

The Sacred and the Secular:
The *'ulama* of Najaf in Iraqi politics
between 1950 and 1980

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Abstract

Najaf has played a pivotal role in the political, religious and intellectual life in Iraq, as well as the wider Arab and Islamic world. However, since the formation of the Iraqi state in 1921, Najaf's position as political arbiter declined in comparison with Baghdad. The Political activism of young Shi'is had reflected a deep sense of discontent against the Iraqi central state, on the one hand, and the declining role of the Shi'a religious community in the holy cities on the other. The 1958 Iraqi Revolution presented both a challenge and an opportunity to Najafi *'ulama*. Thus, Najaf's Shi'a *marja'iyya* had engaged in ideological and political hostilities between Abdu Karim Qasim and the strong ICP, on one hand, and Arab nationalists, backed by Naser's Egypt on the other. Najaf's role in the dispute was affected by its regional connections, and hence directed its standing towards Qasim's regime. This religio-political campaign eventually led to the ousting of Qasim in February 1963. Over the next six years (1963-68), Sayyed Muhsin al-Hakim adopted two contrasting approaches towards Baghdad's government; he advocated no specific Shi'a demands during the first months (the Ba'th period). Al-Hakim showed a radical turn towards the first 'Arif government, calling for a fair representation within the Iraqi government. Al-Hakim returned to his old peaceful attitude with the arrival of the second 'Arif government. The rise of the Ba'th party to power in July 1968 brought an end to Shi'a activism. While the Ba'th maintained cordial relations with al-Hakim between July 1968 and April 1969, relations deteriorated rapidly in June 1969 ending in irrevocable divorce. Following al-Hakim's death in 1970, Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr emerged as the most prominent *mujtahid* in Najaf. Al-Sadr gradually moved from his non-intervention approach to a more radical and revolutionary position after

the failure of the Najaf uprising in 1977. Al-Sadr's action was spontaneous and unplanned, lacking all the requirements needed for making it a successful revolution. It ended with al-Sadr's execution in April 1980, bringing Iraq to new extended phase under the Ba'th regime.

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