'i mujtahid residing in Iraq. The irony, however, is that it came from the Ayatollah who was believed by a majority of analysts to be the most famous advocate of political

---

[43] Seyyed Mohammadreza Sistani, interview by the author, June 7, 2013, Najaf, Iraq.
[44] Babak Rahimi, 'Ayatollah Sistani and the Democratization of Post-Ba'athist Iraq', Special Report 187. Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace.
[45] Luay Al Khatteeb, 'What Do You Know About Sistani's Fatwa?', *The Huffington Post* (9 September 2014), http://www.huffingtonpost.com/luay-al-khatteeb/what-do-you-know-about-si_b_5576244.html (accessed January 10, 2017).

quietism among the Shi'i clergy.[46] The political postures taken by Sistani over the course of the last fifteen years clearly indicate that he becomes engaged in politics when, in the context of an open POS, he perceives a threat to the Shi'i community, especially when it is imposed by outsiders. His millions of followers, Iraqi politicians and other regional players regard him as the most influential religious leader in Iraq.[47]

Shi'i activism in Lebanon also has unique characteristics compared with Iran and Iraq. Interestingly, the Shi'is in Lebanon had succeeded in establishing judicial court dedicated to their sect before their coreligionists in Iran and Iraq. The establishment of the Ja'fari court in 1926, in a sense, has been propulsed the Shi'i identity in Lebanon.[48] Because of the relatively closed objective structural opportunity in the country, and the confessional nature of Lebanese politics, the Shi'i mujtahids in Lebanon engaged in politics simply to protect the very existence of their followers. It took Imam Musa Sadr, the founder of clerical activism in contemporary Lebanon, more than fifteen years to form the Deprived Movement – the father of Amal Party- in 1974. The charter of the movement indicated that it was formed to protect deprived Lebanese communities (Shi'is and others), which, at the time, were entangled geographically between the hostilities of the Palestinian refugees in the south and the Christian Maronites of northern Lebanon.[49]

Later, with the commencement of the Lebanese Civil War in 1975 and the constant threats from Israel, Shi'i mujtahids moved further towards assuming an activist

---

[46] Andrew Arato, 'Sistani v. Bush: Constitutional Politics in Iraq', *Constellations* 11, no. 2 (2004): 174–192; Mehdi Khalaji, *The Last Marja: Sistani and the End of Traditional Religious Authority in Shiʿism* (Washington: The Washington Institute, 2006).

[47] Luay Al Khatteeb, 'Sistani's Jihad Fatwa One Year On: The Man Who Pulled Iraq From the Brink With a Single Statement', *The Huffington Post* (6 December 2017), https://www.huffingtonpost.com/luay-al-khatteeb/sistanis-jihad-fatwa-one_b_7579322.html?guccounter=1(accessed May 18, 2018).

[48] Max Weiss, 'Institutionalizing Sectarianism: The Lebanese Jaʿfari Court and Shiʿi Society under the French Mandate', *Islamic Law and Society* 15, no. 3 (2008): 371–407.

[49] Augustus R. Norton, *Amal and the Shiʿa: struggle for the soul of Lebanon* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1987): 145.

posture. Musa Sadr's inheritors did the same; most notably, the formation of Hezbollah around a handful of clerical figures was in direct response to the threats of Israeli occupation in post-1982 Lebanon. [50] Although during its early years the clerical leadership of Hezbollah asked for the establishment of an Islamic state, with the emergence of a new charismatic leadership, they later moderated their posture to be consistent with the realities of the country's political structure.[51]

Shi'i political history over the last 40 years suggests that a new paradigm has emerged in modern Middle East based on the central role of the mujtahids' leadership. The cases of Iran 1979, Iraq 2003 and Lebanon 2006 provide a basis for analysing this political paradigm through the prism of a clerical elite network, which has been formed by individual Shi'i mujtahids, their perceptions of the POS, and the political contexts in the region.

These three cases imply successful Shi'i political movements through the accurate assessment of the perceived POSs in Iran, Iraq and Lebanon. Nevertheless, the similarities and differences between the Shi'i mujtahids' political postures in modern Iran, Iraq and Lebanon are attributable not to sharply different interpretations of Shi'i principles or different versions of Shi'ism but to the similarities and differences in the objective POSs that they face. 'Activism' and 'quietism', therefore, should be understood not as representing a strategic or doctrinal divide in Shi'ism but only as tactical political postures that vary according to the context.

The figure above shows objective POS, may pose different levels in their systematic analysis in international relations. The structure a Shi'i mujtahid faces, in a

---

[50] Augustus R. Norton, *Hezbollah: A Short History* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2014): 33.
[51] Rula J. Abisaab, and Malek H. Abisaab, *The Shi'ites of Lebanon: Modernism, Communism, and Hizbullah's Islamists* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2014): 181.

specific context, influences and be influenced by opportunity structures in other contexts. Therefore, the objective POSs relevant to Iran, Iraq and Lebanon exhibited both recurrent and unique factors.

At the international level, the POS overlapped for the Shi'i communities in the Middle East. Until the early 1990s, Shi'i mujtahids faced threats arising from the Cold War as the US–Soviet rivalry represented the potential threat of a non-Muslim conquest of the Muslim world. While Iran was inclined towards the Western camp for the most of its pre-Revolution era, the Republic of Iraq tended towards the East and Lebanon vacillated between the two camps.[52] The Shi'i mujtahids tried to preserve their popular constituency from both influences of anti-religious communism and the religious laxity and secularism introduced by western liberalism. To this end, some mujtahids succeeded, and others failed to mitigate the threats to their communities.

A case in point at the regional level, is the abolition of the Ottoman Caliphate in the aftermath of WWI that changed the political structures in Iraq and Lebanon and influenced those in Iran.[53] The rise of Iraqi Republic in 1958, the civil war in Lebanon and, most significantly, the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran impacted the regional level as well as the POSs of neighbouring countries.[54] One impact of these regional upheavals was the development of a sense of religious transnationalism among Shi'i communities in the Middle East. A case in point is the popular uprising in 1963 in Iran, which ignited harsh response from the leadership of the Najaf Seminary in Iraq, [55]

---

[52] Richard W. Cottam, *Iran and the United States: A Cold War Case Study* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 1989): 9-12.

[53] Abisaab, 'The Shi'ites of Lebanon', 52.

[54] Laurence Louër, *Transnational Shia Politics: Religious and Political Networks in the Gulf* (London: Hurst, 2008): 177.

[55] The clerics in Najaf supported their colleagues in Iran during 1963 upheavals. Mohsen Hakim (1889-1970), sent a telegram of condolence in early April 1963 and invited the Maraji' to migrate from Qom to Najaf, so they all work on unanimous response to the Shah. The more contentious reaction, however, came from Khoei, a renowned teacher of Najaf seminary at the time. Through a set of questions and answers, which later was distributed in a pamphlet called 'Serious Warning

as did the devastating Lebanon Civil War from 1975 to 1990.[56] Religious leaders in Iran opposed the atrocities of the Baath regime against the Shi'i community in Iraq (1968–2003),[57] and condemned the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in the 1980s.[58]

An important element of POS at the national level could be seen in the attitude of the state towards the Shi'i religious community. The rise of Reza Shah in Iran became concurrent with the pressure on clerical establishments in Iran.[59] Although some restrictions against the clergy were lifted during the early stages of Mohammadreza Pahlavi's reign, for various reasons, mujtahids were the main target of sanctions by his regime during the second half of his rule.[60] In Lebanon, however, due to the weakness of the state, the Shi'is were faced with a more open POS at national level.[61] The situation was the worst for the Shi'is in Iraq. The rise of the Baath regime in Iraq in 1968 heralded the most severely repressive era for the Shi'i community and for its mujtahids settled in the holy cities. The state did not tolerate even a semblance of activism from the clergy and responded harshly to such insurrections.[62] Over the course of the two decades that ended with Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2003, the Shi'i mujtahids in Iraq faced a closed POS, mainly because of the state repression.

---

of Ayatollah Khoei about the Jewish involvement in Iranian politics', he issued a punitive declaration against the Iranian monarchy and cautioned the Shah for his anti-Islamic actions. The full text of Khoei's pamphlet is available at:
http://www.alkhoei.net/arabic/pages/book.php?bcc=17&itg=61&bi=132&s=ct (Accessed 8 May 2014).

[56] Rula J. Abisaab, 'Lebanese Shi'ites and The Marja'iyya: Polemic in the Late Twentieth Century', *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 36, no.2 (2009): 215-239.

[57] Chibli Mallat, The renewal of Islamic Law: Muhammad Baqer as-Sadr, Najaf, and the Shi'i International (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993): 7.

[58] Abisaab, 'Lebanese Shi'ites and The Marja'iyya'.

[59] Akhavi, 'Religion and Politics in Contemporary Iran', 59.

[60] Ibid., 91.

[61] Waleed Hazbun, 'Assembling security in a 'weak state:' the contentious politics of plural governance in Lebanon since 2005', *Third World Quarterly* 37, no. 6 (2016): 1053-1070.

[62] Abbas Kadhim, *The Hawza under Siege: A Study in the Ba'th Party Archive* (Boston: Institute for Iraqi Studies, 2013).

Political opportunity structures also vary in these three countries at societal level. The Shi'is in Iraq became a majority population of the country during the process of conversion by Sunnite tribesmen to Shi'i Islam in the early twentieth century. [63] Therefore, the traces of strong Arab and nomadic ties should not be underestimated when studying the Shi'is in Iraq.[64] Some Iraqi tribes still have both Sunni and Shi'i members, both of whom show relatively strong patronage to their tribal values and sheikhs. Shi'i mujtahids in Iraq have always faced a dilemma as how to respond to this tribalism when undertaking their socio-political responsibilities. Therefore, they are less likely to engage in politics or, if they become active, expect less successful outcome unless they have the support of the tribal chiefs. This can also have been seen in Lebanon through the lens of sectarianism as Lebanese identity tends to be constructed along sectarian lines. Therefore, the main concern of the Shi'i mujtahids in Lebanon is to evaluate the consequences of their actions in line with the 16 other religious sects in the country. Nevertheless, the sectarianism of Lebanon's society has enabled mujtahids to form a strong relationship with the laity followers.[65]

Finally, the POS for Shi'i activism on an individual level has been relatively dependent on a handful of charismatic leaders, high-ranking mujtahids, who have been active in Iran, Iraq and Lebanon during the modern era. As leaders of their relevant communities, each of these figures has sought to seize the opportunity when available to pursue their socio-political roles and responsibilities. Faced with different objective political opportunities on broader levels, these figures have contributed to the structure on an individual level through their ijtihad and other activities. The ijtihad of Khomeini

---

[63] Yitzhak Nakash, 'The Conversion of Iraq's Tribes to Shiʿism', *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 26, no. 3 (1994): 443–63.

[64] Yitzhak Nakash, Transnational Shia Politics: Religious and Political Networks in the Gulf (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2006): 97.

[65] Abisaab, 'The Shi'ites of Lebanon', 104.

in the 1970s, which outlined the role of mujtahids as participants in political affairs, was not only crystallised as a response to the structure he perceived at the time, but also changed the objective POS for his colleagues and followers and further developed opposition to the regime of the Shah in Iran. This was like the role played by Musa Sadr in revitalising the Shi'i community in Lebanon. In contrast, the ijtihad of Khoei, influenced by his interpretation of what was a relatively closed POS in Iraq during 1980s, pushed him towards assuming a quietist posture and, hence, further closed the political opportunity structure for other mujtahids in Iraq for years to come.[66]

Evaluating the objective POSs at different levels further explains the rationale behind the postures of different Shi'i mujtahids in contemporary politics of Iran, Iraq and Lebanon. The course of events that led to the current Shi'i revival in the Middle East has been mainly influenced by the contextual changes which have occurred in recent years and, consequently, provided a relatively more open political opportunity structure for clerical activism.

Conclusion

Since the early 1970s, the concept of the 'political opportunity structure' has been the focus of the study of social movements and contentious politics. Only recently, however, have researchers begun to recognise the significance of actors' perceptions of *objective conditions*. Perceptions, accurate or otherwise, are important in the formation of contentious politics.

The previous section showed how mujtahids manoeuvred and positioned themselves in response to the socio-political upheavals they faced and how they broadcast their opinions. Some scholars have suggested that the Shi'i clerical authority in the contemporary era has been mitigated by the activities and novel opinions of a group of

---

[66] Abd al-Jabbar, 'Why the Uprising Failed?'.

Muslim intelligentsias and that the gap has 'widened between clerics and laymen'.[67] Nevertheless, the mainstream structure of the Shi'i clergy, which comprises people who believe in ijtihad as a means of responding to developments, still, and perhaps for the foreseeable future, remains of utmost importance in understanding Shi'i politics in today's Middle East.

Reviewing the trajectory of their political activism since the early twentieth century, it could be concluded that when it comes to the protection of the community from external threats, Shi'i mujtahids form powerful associations, either by engaging in activism or by supporting their active colleagues. In a post-9/11 world and with the rise of extremist groups that constantly threaten the regional order, it has become clear that perhaps the greatest threat to stability in the region is the set of doctrines that are embraced by radicalised groups in the region. Today, the active Shi'i leadership in Iran, Iraq and Lebanon seem to have coherent pragmatic policies that comply with the norms of the international community.

It has been suggested that categorising the members of high-ranking Shi'i mujtahids as either apolitical quietists or extreme activists obscures the realpolitik that is common to all of them. Shi'i mujtahids are always potentially active because of the varying political contexts which arise in the Middle East; further, the core foundations of the faith have been constructed around politics. Above all, in times of threat, whenever they perceive a relatively open political opportunity structure, Shi'i mujtahids would orchestrate contentious politics. To this end, especially in modern times, they may go beyond the exclusive domain of divine politics and engage in more pragmatic politics.[68]

---

[67] Laurence Louër, *Shiʿism and Politics in the Middle East*, trans. John King (London: Hurst, 2012), 126.
[68] Nasr, 'The Shia Revival', 231.

To fulfil their responsibilities as the heirs to the Prophet and infallible Imams,[69] they form alliances with a specific social class against common threats and might even collude with autocratic state rulers with the sole purpose of protecting the Shi'i community from the threat of the deprivation of an infallible source of leadership. Recognising this is a crucial step towards understanding Shi'i elite politics in the region today and how these politics might shape the future.

---

[69] Liyakat Takim, The Heirs of the Prophet: Charisma and Religious Authority in Shi'ite Islam (New York: SNNY Press, 2012).