

Shi'a Islam and Religious Secularism New Spirit and the Old Tradition

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Abstract: Secularism is one of the most debatable issues in Arabic and Islamic discourse. Shi'a Islam has shown a great deal of enthusiasm for democracy and secularism. This democratic spirit owes a lot to the Grand Ayatollah Seyyed 'Ali Al-Sistani, the highest Shi'a religious authority (*marja'iyya*) in Najaf. Al-Sistani produced, among other things, a thorough thesis based on a complete separation of religion and state, and combines Western liberal values and Islamic characteristics. Al-Sistani, who revives an old Shi'a tradition that began in the 18th century, makes a sharp break with both Sunni and Shi'a political Islamist tradition. While this model provides a solution for both Islamists and secularists, it also reminds us of the great Islamic theorists in the 19th century such as 'Abd al-Rahman al-Kawakibi and Muhammad Hussein Al-Na'ini. Al-Sistani's main concern is to build a real civil society where religion and politics work in harmony.

Key words: secularism, Islam, Shi'ism, Hidden Imam, Al-Sistani

Introduction

Secularism is one of the most popular words in Arabic and Islamic discourse. For its proponents, secularism provides a successful cure for all the ills of Arabs and Muslims. For its detractors, it is an evil that needs to be challenged and suppressed, along with its adherents.

Indeed, in the last two decades, secularism has become a focus of conflict, in which one has to take a stand for or against it. Dozens of books have been published in the last two decades dealing with this problematic issue, with academic and monthly magazines giving special attention to secularism, ranging from attacking this Western phenomenon to praising it as the last hope for humanity.

Secularists and their supporters defend their stance on the ground that owing to secularism European countries, and the West in general, have achieved great success and advancement. Thanks to secularism, the West has gained political stability, economic prosperity and scientific progress. It is secularism that solved the complex relationship between individuals' private affairs (religious and spiritual aspects) and political obligations in today's world. By separating religion from the state, humans have become part of civil society, where they find his freedom to fulfil their obligations towards God and the state.

However, the enemies of secularism do not see things in this way. Rather, they argue that secularism has led humanity into a new kind of *Jahiliyya*, that is a new worldly, one-dimensioned life, concerned solely with satisfying our basic and material needs. Furthermore, they claim that secularism is no more than a Western campaign to weaken the Islamic *Umma*. In this sense, secularism is held up as a cultural phase of the old/new encounter between the West and Islam. ('Amarah: 8)

While Shi'a Islam has been manifested in the religio-political revival of the last three decades, it has also revealed a new tendency towards secularism. In Iran, following the Islamic Revolution, Iraq and Lebanon alike, the Shi'ites (religious clerics and Islamic parties) have expressed a great deal of enthusiasm for democracy and secularism. This tendency has touched both traditional

Shi'a theoretical foundations and political platforms of Shi'a movements. In other words, it reflects a deep sense of openness among Shi'a communities towards other people, as well as pragmatic understanding within Shi'a political organizations. (Nakash)

In Iran, for example, Grand Ayatollah Sheikh Hussein Mantadhari who, for many years espoused the jurist's governance according to (*al-wilayat al-Mutlaq*) has recently shifted his direction towards a very limited role given to *al-waly al-fiqeeh*. Under this understanding, the whole political authority has been given to the people with oversight given role to *al-waly al-fiqeeh*.

This view, it should be stressed, revives the old theoretical arguments that surrounded the Constitutional Revolution of 1905 and the call for the oversight role of the *fiqahae council*. Also, in Iran, there have been clear calls for secular religion. Abdolkarim Soroush, one of the most influential independent intellectuals in Iran, has developed his ideas about pluralism, democracy and secular religion extensively. Soroush fiercely criticized the call to turn Islam into ideology, emphasizing the need for private religion. Soroush also developed his idea of the 'religious democratic state' (Gamari-Tabrizi: 203).

In Lebanon, too, we have witnessed similar developments. Seyyed Muhammad Hussein Fadlullah, one of the most influential and controversial Shi'a *'ulama* has made the same breakthrough. Fadlullah, who was a strong adherent of the Islamic state, moved his support to a new kind of open civil society, where different communities and religions can interact with each other. The Shi'a Party of Hezbollah in Lebanon also showed this kind of openness. Since the mid 1990s, Hezbollah has made a great transformation from its radical and religious language towards more realistic platforms, making secular alliances with Christians, communists and nationalist parties. This shift, no doubt, exhibits a more pragmatic view towards the relationship between politics and religion.

Recent and far-reaching change, however, has come from within the Shi'ites of Iraq. The Shi'a of Iraq who grasped on political power for the first time after decades of oppression and exclusion, seem to be ready for democracy and to accept sharing power with other communities. At both political and religious levels, the Shi'ites of Iraq have shown a desire to accept secularism for both practical and internal reasons. After the landslide victory at the 2005 Election, Shi'a political parties recently realized that sectarian politics have no roots in Iraq.

We should, however, state that this democratic spirit owes a lot to the Grand Ayatollah Seyyed 'Ali Al-Sistani, the highest Shi'a religious authority (*marja'yya*) in Najaf. From the outset, he demanded democracy for the Iraqi people, insisting, for instance, on writing a balanced constitution and calling for early elections.

This paper will deal, first of all, with the limited political role that Shi'a religious men assumed in their history (the core idea that lies behind secularism) and how this experience is seen within the contexts of both Islamic and Christian traditions. The next part will focus on following how the traditional Shi'a theory of *Al-walayyat Al-mahdoodat* of *fiqeeh* (limited authority), that was developed by the Shi'a *Usuli School* in the 18th century has affected recent discussions regarding what I call secular reformations. The main part of this essay presents the ideas of Seyyed 'Ali Al-Sistani, the Grand Ayatollah in Najaf, regarding the political and religious role of Shi'a clerics, as well as his thoughts on political participation, elections, pluralism and so on

Christianity, Islam and the foundations of secularism

When Alexis de Tocqueville arrived in the United States in the early 19th century, the first thing that astonished him was the religious feelings among the American people. The French philosopher compared the French and the American nations, stating that while 'among us [the

French] I had seen the spirit of religion and the spirit of freedom almost always move in contrary directions, here I found them united intimately with one another: they reigned together on the same soil' (Himmelfarb: 205). Tocqueville concluded that 'religion, which among Americans, never mixes directly in the government of society, should therefore be considered as the first of their political institutions; for it does not give them the taste for freedom, it singularly facilitates the use of it' (Himmelfarb: 209). This unique American example made John Adams claim that 'Our constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other'. Adams also showed his surprise for the French attempt to establish a secular republic, stating that 'I know not what to make of a republic of thirty million atheists' (Himmelfarb: 211).

Indeed, religion is nowadays considered incompatible with politics. It is taken for granted that a secular system must abolish any kind of religion. This radical version of secularism, as one could describe it, is closely associated with the ex-Soviet Union and other communist regimes in Eastern Europe and, in turn, it especially affected communist parties in the Arab world. The French model is also very close to this type of secularism, where religion is viewed as reactionary and a setback for progress. The French model was imitated by Kamal Ataturk in Turkey and elsewhere (especially in North Africa). However, the Americans and, to a lesser extent, the British, showed a very different attitude towards religion. It is interesting here to recall how Western liberal states used to accuse the ex-Soviet Union of being atheist and anti-religion.

In the Arab and Islamic world, the relationship between religion (in this case Islam as the religion of the majority) and state is an issue of conflict between two trends: secularists and Islamists. By secularists, we mean all secular parties, movements and intellectuals who espouse secularism as a way of life. Communists, Ba'athies and Nasires make a very sharp distinction between Islam and the state. In the name of secular reformations, they subjected Islamic societies (institution, beliefs, *'ulama* and so on) to severe pressures and attacks.

In reaction to these invading secularist regimes, the Islamic movement emerged as a substitution for Muslims' dilemmas. From Egypt to Iraq, through Iran and Pakistan, Islamic movements and parties have been organized as a consequence of the dramatic failure of secular regimes. Islam became the only solution that could resolve the ills of this '*Umma*' and it certainly brings a full system for Muslim people, though terms such as democracy, liberalism and elections have been criticized and attacked by Islamic trends as they are perceived to be part of the 'Western' imperialist project.

In the 19th and early 20th centuries, the picture was completely different. Islamic scholars and *'ulama* saw democracy, constitution and elections as good Western ideas that could be adopted by Muslims to solve their own problems. 'Abd al-Rahman al-Kawakibi (1849-1903), for example, in his two books *Taba'i al-istibdad* (The Characteristics of Tyranny) and *Umm al-qura* (Mother of the Cities), call for Western ideals of democracy, representative government and so on to be adopted. For Al-Kawakibi, 'the just state, in which men fulfil themselves, is that in which the individual is free and freely serves the community, and in which the government watches over this freedom but is itself controlled by the people; this is what the true Islamic State was'. (Hourani: 272).

Another example of the incorporation of Western ideas is the Constitutional Revolution of 1905 in Iran. Indeed, this democratic revolution brought about a break between the *Mashroua* group (pro-Constitution), headed by Sheikh Muhammad Kadhem Al-Khurasani and the *Moustabadah* forces (anti-Constitution) headed by Seyyed Kadhem Al-Yazdi. For the *Mashroua* group, however, democracy was not *haram* or forbidden. It was a means by which Muslims could achieve their political rehabilitation.

Muhammad Hussein Al-Na'ini, a leading Shi'a jurist and theorist, echoes Western ideas in his famous book *Tanbih al-umma wa-tanzih al-milla* (The Awakening of the Islamic Nation and the Purification of the Islamic Creed). This book, published in Najaf in 1909, was a pioneering attempt

to use Western ideas in the service of Islamic reformation. Al-Na'ini, for example, provided, for the first time, the Islamic foundations for democratic government accountable to its people, with a mere guiding role for the *'ulama*.

As such, two groups of thinkers tended to argue that Islam is irreconcilable with democracy, and hence secularism. The first group includes all Western thinkers who define liberalism, democracy and secularism as unique European and Christian values that cannot be grown elsewhere. The second group consists of those Islamist thinkers who regard secularism as an atheist and irreligious Western disease intended to deconstruct the values of Muslims.

Among Western theorists, Samuel Huntington, for instance, argues that 'the universalisation of these Western values is destined to fail, because the acceptance of these values requires other people to abandon their own civilization and convert to Western civilization' (Haidar: pp12-13) Sidentop goes further, claiming that 'Christianity provided the moral foundations of modern democracy, hence liberalism'. Islam, he claims, poses 'an interesting problem', with Islamic fundamentalism being 'a reaction against Western liberalism - a reaction which derives from the fact that, behind liberalism, Islam perceives Christianity at work'. (p.208) This view, it could be argued, is based on Weber's analysis of Protestantism and spread of capitalism. Weber's argument has led some Western sociologists and historians to formulate what has come to be known as Islamic Exceptionalism; that is, the failure of Islam to adopt secularism in the way that took place in Europe.

Islamists, on the other hand, also reject secularism in the name of Islamic Exceptionalism. Their argument, however, is completely different from the above. Islamists maintain that there was no church in Islam and Islam did not witness any struggle between religion and state similar to that in Europe.

The debate over religion and its role in politics is still ongoing between Islamist and secularist thinkers. While Islamists do not hesitate to portray secularists as irreligious people, secularists defend themselves against this, stating that secularism is far from being equivalent to atheism. Fouad Zakariyya, a secularist Arabic philosopher claims that 'secularism is mistakenly understood as a movement rejecting religion. This understanding claims that in essence European secularism was, and has been - against religion' (Zakariyya: 38). To build such a new secularist front, Zakariyya entreats his colleagues in the Muslim world not to make 'carbon copies of modern Western thinkers, but rather an extension of the rational tradition of the Mu'tazilites, al-Farabi, Ibn Rushd, and Ibn al-Haytham. Certainly, these thinkers fought many battles against the proponents of literal submission to text and religious authority; perhaps they waged these battles under the banner of reason and imitation or the attempt to reconcile reason and Shari'ah' (Zakariyya: 41).

Abdullah An-Na'im, who argues for a secular state, insists that 'separation between Islam and state does not mean separation between Islam and politics...this means that Islam and state are separated and they should be separated but Islam and politics cannot be separated' (An-Na'im:27). The secular state for An-Na'im, however, is 'distinct from secularism. In other words, although An-Na'im favours the institutional separation between religious and political authority, he does not favour secularism as the privatization of religion or, in his own words, the total relegation of Islam to the purely private domain and its exclusion from public policy... He maintains that although Islam should be separated from the state, it need not be separated from politics' (An-Na'im:pp7-9).

For both secularists and Islamists, however, there is an urgent need to revive the Islamic liberalism of the 19th century. Islamic liberalism, as espoused by secular Islamists, was affected mainly by Western thoughts and ideas and its supporters were proud of Islam. For al-Kawakibi, Qasim Ameen, Lutfi al-Seyyed, and many others, it was possible for secularism to be provided by Islam. Based on Islamic tradition, Islamic secularism was very independent and called for secular Islam. Secular Islamists condemned dictatorships and demanded constitutional government and

a parliamentary system, ensuring specific rational foundations to keep citizens' freedoms and limit authorities' powers (Sharabi: pp179-211).

Recently, Hamid Haidar in his book, (*A Theory of Religious Democracy, A Shi'a Islamist Theory of Religious Democracy for a Modern Shi'a Society*), sought to develop a religious democratic theory based on Shi'a principles. Compared with Western secular democracy, Haidar endeavours to find an Islamic democratic model, focusing on Imam Khomeini's *Walayat Al-Faqeeh* thesis, where sovereignty is shared between *Al-Waly Al-Faqeeh* and the people.

Without going into arguments over the previous model, I will provide here, what I can describe as a thorough and real model introduced by Seyyed Al-Sistani. I will demonstrate that this model, which is based on a complete separation of religion and state, combines Western liberal values and Islamic characteristics. This model, I should state, rests on Shi'a traditions and is based on religious principles. This model, I assume, reminds us of the efforts exerted by secular Islamists as well as Al-Na'ini to reconcile Islam with modern ideals. Thus, I will start by providing some historical background to this tradition, how it emerged and gradually developed and then analyse the model itself.

Shi'ism: religion vis-à-vis politics

Soon after toppling Saddam Hussein's regime, Karen Armstrong pointed to the typical view of Western people regarding Shi'ites. According to this stereotype, 'the mention of Shi'ism immediately evokes thoughts of sinister ayatollahs, processions of flagellants, and an implacable hostility to progress and democracy'. Armstrong, however, argues that although Shi'ism has inherited deep revolutionary zeal from Kerbala, the 'Kerbala paradigm also inspired what one might call a religiously motivated secularism'. She further claims that 'long before western philosophers called for the separation of church and state, Shias had privatized faith, convinced that it was impossible to integrate the religious imperative with the grim world of politics that seemed murderously antagonistic to it. As a result of this, Armstrong concludes that 'by the eighth century, most Shias held aloof from politics, concentrated on the mystical interpretation of scripture, and regarded any government - even one that was avowedly Islamic - as illegitimate'(Armstrong).

From the outset, the Shi'a *'ulama* of Iraq have shown clear interest in democracy and advocated the rights of the Iraqi people in elections and a constitution. Cole notes this reformation's leading role, considering it as an attempt 'to reconcile the principles of Islam with those of the Enlightenment', recognizing that 'this encounter between the two systems is hardly new, and the contradictions are hardly easy to work out'. He links this democratic revival 'with the ideals of Jean-Jacques Rousseau', realizing that this attempt 'is among the most thorough-going and institutionally promising in modern history' (Cole: p.5).

Looking back to Rousseau's time, it is obvious that the Shi'a *'ulama in Iran*, were considering a new approach regarding the political authority there. Each religion, wrote Rousseau in *'The Social Contract'*, 'was exclusively attached to the laws of the state which prescribed it' (Rousseau: P. 144) Writing in the early 1760s, when the church in Europe still had great power and influence over monarchs and people alike, Rousseau noticed that 'there is always a prince and civil laws, this double power has resulted in an unending jurisdictional conflict which has made any sort of good polity impossible in Christian states; and it has never been possible to decide, once and for all, whether it is the ruler or the priest who ought to be obeyed'. (Rousseau: P. 145). Islam, however, had a very different experience. Rousseau stated that the Prophet 'Mohammad had very sound ideas; he kept his political system well unified; and as long as his form of government continued under the caliphs who succeeded him, that government remained strictly unitary, and therefore good. But the Arabs having become prosperous, literate, polished, soft and cowardly,

they were conquered by barbarians; then the separation of the two powers began again. Although it is less apparent among Mohammedans [Muslims] than among the Christians, it is there nonetheless, especially in the sect of Ali; and there are states like Persia, where it has never ceased to be felt' (Rousseau: p.146).

Since the Safavid's rule, an 'unspoken agreement' emerged for the first time according to which the Shi'a *'ulama* authorised their secular rulers, keeping themselves with their religious teaching and business. This agreement was set up officially during the Qajar's rule. Halm observes correctly that this agreement was similar to that of 'two swords theory' which was formulated by some Christian theorists to organize the relationship between the kings of Medieval Europe and the pope (Halm: 117).

It was Shaikh Ja'far Kashif Al-Ghita who set the foundations of this new theory for the first time. According to this: 'representation of the Hidden Imam - who alone unites the spiritual and secular leadership in his person - is divided during his occultation. The secular arm of the monarch is responsible for law and order and protection of the country militarily, whereas the 'ulama have the role of the spiritual guardian. They confirm the legitimacy of all government actions and monitor the maintenance of the revealed, divine order (shari'a) (Halm: 117).

Although the relationship between the Shi'a clergy and secular rulers remained a very sensitive area, the mainstream among Shi'a *'ulama* has been political aloofness. As the Shi'a *'ulama* isolated politics from the religious realm for practical reason and due to the fact that the Shi'a doctrine gives no legal grounds for all temporal authorities, so all political authorities are de facto governments (Momen: 193).

This tendency was sustained by Najaf's *Hawza* with the coming of Sheikh Murtadha Al-Ansari who advocated 'political acquiescence and nonintervention'. (Arjomand: 112). Since then, political authority on earth has come out of *fiqh* concerns as they believe that real authority belongs to the Hidden Imam. This does not mean, however, that Shi'a *'ulama* abandoned their guiding or religious role. This explains perfectly their twofold role; that is, although they make real efforts to challenge any deviated government or policies, they give no attention to participating in governance (The Tobacco Crisis, the Revolution of 1920 and so on).

Al-Sistani, Najaf and renewing the old tradition

The Shi'a *'ulama* emerged after 2003 as a leading and very influential power in the new Iraq. Among these *'ulama*, Seyyed 'Ali Al-Sistani held a special position as his ideas and actions affected the whole political process. Al-Sistani, who was born in Sistan (Iran) in 1930, belongs to a famous religious family. His father, Muhammad Baqir, and grandfather, 'Ali were regarded as among the leading *'ulama* of Mashhad and later Najaf. They specialized in *fiqh* and *usul al-fiqh*.

Al-Sistani began receiving his religious education in Mashhad at the age of eleven. He studied *bihth al-kharij* (a very high level of *Hawza* studies) with Seyyed Hussein Al-Brujerdi in Qum. In his early twenties, Al-Sistani went to reside in Najaf. From that time he did not leave Najaf apart from performing Hajj and for short visits to Mashhad (Al-Sagheer in Al-Fadhili: pp105-108). Al-Sistani mainly attended the lessons of the most famous scholar, namely, Seyyed Abu Al-Qasim Al-Khoei, who is regarded by many researchers as one of the great *mujtahides* among the Shi'a circle since the death of Sheikh Al-Tusi. Al-Khoei himself was a disciple of Muhammad Hussein Al-Na'ini (see above). It seems that Al-Sistani has been influenced deeply by this attachment.

Al-Sistani followed Al-Khoei's political approach of aloofness. Political aloofness, however, does not mean isolation from this world. There are some references that indicate Al-Sistani's deep involvement in political discourse, especially in regard to Islamic movements in the Arab world

(Private source). From the mid 1990s until toppling Saddam's regime in April 2003, Al-Sistani was kept under house arrest.

Although Al-Sistani has not yet formulated his full ideas, it is perhaps possible to draw a picture of his main thoughts through his *fatwas*, orders and injunctions. Al-Sistani has also expressed many of his thoughts through interviews he made with newspapers, magazines and news agencies. Thanks to Hamid Al-Khafaf, Al-Sistani's spokesman in Lebanon, who compiled Al-Sistani's statements for three years starting from April 2003, it has become possible to us to have a good idea about Al-Sistani's views.

First of all, Al-Sistani rejects any kind of religious state. For him, there is no Islamic or Shi'a state. This understanding is based on religious principles rather than pragmatic or political reasons. In fact, rejection of religious government relies on very intimate Shi'a principles. According to this principle, all governments are temporal and illegal authorities as legal and real just rule belongs to *al-imam al-ghaeb* (the Hidden Imam).

Notwithstanding, Al-Sistani sees no contradiction between establishing democratic government and Shi'a traditional principles. While he conceptualizes his ideas regarding democratic government according to very practical principles, he postpones his original thesis about ideal government to be realized on the awaited return of Imam Al-Muhdi. This is to say that the Just ruler (the Imam himself) will take responsibility for establishing his ideal government. In the meantime, Shi'a *'ulama* have no authority or power to exercise over people. Actually, *'ulamas'* role is very limited within their societies as will be shown.

It is clear that political authority (whether Shi'a or Sunni, religious or secular) is dealt with as means of organizing people's lives. This sense is very close to Thomas Hobbs's Social Contract, where people are obliged to submit their will to their authority to avoid disorder. To put it in simple words, political authority represents the less of two evils. It should be stressed, however, that Al-Sistani's social contract, resembles Rousseau's contract in terms of its conditions. That is to say, that unlike Hobbs who asks people to give up their rights unconditionally, Rousseau preserves peoples' rights in 'general will'.

Although this given authority is considered de facto, as long as it keeps justice and exercises civil orders, it is nevertheless regarded as illegal. Once again, that is because temporal authority (including Shi'a religious governments) can claim no religious mandate as it lacks such basis. No doubt, this understanding separates religious principles as eternal and unalterable and political mundane powers as secular changeable occurrences (17, 18, 43, 46, 48, 68, 74, 93, 98).

Al-Sistani, accordingly, shows a very clear stand regarding sovereignty. For him, the people are the real holders of sovereignty. They decide on their destiny as they wish. Al-Sistani, of course, points here to the theory of the 'general will'. As a consequence, Al-Sistani makes a sharp break with both Sunni and Shi'a Islamist traditions, which gives sovereignty to God. Sunni and Shi'a Islamists, tend to argue that God is the supreme holder of sovereignty, practically transmitting this sovereignty to the Caliph (in Sunni tradition) and to the Hidden Imam and his representative (according to *walayah al-fiqeeh* theory). Al-Sistani, in fact, is not vague about this point, clearly placing sovereignty back in the hands of ordinary people.

Is their any role left for Islam and the *'ulama*?

As regard *'ulama*, Al-Sistani states clearly that no political, administrative or executive roles should be allocated to religious *'ulama*. Al-Sistani himself ordered one of his delegations to resign his political position in Karbala and refused to appoint a delegation for al-'Amarah local council when he was approached to do so (12, 77, 116). On contrary to both Sunni and Shi'a political trends, Al-Sistani does not give religious *'ulama* any kind of political authority. For him, *'ulama* have no right to involvement in politics, nor to hold any position.

This also brings us to the issue of implementation of the Shari'ah. This issue, in fact, is always raised by both secularists and Islamists for different reasons. For secularists, implementation of the Shari'ah means returning back to the dark ages. For Islamists, however, it means the first step in bringing Islam into life. Indeed, implementation of the Shari'ah has become very controversial and touchy area especially within Western societies, where Islam is viewed, in general as fundamentalist, extremist and so on. But for Al-Sistani, there is no such call for implementation of the Shari'ah. Instead, he calls for respect for the religion of the majority (Islam), with due respect for other religions. Constitution, according to Al-Sistani, is supposed to respect the Islamic cultural identity of the Iraq people. How to put this in details is left to the representatives of the Iraq people in the National Assembly.

This moderate attitude might be understood in the light of the whole doctrine system of Al-Sistani. That is to say that the Shari'ah as a full and accurate is ought to be truly and fully implemented by the Hidden Imam himself. The Imam, according to this, is thought to have the hidden knowledge. Role of *faqeeh* hence is limited to giving the best attainable legal *fatwa* according to his *ijtihad* (reasoning). This role is not accompanied with any kind of using force to practice the Shari'ah. Al-Sistani, for this reason, fiercely rejected those special religious courts that were organized by some Shi'as in Iraq soon after the fall of Saddam Hussein. (28, 43, 46, 49, 53, 58, 74, 75, 94, 129)

Al-Sistani urges people to participate in elections as they offer real expression for people of their rights. It is through elections that people can embody their general will. Al-Sistani insists on running decent elections, prohibiting any kind of corruption. For Al-Sistani, people are the only responsible for choosing their representatives and no one could impose on them their choices. Al-Sistani himself does not show any inclination towards any party and he insists on selecting good people for running positions. Al-Sistani also encourages educated and skilled women to play their role as there is no reason that prevents them from running in elections. (68, 93, 96, 98, 99, 127)

Al-Sistani contends that the sole permissible means to achieve any goal is dialogue (*alhiwar*) and he prohibits any kind of violence against others. Al-Sistani, in fact, insists on prohibiting (*hurmat*) human beings' blood. It is worth noting that only Al-Sistani called for not killing of the Ba'athies, who became the main target of angered Shi'a people at the time when nobody could openly defend them. (24, 25, 45, 71, 136, 145-46)

There is no doubt that Al-Sistani has elaborated a new approach towards politics. While Al-Sistani put pressure in the face of the Americans to held elections and write constitution, he also showed noninterference with political affairs. Attention has been paid to his leading role in regard to elections, constitution and political participation. Much attention, however, is required to shed light on Al-Sistani's approach towards separation politics from religion. The importance of Al-Sistani's approach stems from the following facts:

1. These secular ideas and thoughts come from religious authority. This point is very important as we used to see religious people at the top of the list of enemies of secularism, whether in the West or in the Arab and Islamic world.
2. This also significant, in particular for Iraq and the Arab and Muslim world, as Seyyed Al-Sistani possesses spiritual authority among his followers. Although Al-Sistani has no party or militia, he has influence over ordinary people who respect his orders and *fatwas*. This has pushed political parties in Iraq to benefit from his image. Al-Sistani, however, has been cautious about showing support for any party or person.
3. The ideas of this religious authority can be easily adopted and gradually developed by religious and secular parts alike in order to build a real democratic and secular system accepted by all sectors of society.

Alam Khundmiri noted correctly that it is only possible to revive the Islamic humanistic tradition, 'if believers reject Islam as an ideology, that is, reject the medieval image of Islam and give importance to the vision it contains'. While Al-Sistani rejects any kind of rhetorical language of

Islamic parties and movements, he provides a coherent formulation that preserves the status of Islam within the state, on the one hand, and gives hope for the first time, to secular trends within Islamic societies. That is to say that whereas some Sunni and Shi'a political trends attempt to establish an Islamic state on earth, Al-Sistani's main concern is to build a real civil society where religion and politics work in harmony.

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