

The content of Ayatollah Sistani's charismatic authority: the affective bond

O conteúdo da autoridade carismática do Aiatolá Sistani: o vínculo afetivo

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ABSTRACT

Historically, Ayatollah Sistani's calls to action have mobilised hundreds of thousands and even millions of his followers into different forms of political mobilisation in the post-2003 Iraqi context (e.g. voting, demonstrations, and armed jihad). A fundamental reason for this is his charismatic authority. Pre-existing literature on Sistani's charisma has salient shortcomings in providing a conceptually coherent framework to capture how the Ayatollah inspires Weberian 'absolute trust' in his religio-political leadership. The present research seeks to compensate for this by offering an alternative approach to understanding Sistani's charisma, which is informed by 40 semi-structured interviews conducted in 2022 with his followers and other seminary and academic personalities in Iraq. The content of his charismatic authority is referred to as the 'affective bond', which is a cognitive-emotional connection between the followers and Sistani premised on the former's recognition of him as a symbol of legitimacy, hope, and authenticity. These perceptions confirm the 'absolute trust' that followers have in Sistani, which becomes the cognitive basis of their emotional willingness to answer his calls to action. In undertaking the mission of this paper, the intimate interplay between narratives, history, culture, rituals, practices, history, storytelling, and the perceptions that produce Sistani's charismatic authority, will come to light.

Keywords: Sistani, Affective Bond, Charismatic Authority, Trust, Perceptions.

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RESUMO

Historicamente, os apelos à ação do Aiatolá Sistani mobilizaram centenas de milhares e até milhões dos seus seguidores para diferentes formas de mobilização política no contexto iraquiano pós-2003 (por exemplo, votação, manifestações e jihad). Uma razão fundamental para isso é a sua autoridade carismática. A literatura preexistente sobre o carisma de Sistani apresenta deficiências evidentes no fornecimento de um quadro conceitualmente coerente para captá-lo. A presente investigação procura compensar isso oferecendo uma abordagem alternativa para a compreensão do carisma de Sistani, que é informada por meio de 40 entrevistas semiestruturadas realizadas em 2022 com os seus seguidores e outras personalidades do seminário e acadêmicas no Iraque. O conteúdo da sua autoridade carismática é referido como o “vínculo afetivo”, que é uma ligação cognitivo-emocional entre os seguidores e Sistani, baseada no reconhecimento que o primeiro faz dele como um símbolo de legitimidade, esperança e autenticidade. Estas percepções confirmam a “confiança absoluta” weberiana que os seguidores têm em Sistani, que se torna a base cognitiva da sua vontade emocional para responder aos seus apelos à ação. Ao cumprir a missão deste artigo, a interação íntima entre narrativas, história, cultura, rituais, práticas, história, narrativa e as percepções que produzem a autoridade carismática de Sistani virá à tona.

Palavras-chave: Sistani, Vínculo Afetivo, Autoridade Carismática, Confiança, Percepções.

INTRODUCTION

Grand Ayatollah¹ Sayyid² ‘Ali al-Sistani was born on August 4, 1930 in the Shi‘i Muslim holy city of Mashhad in Iran. He was raised in a religious household wherein both his father and grandfather were reputable religious scholars. Sistani began his introductory *hawza* (seminary) lessons in Mashhad in 1941. In 1949, he started more advanced lessons in jurisprudence in Qum (another centre of religious learning in Iran) under numerous authoritative clerics, most notably Grand Ayatollah Sayyid Husayn Burujirdi. By 1952, the young Sistani moved to the Vatican of Shi‘ism – Najaf, in Iraq. There, his learning accelerated under the guidance of Grand Ayatollah

¹ Grand Ayatollah is a title given to clerics that have attained *marja‘iyya* status (see footnote three for elaboration on *marja‘iyya*).

² Title given to descendants of the Prophet (SAWW).

al-Khu'i, and attained the level of *mujtahid*³ in 1960. Overtime, Sistani's research and teaching of religious topics progressed as did his reputation as the foremost student of al-Khu'i, who was considered the most followed and knowledgeable Shi'i Muslim religious figure globally from 1972 until his death in 1992.⁴ After Khu'i's death, the mantle of traditional religious leadership⁵ went to Grand Ayatollahs Golpayigani and Sabziwari for short one year stints before their deaths. Thereafter, it passed onto Sistani in 1994 (Rizvi, 2018, p. 178).

At the time of Sistani's ascension to paramount religious authority, due to the highly repressive circumstances under Saddam Husayn's tyrannical reign over Iraq, Sistani kept a low profile and did not actively intervene or participate in politics. However, after Saddam's fall in 2003, Sistani's interventionism, and the political mobilisations he was able to inspire, were crucial to buttress order and stability in Iraq. Post-2003, Sistani became a *charismatic* leader to his followers, or *muqallidin*⁶ (emulators; singular: *muqallid*) in Iraq (Cole, 2007, p. 71). With the power to inspire millions to go out and vote in 2005 (Katzman, 2007, p. 6), and hundreds of thousands to partake in the Najaf Crisis march of 2004 (Al-Khaffaf, 2012) and the 2014 jihad *fatwa* (edict) against ISIS (Caruso, 2020, p. 7), the question then arises as to *why* he has such power over his *muqallidin*. Emulators, followers, and *muqallidin* are used interchangeably here.

Although he did manage to mobilise non-followers in the period post-US invasion, for specificity, his followers are the group focused on in this paper. In Weberian terms, Sistani's capacity to mobilise his *muqallidin* is fundamentally due to his charismatic authority. To understand what primarily enables him to have such an emotional effect on his emulators, the focus of this research is to uncover the content of Sistani's charisma. Moreover, this paper's aim is to put forward an account of the Ayatollah's charisma based on ethnographic fieldwork. This account is encapsulated and elaborated upon through the 'affective bond' concept (introduced and defined further on) derivative of the 'emotional entrepreneurship'⁷ theoretical paradigm. By extension, it is my hope to humbly introduce the 'affective bond' as a conceptual framework for researchers to investigate other leaders' charismatic authority in the Middle East and beyond.

³ Level of religious authority wherein a cleric is capable of independently discerning legitimate religious opinions.

⁴ For more on Sistani's biography see: "Biography", Sistani.org, at: <https://www.sistani.org/english/data/2/>. Last accessed on Oct. 31, 2023.

⁵ This form of leadership will be elaborated upon throughout this paper.

⁶ In Twelver Shi'i Islam, all Shia who have not reached the religious learning level of *mujtahid* must choose a *marja' iyya* or *marja' taqlid* (source of emulation) as their religious guide. They must choose based on their belief in the *marja'*'s knowledgeability. To make this decision is to become jurisprudentially obligated to comply with that cleric's religious and political edicts (Gleave, 2007).

⁷ For more on this new theory see Alsayegh (2024).

Interviews and Charismatic Authority

In total, 40 semi-structured interviews⁸ inform the content and analysis of this paper. 20 interviewees were seminary and academic personalities who provided valuable and experienced insights into the psycho-emotional dynamics between Sistani and his most loyal *muqallidin*. The second category of interviewees (20 interviewees) were the emulators of Sistani who formulate the basis of this paper's alternative account of Sistani's charisma. Participants were exclusively male between the ages of 20-75 and were lower to middle class Iraqis. Interview durations varied from 15 minutes to three hours (depending on the availability of the interviewee). Originally, 30 interviews were aimed for, in correspondence with Adler and Adler's (2012: 30) recommendations for qualitative researchers. The 30 mark was not intended to formulate a representative narrative of how Sistani's image is perceived by his emulators, rather it was to locate a common pattern of narratives to provide a detailed ethnographic explanation of this topic. After 30 interviewees, this pattern emerged. Subsequently, another 10 interviews were conducted to reconfirm the consistent theme of answers. It is worth noting that this paper will not exhaust all 40 interviews. Rather, it puts forward some of the key quotations that best summarise the views of most interviewees.

Interviewees in the second category were chosen based upon their emulation of the Ayatollah and their history of answering his calls to action in the political field, and/or basing their approach to politics on an interpretation what Sistani required of them (this reflected their recognition of Sistani as their foremost leader). The *muqallidin* were not asked why they view Sistani as a 'charismatic authority' in their political life. Rather, the questions were left open-ended and did not use academic terms to minimise chances of the *muqallidin* providing answers based upon subjective understandings of said terms. As such, the interviewed *muqallidin* were colloquially asked to identify why they follow the Ayatollah and his calls to action.

It could be semantically argued based on a rigid understanding of Weber's typology of authority that Sistani ought to be understood as a traditional authority⁹ due to his *marja'iyya* status rather than a charismatic one. However, interviewee narratives notably highlighted their 'absolute trust' in the leadership of Sistani and their 'personalised devotion' to him. It was at this point that charismatic authority was introduced as a concept to describe how his followers understood the nature of his authority over them. As Weber (1947, p. 330) explains:

8 The 40 semi-structured interviews utilised for this paper were conducted in Najaf, Karbala, and Kufa, in 2022 as part of a larger fieldwork research of a PhD thesis on Ayatollah Sistani's strategies of emotionally motivating his followers into different forms of political action post-2003.

9 Weber (1978, p. 215) explains traditional authority as "established belief in the sanctity of immemorial traditions and the legitimacy of those exercising authority under them".

It is *recognition* [my emphasis] on the part of those subject to authority which is decisive for the validity of charisma. This is freely given and guaranteed by what is held to be a sign or proof, originally always a miracle, and consists in *devotion* [my emphasis] to the corresponding revelation, hero worship, or *absolute trust* [my emphasis] in the leader.

As is made apparent throughout this paper, the *muqallidin*'s narrations are better understood through the lens of charismatic authority, rather than traditional authority. Whilst emulators did indicate elements of Sistani's traditional authority (as a *marja' iyya*) as constituting a core reason for having absolute trust in Sistani, it was not sufficient to build such trust.¹⁰ As such, to say that Sistani is simply a traditional authority, is to be dishonest to how the followers' viewed Sistani. Ultimately, as Weber would contend himself, charisma is *subjectively recognised*. Therefore, it is also subjectively constructed by those who own the capacity of recognition. In other words, a narrow understanding of the separateness of traditional and charismatic authority would obfuscate how his most loyal followers recognise his charisma.

Additionally, this paper does not intend to claim that the power of the Ayatollah's charismatic authority over his followers has remained static from 2003 until today. Charismatic leaders emerge during crises, such as post-2003 Iraq when the downfall of Saddam's regime created an opening in the political opportunity structure for Sistani to operate in (Cole, 2007, p. 67; Valdes, 2008, p. 28; Al-Hakim, 2015, p. 134). However, while the Ayatollah arguably still has a strong claim to charismatic authority over his emulators (particularly this paper's interviewees), it can be argued that overtime, and in relation to different political matters, his charisma has been challenged and fluctuated. References to these moments are made further on.

Sistani's Charisma in Pre-Existing Literature and Introducing the Affective Bond

Before the structure of this paper is presented, it is worth introducing a brief literature review of Sistani's charismatic authority along with its main contentions and shortcomings. For example, Rizvi (2018, p. 168) states that Sistani's charisma is due to him being a, "[S] ayyid, a descendant of the Prophet... That charisma is then augmented by renown for scholarly excellence." While Rizvi explains the importance of being a *Sayyid* for Sistani, it must be said that many other *maraji'* (plural of *marja'*), and lesser clerics are *Sayyids* as well. However, they do not share the same aura that Sistani does. As such, *Sayyid*-ness should not be understood as the core of Sistani's authority and *augmented by* his religious knowledge. Rather, his *Sayyid*-ness plays a backseat role to his 'knowledgeability', a key factor to becoming a *marja' taqlid* in the first place. This is said without discounting the importance of the significant degree of

¹⁰ As per their conveyance of Sistani's political successes and authentic character as the two other core perceptions that produced such a formidable form a trust. These are discussed further on.

respect and perceived spirituality allocated to *Sayyids* in Twelver Shi'i discourse and culture, which do not need to be mentioned in interviews to be deemed relevant. Nevertheless, it was his perceived knowledgeability or *'a'lamīyya* that was highlighted, more than his *Sayyid* status, as a core component of his charismatic aura.

Caruso provides a slightly different elaboration of Sistani's charisma when he argues that it is down to his perceived knowledge, piety¹¹, and, in agreement with Cole (2007), his heroism. Through this understanding, Caruso taps into the many features of Weberian charisma: knowledge (religious), piety (ethical), and heroism. However, there are several issues here. Firstly, Caruso leaves out much of the legitimacy Sistani obtains from being part of the *marja'īyya* system. According to Rizvi (2018, p. 167), a considerable portion of Sistani's charismatic authority as a *marja' taqlid* in Twelver Shia Islam, "is delegated and routinized from that of the Imam". As a *marja'*, Sistani is seen by his emulators as an extension of Imami authority and a representative of the hidden infallible Imam¹² Mahdi (AS) who, according to Shi'i eschatology, is in occultation and will reappear towards the end times to guide the human race to an earthly utopia.¹³ As such, the Ayatollah's words are the closest in accuracy to the word of the Imam, and therefore, the word of God. This means that the *muqallidin* of the *marja'* feel doctrinally and legally bound to conform to the *fatwas* of Sistani. Secondly, regarding piety, Caruso (2020, p. 2) says this perception is explainable through his "simple lifestyle, his frugality, and even the humbleness of his house". While these are important components of the ethical dimension of Sistani's charisma, Caruso does not mention how Sistani's treatment of his constituents also contributes to the Shi'i leader's charisma.

In addition to mentioned shortcomings, a more fundamental limitation of pre-existing literature is its neglect of putting forward a concept capable of 1) capturing the core components of Sistani's charisma (according to an ethnographic account of emulators' narratives), 2) highlighting the interrelationship of the perceptions that generate the 'absolute trust' Weber theorises followers have in charismatic figures, and 3) how this absolute trust helps create an emotional urge, among followers, to comply with the Ayatollah's calls to action. The introduction of the affective bond concept in this paper will be a humble attempt to do this. The affective bond can be defined as:

Followers' belief in the legitimacy, problem-solving capacities, and authenticity of their leader, culminating into a sense of absolute trust in that leader's judgements on

¹¹ Rizvi also mentions piety in his work.

¹² Meaning leader.

¹³"The Occultation of Imam Mahdi (A.S.)", *Erfan.ir*, at: <https://www.erfan.ir/english/68144.html>. Last accessed on Dec. 6, 2023.

matters within his/her perceived jurisdiction. (Alsayegh, 2024, p. 346).

What is specifically meant by each symbolism will be mentioned in their respective sections. Being a symbol of a value (i.e. legitimacy, hope¹⁴, authenticity) is essentially a reference to Sistani embodying the necessary characteristics to become a representation of it. As will be seen, when Sistani's followers recognise him as representing the three symbolisms, he attains his charismatic authority in their eyes. This charisma translates to absolute trust which provides not only the lifeline of the *muqallidin*'s emotional relationship with Sistani but also the cognitive basis of his capacity to emotionally motivate them into action. In this sense, the affective bond can also be a useful framework to understand the difference between when a cleric, such as Sistani, has 'practical authority' rather than 'epistemic authority' over his followers. In Bhojani and Clarke's (2023) work they argue that recognising a cleric as one's *marja*' can build epistemic authority, but not necessarily practical authority. The former relates to *muqallidin*'s recognition of Sistani's knowledgeability but entails the necessity of them rationalising the Ayatollah's edicts to comply with them. Practical authority, dissimilarly to epistemic authority, entails total obedience regardless of emulators' capability to rationalise Sistani's calls to action. I do not mean to contend that an active affective bond prevents the *muqallidin* from rationalising the Ayatollah's calls. Rather, it provides a lens to understand how the emotional urge to commit to total obedience, amongst the *affected muqallidin*¹⁵, is cognitively rooted within the emulators' perceptions of, and absolute trust in, the Ayatollah.

Structure

This paper begins by explaining why Sistani is seen as a symbol of legitimacy (to account for the Weberian aspect of religion in charismatic authority). His legitimacy is understood as institutionally-inherited (by being part of the *marja*'*iyya* system, an extension of the Imami line, and the successor to the previous *Grand Marja*'¹⁶) and historically-anchored by being perceived as the most knowledgeable of all *maraji*'. I then address the question of him being a symbol of hope in the political domain to account for his Weberian heroism. Forthwith, his symbolism from its authenticity-based component will be analysed to capture the ethical aspect of Sistani's charisma. Subsequently, there will be explicit mention of how the belief in the validity of the three symbolisms generates the charismatic absolute trust, or faith, his *muqallidin* have in him. Finally, the question of how this trust formulates the basic cognitive fabric of the emotional

¹⁴ Hope refers to Sistani's problem-solving capacities.

¹⁵ Affected *muqallidin* means the emulators who have an affective bond with Sistani.

¹⁶ *Grand Marja*' status is obtained upon having the biggest follower-base relative to other *maraji*'. For more on *Grand Marja*' status see Alshammary (2020, p. 16).

relationship between the Ayatollah and his *muqallidin*, and Sistani's capacity to mobilise them, is addressed. In doing so, I seek to have portrayed the 'affective bond' as a considerable conceptual tool to understand Sistani's charisma and its mobilising capacity.

SISTANI – A SYMBOL OF LEGITIMACY

Sayyid 'Ihsan al-Sa'ali al-Najafi (student of Sistani) – **“Sayyid Sistani is the Vatican of Shi'ism”**

Sistani's *muqallidin* paint a picture of a *marja'* who has a divinely ordained form of religious legitimacy. In what follows, an attempt to utilise the interviewees' narratives will be undertaken to highlight how Sistani's legitimacy was not only institutionally-inherited, but also historically-anchored by demonstrating the acquirement of the status of '*alamiyya*. It is noteworthy that Sistani's institutionally-inherited legitimacy is not simply from being a representative of the *marja'iyya* system¹⁷, but also (which distinguishes himself from his *marja'iyya* peers) the successor to the previous long-standing *Grand Marja'*, Sayyid 'Abu al-Qasim al-Khu'i. Such an inheritance is fundamentally premised upon his status as Khu'i's most knowledgeable student. Moreover, Sistani's historically-anchored legitimacy ('*alamiyya*) enables his acquisition of a pool of legitimacy unavailable to other *maraji'* in Najaf and beyond.

Upon getting into a taxi to interview a seminary figure, a conversation was struck up with the driver who is a *muqallid* of Sistani. Upon asking him why he follows Sistani, he mentioned that “I became an emulator of the Sayyid due to his ideas, cultured-ness, and the depth of his knowledge”. This emphasis on perceived knowledgeability did not end with the first interview. On the way back from the same interview, I spoke with another taxi driver (Taxi Driver 2). When asking him the same question, he responded by saying that he emulates the Ayatollah because of his “opinion regarding his knowledge”. He then carried on by mentioning Sistani's *risala 'amaliyya*¹⁸ and referred to it as “the highest of those present in Iraq”. Upon hearing that answer, Sajjad Rizvi's work came to mind which mentions that “[c]laims to authority are sometimes made based on the unique features of these texts” (Rizvi, 2018, p. 172), as was the case with Taxi Driver 2.

In continuing the quest of interviewing Sistani emulators, I met a man named Sayyid

¹⁷ An authoritative religious system of emulating learned clerics, which the *muqallidin* deemed has been in place for over 1000 years.

¹⁸ Pamphlet/manual which acts as the theological basis and guidelines by which people follow a *marja'*.

'Ahmad al-Musawi from Baghdad who explained, "in Baghdad we did not know all the names, we knew that Sistani was the *Grand Marja'*, Sistani was also the name that was on the tongues of my family". As he grew older and more mature, he began asking why he should follow the Ayatollah. To start this path, he mentions that "I went to *'ahlulkhibra'*¹⁹ and they informed me that Sistani was the most knowledgeable". Another muqallid, Sayyid Ja'far al-Qabanji, a *talib* (student) and *'ustadh* (teacher) at the Najaf *hawza* (seminary) explains that among "the characteristics that make people trust him [Sistani, is his] *'a'lamiyya*". He continued to justify his statement by referring not only to the recognition Sistani received from seminary teachers, but also how the Ayatollah "was from Khu'i's students". Sayyid Khu'i's own grandson and current Secretary General of the Khu'i Institute, Sayyid Jawad al-Khu'i, also confirms this understanding of Sistani by saying "Sistani is the juice and butter [meaning the product of] of 'Ustadh Khu'i", and that he is the extension of the "series of thoughts" of his teachers.

Understanding Sistani as a continuation of a series of religious figures, is important to uncover how his legitimacy not only came from him demonstrating set traits, but also how it was simultaneously inherited. Although, without creating a strong case for his *'a'lamiyya* through his personal efforts, he could not have possibly inherited much of his legitimacy from his predecessors. Nevertheless, according to the interviewees, the acquirement of legitimacy from previously active religious figures is understood as originating from both Ayatollah Sistani's connection with the previous *Grand Marja'* Sayyid Khu'i, and also, the perception that he is seen, by his followers, as the closest figure to Imam Mahdi. Shaykh²⁰ Muhammad from Nasiriyya speaks about this in my interview with him. He explains that he was born into a family that follows Sistani and took emulation of Sistani as a given. Though he tells me, "as I grew up, I understood he is the representative of the Imam". In the same conversation, he also mentions that "there is a known line before Sayyid Sistani such as Sayyid Khu'i".

This mention of Sistani as the representative of the Imam is important for several reasons. Firstly, as Shaykh 'Abu Hani says, a follower of Sistani who volunteered in the *Hashd al-Sha'bi* or Popular Mobilisation Units (PMU) in response to his jihad *fatwa*, "society has loyalty to the Imams. Blind loyalty. [And] the *marja'* is the representative of the Imam". He then continues to express that it is a theological obligation to answer Sistani's *fatwas* on this basis. In agreement, another man by the name of Sayyid 'Abbas al-Musawi who was present during the interview says "what the *marja'* says, will happen". Upon asking Shaykh 'Abu Hani to elaborate upon what he meant by the Ayatollahs edicts needing to be applied as if the Imam himself announced it, he says "we do not say that his words are 100% correct, but he has blessings from God". Put

¹⁹ A term for those who are considered learned, experienced, and knowledgeable clerics.

²⁰ Title given to clerics who are not considered descendants of the Prophet Muhammad.

simply, Sistani's is the closest living being able to discern what the Imam, and therefore God, wants of humans. Furthermore, despite possibly not being 100% correct, out of precaution, his calls to action nevertheless 100% must be applied.

The perception of Ayatollah Sistani being an extension of the Imam's line cannot be understated in its importance. Indeed, such a belief paints Sistani in divine light. As Shaykh 'Abbas Kashif Al-Ghita', head of a school in the Najaf hawza, explains, Sistani has a "divine aura". Although Sistani enjoys a significant degree of perceived other-worldly spirituality, he may not be unique in this regard, as Sayyid 'Ihsan al-Najafi explains, "all of our *maraji* ' graduated from the school of 'Amir al-Mu'minin²¹". However, what Sistani excels in is the amount of people that follow him on that basis, which far surpasses other *maraji* ' globally due to his large and extensive network of representatives. Sayyid Khu'i's own perceived endorsement of Sistani also played a crucial role in this. Evidence for this endorsement was widely advertised by the Khu'i foundation as occurring after he asked Sistani to pray in his stead in *Jami' Al-Khadra* ' in 1988, a mosque which is a part of the Imam Ali shrine complex in Najaf (Rizvi, 2018). Upon al-Khu'i's death, Sistani also led the prayers at his funeral, which is a symbolic performance reserved to those sufficiently worthy of doing so for a fallen Grand Ayatollah.²² As such, in all likelihood, many who were old enough to be emulating Khu'i during the 80s or early 90s, inevitably switched to Sistani after the death of their *marja* '. Shaykh Muhammad al-Marzuqi of the Shammar tribe who responded to Sistani's jihad edict in 2014, explains:

I was a follower of Khu'i, but in 2013²³ I switched to Sistani. After the death of Khu'i we used to go back to Sistani for some matters [for answers]... after Khu'i, the most knowledgeable is Sistani.

Al-Marzuqi was not alone in this. Shaykh Radi al-Ta'i, one of the students of the Najafi seminary, also mentions that after finding the evidence and asking *'ahlul-khbra*, "the *'ulama*²⁴ pointed towards the *'a'lamyya* of Sistani after Khu'i, Golpayigani, and Sabziwari".²⁵

²¹ Meaning commander of the faithful; a title to Imam Ali (AS), the first leader of the Shia after the Prophet's death.

²² Guiders14, "Funeral of Ayatollah Khomeini recited by Ayatollah Sistani *شهرت قرآن ج عييش*", *YouTube*, April 26 2012, at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zxm1fF-N3SA>, min: 5:17 – 6:16. Last accessed on Dec. 6, 2023.

²³ It is difficult to assess why Shaykh Muhammad switched to Sistani as his *marja* ' in 2013 specifically. This could have been in anticipation of Sistani's call to jihad against ISIS in 2014, however, the jihad announcement is widely known to have been unexpected even in the build-up to it. The switch is likely to have been a highly subjective thought process that would be difficult to discern without directly asking Shaykh Muhammad why the switch occurred.

²⁴ High-ranking clerics.

²⁵ The latter two names are those of the Ayatollahs that had short, one-year or less, stints at the *Grand Marja* ' role

In summation, Sistani's legitimacy to his followers seems to be as much institutionally-inherited as it was historically-anchored through demonstrations of his knowledgeable to the *'ahlulkitab* and his *muqallidin* in Najaf and beyond. The Ayatollah inherited much of his legitimacy due to his image as the latest product and successor to Sayyid Khu'i, but also an extension of the Imami line itself. The scholarly prestige he generated through his personal efforts worked in tandem with the legitimacy he obtained from his predecessors. The ones from a thousand years ago and those who came directly before him. Sayyid Mustafa sums this up most eloquently as he answers my question of what makes Sistani a *marja* 'worthy of emulation:

Subjective characteristics, a characteristic that he inherits and a characteristic that he builds by himself, the creation of a knowledgeable and cultured personality within himself.

Through the perceived existence of such characteristics, the *muqallidin* see Sistani as a guiding school of thought built with the bricks of the Ayatollah's predecessors, kept together by the cement of his own knowledge, and blessed by God's grace. To his emulators, as Sayyid 'Ihsan puts it, 'Sistani is the Vatican of Shi'ism', or as I would humbly put it, Sistani is the symbol of legitimacy. Thus, the Ayatollah can be seen as having attained the religious aspect of Weberian charisma, which not only enabled him to create the foundation by which Twelver Shias could emulate him, but also produced the first perception that constitutes the absolute trust his followers place in him. To his *muqallidin*, this aspect of Sistani's charisma was captured by his title as *na'ib al-'Imam*.

SISTANI – A SYMBOL OF HOPE

Sayyid 'Ihsan al-Sa'abali al-Najafi – **“Sayyid Sistani is the man of the hour... [he is] the man of politics”**

Thus far, much was said about Ayatollah Sistani's *'a'lamyya*. Though, it is worth mentioning that it was not only his religious knowledge, but also his perceived political knowledge, activities, and successes²⁶, that granted his image with its charismatic aura. The

after Khu'i between 1992-1994.

²⁶ Sistani's political approach of *wilayat al-faqih al-muqayada* or 'limited guardianship' which entails intervening only when necessary in politics, opposing clerical presence in executive and administrative roles of the state, and not calling for the creation of an Islamic state (like Khomeini's Iran), was deemed as an appealing factor by the interviewees. However, to them, a more radical activist political approach like revolutionary Iran's would have

Ayatollah's emulators found that his intellect holistically also covered the optimal way forward to solve political questions. Optimality here is defined by what is closest to God's own will. As Shaykh Lu'ai, a follower of Sistani states, "the 'a'lam is the closest to what Allah demands and wants". In this sense, the Ayatollah's 'a'lamīyya should not be understood as directly creating an image of authority as Rizvi (2018) and Caruso (2020) would refer to it, but rather, that it does so by permeating hope of manifesting a better reality in the socio-political world through his leadership. The result of understanding Sistani as a political saviour, by his *muqallidin*, captures the Weberian notion of 'heroism' inherent to charisma.

Sistani arrives to the political scene as a *Grand Marja'* following a wide range of predecessors who, through their *fatwas*, were understood by many Shia and observers as having created meaningful change in the fight against oppression. Examples include Mirza Hassan Shirazi's 1891 *fatwa* demanding the boycott of tobacco products due to the Iranian Qajar dynasty giving the British a monopoly over tobacco sales in Iran (Sayej, 2018, p. 9). In a *fatwa* that, as Haidari (2021, p. 27) mentions, "does not go beyond one sentence", Mirza Shirazi was able to pressure the Qajars into rescinding their decision and give the rights back to the Iranian bazaars to sell tobacco. In another example, Ayatollah Muhammad-Taqi Shirazi authored the *'Ishreen* (meaning 20) jihad *fatwa* against the British in 1920, resulting in the revolt that pressured the colonial power to establish a monarchy in Iraq over a mandate entailing direct British rule. Objectively, the Ayatollahs' *fatwas* were not the only variables that caused the successes in these two moments in history. However, they were understood as the main ones among my interviewees, and the secondary sources I have obtained in Najaf. Upon the downfall of Saddam's dictatorship in 2003, expectations of Sistani delivering change and guidance in turbulent times, and being a voice for Iraqis, began to rise. Put simply, he had big shoes to fill.

In the post-2003 era, Sistani's activism in solving political situations began to be apparent to observers and emulators alike. As Shaykh Radi al-Ta'i explains:

The street, media, and the world see that Sistani preserved the country and the worshippers... now he is loved among the smart and cultured Iraqi street, and they have sanctified him for what he has given to the country.

The most common feats that my interviewees mentioned were his community-based

not fundamentally dissuaded them from investing trust in the Ayatollah, it was rather the *consequences* of his approach on the security and stability of Iraq that determined to what extent they saw him as a symbol of political hope. Nevertheless, the interviewees did recognise that Sistani's limited guardianship approach to politics plays an important role in terms of his appeal to the general Iraqi street and other sects in Iraq. For more on Sistani's approach to politics, see Visser (2006).

initiatives, solving the 2004 Najaf Crisis²⁷, his opposition to the U.S. occupation, and the 2014 jihad *fatwa* against ISIS. An interview with Shaykh Muhammad from Nasiriyya he sums most of it up when he states:

I saw the actions of the Sayyid in the [political] sphere and they are all positive... he saved Iraq from many situations... America was surprised of something called the *marja'iyya* and its power... the Sayyid came to Najaf during the Najaf Crisis and he saved [us], he cut his treatment trip short to come and save Iraq... the Sayyid established the Al-'Ayn institution to help the poor, he [also] has an institution to prepare the youth [for the future] and built many residential complexes... his activities are a lot!

The mentioned initiatives alongside the *muqallidin's* understanding of their successes gradually contributed to Sistani's image as a political symbol of hope and set him apart from other actors in Iraq be them other *maraji'* or politicians.²⁸ The Najaf Crisis march is important to mention here as it is arguably the first demonstration of Sistani's mobilising power and major victory of his tenure as *Grand Marja'* of post-2003 Iraq. At this point, Sistani began establishing an image of himself as an actor that change, or beneficial outcomes in the political sphere, were partially, if not completely, dependent on.

In most other interviews, the *muqallidin* of Sistani placed greater emphasis on Sistani's jihad *fatwa* of 2014, its successes, and how it won the hearts of people. Shaykh 'Abu Hani says, "people's trust in the *marja'* is now at 99% after the win against Daesh [Arabic acronym for ISIS]". Taxi Driver 2 supports this narrative of Sistani being the primary variable in Iraq's win over ISIS when he says, "if it were not for him [Sistani], Daesh would have reached Najaf". Shaykh Radi al-Ta'i hammers the point home by stating, "the jihad *fatwa* was the beginning of [Iraq's] security stability, it resulted in the clotting of blood". In effect, what is seen as an epic victory against an evil takfiri force, carved the Ayatollah's name into Twelver Shia lore alongside Mirza Hassan Shirazi and Muhammad-Taqi Shirazi. The win against ISIS and Sistani's previous escapades has turned him into a political symbol of hope that informs the *muqallidin's* understanding of his image in conjunction with his perceived legitimacy. He is not only the Vatican of Shi'ism, but also, as Sayyid Ihsan put it, "the man of the hour... the man of politics". Thus, capturing the crucial component of Weber's charismatic 'heroism', and generating the second core perception that builds the absolute trust his constituents have within

27 In this crisis he galvanised hundreds of thousands of his followers to join him in a march towards Najaf to pressure Muqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army and the US military to stop their skirmishes and leave the city before they destroy the Imam Ali shrine. For more on this, see Alsayegh (2024, p. 161-169).

28 Of course, such an interpretation of Sistani's successes cannot be disconnected from the framing deployed by his representatives such as Sayyid Ahmed al-Safi who emphasises upon the victory the Ayatollah achieved upon mobilising "two million... to solve the [Najaf] crisis that the country was experiencing" (Haidari, 2021, p. 32).

him. This belief in his political hope symbolism earned Sistani the title of *sammam al-'amman* (the safety valve) among his *muqallidin*.

It is crucial to highlight that by virtue of how Sistani's hope symbolism is built upon an understanding of his *successes* in the national arena, his charisma (and by extension, his absolute trust) has fluctuated in relation to different political questions. For example, as mentioned in Alsayegh (2024, p. 127), voting turnout in Iraq dropped from 75% in 2005 to 36% in 2021. In acknowledging that many non-participants could be Sistani followers (a majority of Shia in Iraq are Sistani emulators), Alsayegh put forward an (though not necessarily holistic) explanation for this drop in *muqallidin* participation as down to a significant loss in Sistani's charisma in the context of the elections. Here, charisma loss was due to the series of corrupt figures and political parties that obtained power through elections. This created a political reality that was contrary to the positive national outcomes that Sistani contended can be manifested through voting²⁹. As such, it is possible that many of the Ayatollah's followers, may have lost their absolute trust in Sistani's judgement as it pertains to electoral politics.³⁰

SISTANI – A SYMBOL OF AUTHENTICITY

A Shaykh from Najaf – **“The Sayyid [Sistani] is a spiritual father”**

Until this point, Sistani's *muqallidin* have pinpointed their reasoning for following the Shi'i leader to the belief in his institutionally-inherited and historically-anchored legitimacy, and his capacity for creating meaningful change, or beneficial outcomes, in the political sphere. Though, these only paint two-thirds of the picture. In what became a commonly repeated narrative, many of his followers and other seminary figures mentioned the Ayatollah as *al-'ab al-ruhi* or the “spiritual father”. The image of a spiritual father seemed to be one that interviewees explained as capturing the ethical component of a Weberian understanding of charismatic authority. Sistani's *muqallidin* connected the notion of spiritual fatherhood to beliefs regarding the extensive horizons of Sistani's moral compass. Being a spiritual father not only meant that Sistani's words were authoritative, but also his perceived character became a genuine depiction of caring and moral leadership. The interviewed emulators simultaneously deemed Sistani to be a relatable figure, in that his lifestyle choices did not reflect his high status,

²⁹ For more on Sistani's voting fatwa see Haidari (2021).

³⁰ This does not necessarily entail a loss of trust in other fields of politics (e.g. armed mobilisation and demonstrations). For more on this, see Alsayegh (2024, p. 346-347).

but rather, resonated more with the circumstances of his followers. In this sense, the Ayatollah's authenticity represents morality, genuineness, and relatability. This perception of Sistani further legitimated followers' motivation to invest absolute trust in the Ayatollah.³¹

Asceticism, Humility and Piety

Sayyid Ja'far al-Qabani explained to me as I interviewed him at the Khu'i institute that, "the characteristics that make people have trust in him... [Sistani, is his] asceticism. Everything is available to him, him and his children and his children's children". The word specifically used for 'asceticism' was *zuhd*, which is a reference to how, despite having a significant amount of wealth and power under his office's command he still does not exploit it for personal use, nor does he have a superiority complex. Sayyid 'Ihsan also mentions Sistani as a "*zahid*" (a man who has the trait of *zuhd*). Shaykh Muhammad from Nasiriyya mentions this trait as well and elaborated upon it by saying "*al-zahid* means you have money, but you withhold it from yourself in this life and you become humble in what you wear, and you use what you have for the people". He continues to legitimate his statement by exclaiming a commonly-known fact about Sistani in that he "currently lives in a rented house... [and] he does not have any property to his name." Caruso (2020, p. 2) also mentions Sistani's house as a representation of his humility. Though, she forgets to mention that it is not only the basicness of the building, but also the fact that Sistani still pays rent for it despite being able to purchase it without difficulty. Ultimately, it is within the emulators' understanding of what Sistani *has* in comparison to what he *can have*, that boosts their belief in his *zuhd*.

Sistani's authenticity was also implicitly engraved and manifested in several other stories as well that were used to justify notions pertaining to his genuine character. Shaykh Dr. Haidar al-Sahlan, a prominent scholar and cleric at the University of Kufa in the College of Jurisprudence, narrates a story to me in an interview:

As Sistani started to grow older, the doctor told him he had to eat an egg and apple for breakfast so he can regain some of his health, but he refuses, and sticks to the same

31 It is worth mentioning that Ayatollah Sistani and his network of representatives played a primary role in the promotion of the Sayyid as a father figure (in addition to their role in promoting Sistani as a symbol of legitimacy and hope). 'Abdulmahdi al-Karbalai, one of the two Sistani representatives that conducts the Friday sermons in the highly revered Imam Husayn shrine, mentions that Sistani's *marja*, "represents a father-like figure to all" (Haidari, 2021, p. 69). Even upon interviewing an 'Ustadh Jim in Najaf, I referred to Sistani as a leader. He subsequently reprimanded me and said, "Sistani did not present himself as a leader, *the spiritual father* is a better term than leader for Sistani". Sayyid Jawad Khu'i, although not a representative of Sistani, also mentions the Ayatollah as the "humanitarian father" and explains that Sistani intentionally attempts to play the "role of the father". He also noted that Sistani regularly addresses the Iraqi people as "my loved children". Moreover, it was clear that the understanding of Sistani from his own point of view, his networks, and seminary personalities, as a father figure, was deeply embedded within the exported image of the Ayatollah.

meal he has eaten for decades: biscuits and tea.

This was said within the context of explaining how the Ayatollah refuses even to break away from his humble daily meals, even if it comes at the expense of his health. In what is a demonstration of a non-negotiable attachment to an idea of an authentic self despite having the capacity to be consuming better goods, Sistani exudes the awe of his followers. Shaykh Muhammad also reflects this by mentioning how Sistani politely declines when one of his Kuwaiti students offered to buy him better cigarettes from Kuwait than the ones he was smoking from Iraq. In this conversation Sistani is reported to have said, “I smoke what the Iraqi public smokes”. Such a story, as mundane as it sounds, reproduces the notion of Sistani as figure that not only remains true to himself despite having the capacity and right to live a better life, but also highlights his rejection to living in a better condition than the impoverished members of the Iraqi nation-state. To the emulator, the received idea is not that Sistani is somehow different to them, but rather, the idealistic epitome of what they are, a personified refusal to live in a better way than his children, as a father-figure would do.

Sistani’s Treatment of Constituents

Ayatollah Sistani’s authenticity did not only demonstrate itself through stories reflecting how he lives his own life, but also ones related to how he treated others. Sayyid ’Ihsan, himself being a student of Sistani, enabled me to get a closer look at how Sistani carried himself around those who looked up to him for guidance. He explains that Sistani used to tell his students “you have to debate me, how do you want to be a *marja* ‘ if you do not debate me”. Rather than egotistically clinging onto a fundamental factor which validates his legitimacy as a *marja* ‘ (knowledgeability), Sistani outwardly demonstrated a willingness to have his intellect challenged by his students for their learning experience. As miniscule as it may seem, Sayyid ’Ihsan understood this as evidence of Sistani’s fatherly care. To a detached observer, this connection between being challenged and having a father-son relationship may seem far-fetched. However, in attempting to discern Sistani’s charisma and how it is *subjectively recognised*, it is ultimately the affected follower experiencing such moments that should have the final say in how it was interpreted. This notion of Sistani’s idealistic fatherhood is reinforced even further when Sayyid ’Ihsan continues by explaining Sistani’s humility during the same narration, “Sayyid Sistani used to sit with us on the ground and did not talk with us as if he was the *marja* ‘ and we were the students”. Sistani’s father image was not only validated through a demonstration of pure intentionality (wanting the better for his students), but also the humble means by which the intention was carried out (sitting on the ground with them), despite having the absolute right to sit on a chair given his old age and *marja* ‘ status.

The narrative of Sistani as a spiritual father, of course, would not have much weight unless it also meant that there was a perception of his care treading beyond the lines of his own students and followers. Such a notion was not uncommon among the emulators I interviewed. Taxi Driver 1 says that Sistani is “a person that prefers the interests of the people over his personal interests”. When asking Taxi Driver 2 why he follows Sistani, aside from his *'a'lamīyya* status and role in the fight against ISIS, he explains that:

There is no dust on his personality... [and that] the Sayyid said to the people that they should deal with their *khums* [by themselves] and give the help of the *khums* to the needy from the poor and the volunteers [fighting] against Daesh.

Shaykh 'Ali from Nasiriyya similarly says, “one of the attractive things about the *marja'* is that he [allows] the *khums* to go from hand to [another] hand within the religious regulations”. What is particularly eye-catching here is that one of the main sources of income for any *marja'* around the world is the *khums*. *Khums* refers to one-fifth of one's overall unspent money from a year's earnings. For the *muqallidin*, they have a theological obligation to send this money to their *marja'* so that they may maintain his office and community-based projects and initiatives. The notion that Sistani was willing to give up extra financial resources and give people the agency to deal with their *khums* independently, was an unprecedented move that augmented his followers' faith in him as an altruistic father figure. Sayyid Ja'far al-Qabanji sums up this notion of Sistani's unconditional selflessness when he says, Sistani:

Has the feelings of a father, he has compassion towards you and is protective of you, he will hold the hand of the child and sit next to him and advise him despite [the fact that] he does not benefit [anything] from this... he asks about your life and study matters.

To summarise, Sistani's image as a father-figure is validated by the *muqallidin's* perceptions of him beholding the personality traits of asceticism, humility, and piety. His commitment to the idealistic nature of his character formed the basis of his *muqallidin's* understanding of him as a relatable and genuine spiritual fatherhood figure worthy of being looked up to. Their views about his unconditional care and altruism towards his constituents further augment this belief in his authenticity. This accounts for the final component of the affective bond the *muqallidin* have with Sistani. Thus, obtaining the last key aspect of his own brand of charisma: the ethical part.

An important point of clarification here is that perceptions pertaining to Sistani's authenticity are intimately interconnected with, and understood through, his perceived intentionality in national politics. As reported in Alsayegh (2024, p. 105-107 and 140), Sistani's image as a benevolent figure was under threat due to a mass uprising that took place in 2011

over the Iraqi government's corruption. This was particularly dangerous for Sistani's image because this was a government that was perceived to have achieved political power through the Ayatollah's support and approval. To safeguard his authenticity from the disillusionment and anger of the Iraqi street, Sistani decided to boycott the government by barring its officials from being able to visit him. Sayyid Dr. Muhammad-'Ali Bahar al-'Ulum highlights this as he says:

He boycotted to defend the interests of the people... the government came into power due to support from Sistani during elections. The nature of the boycott was so the government feels that they do not represent my [Sistani's] views, [Sistani] removed legitimacy from the government... Sistani in 2011 confirmed his priorities to society.

The positive impact of the boycott on protecting his authenticity was reported by his emulators themselves as well. Shaykh Muhammad reaffirms Sistani's authenticity post-boycott as he says, "after [Sistani] saw their actions [the government], he closed his door to them". Shaykh 'Ali from Nasiriyya states, the boycott "increased our knowledge of the *marja' iyya* and that the *marja' iyya* would never destroy society... it is impossible for the *marja' iyya* to betray the people!". Such views possibly would not have existed had he decided to praise the government after the 2011 protests. Shaykh Radi reconfirms the purpose of boycott when he mentions that "the boycott brought down the media that affiliated the government's mistakes [with Sistani] when it came to power after the discourse of the *marja'* during the elections". Moreover, such moments underscore that authenticity is not only a set of personal apolitical characteristics. Rather, they are deeply understood in political and nationalistic terms and must be safeguarded at different intervals in relation to image-threatening political developments.

THE EFFECT OF THE AFFECTIVE BOND – TRUST

Sayyid Dr. Muhammad-'Ali Bahar al-'Ulum ('Ustadh in the Najaf Hawza) – **"The characteristics of Sayyid Sistani are what give birth to the trust between him and his constituents: faith, knowledge, and justice."**

Perceptions of Sistani as a symbol of legitimacy, hope, and authenticity appear to *combine* to formulate the affective bond that exists between himself and his *muqallidin*. For example, upon asking Sayyid 'Ihsan why he emulates the Ayatollah he mentions his knowledge (legitimacy), political activism (hope), and his asceticism (authenticity) as the foundations of his emotive connection with Sistani. Taxi Driver 2 explains his reasoning to be Sistani's knowledge (legitimacy), fight against Daesh (hope), and his relaxed ruling on *khums* (authenticity). Although some emulators had varying emphases on the different values Sistani symbolises

(and the narratives constituting them), most interviewees similarly followed this thematic trend in their reasoning, which generally make note of the Ayatollah's knowledgeability, his history of political successes, and a mention of an ethical component of his character. The interrelation of these evaluative judgements seems to coalesce to provide the cognitive foundations of their decision to emulate Sistani and answer his calls to action. This basis is one of trust.

As mentioned in the above quote by Sayyid Dr. Muhammad-'Ali, he points towards the conglomeration of characteristics that generate trust between Sistani and his *muqallidin*. In the same conversation he explains why this is the case. Part of the *muqallid-marja'* relationship is one wherein the *muqallid* is obligated to follow the religious edicts of the *marja'*. Though, to transcend from recognising the *marja'* as a traditional authority (that does not necessarily entail fervent loyalty) to a charismatic authority that inspires ready devotion, this will need a considerable amount of trust in the judgement of the *marja'*. When Sistani acquires the characteristics necessary, this validates the trustworthiness of calls to action themselves. As Sayyid Muhammad-'Ali states "knowledge will enable the fatwa to be closer to reality. Faith and justice will ensure that knowledge is directed towards the correct path".

In recognition of knowledge being fundamental to the legitimacy and political hope symbolisms, the Sayyid notes the capacity for Sistani's knowledge in finding a solution. He continues to note the ethical component of authenticity symbolism by mentioning that faith and justice ensures that the knowledge will be put to 'good use'. Here, Sayyid Muhammad-'Ali effectively says that all three characteristics are necessary to be recognised by the *muqallidin* so that they may feel assured of Sistani's judgement and be willing to follow it.

Similarly, this way of thinking is also present among Sistani's *muqallidin*. Sayyid Ja'far al-Qabanji mentions that it is Sistani's "characteristics that make people trust him" and continues by mentioning his "knowledge", "asceticism", and his role as a "father-figure". Shaykh Sadiq al-Murshidi adds to this by saying, Sistani's "knowledge", "justice", "piety" all "create reassurance and confirmation of the *marja' iyya* [Sistani] to his followers". In this sense, legitimacy, hope, and authenticity come together in a mutually-reinforcing manner to inspire absolute trust in Sistani's judgements. Moreover, it is not sufficient to only be perceived as having the legitimacy and hope to make commandments, it is also crucial that Sistani has the necessary authenticity to use his legitimacy and hope capabilities for the collective good.

Concurrently, the three symbolisms are interrelated in manner wherein one could imply the existence of the other or help produce it. As Zargar (2020, p. 7) mentions, a *mujtahid* worthy of emulation must have already achieved a reputation of a "clean public record" (authenticity). In this sense, authenticity then also, in turn, helps confirm Sistani's legitimacy. In another sense, recognising the Ayatollah's knowledgeability (legitimacy) also helped encourage the perception that he knew how to solve political conundrums (hope). The magnanimous moments of success

(e.g. Najaf Crisis march and defeat of ISIS) then reaffirm his characteristic of *'a'lamīyya*. The perceived sacrifices the Ayatollah took to make such successes come to fruition then also simultaneously highlight his authenticity.³² This intricate interplay between the legitimacy, hope, and authenticity perceptions, and how they depend on one another to create absolute trust in Sistani, is the crucial shortcoming of pre-existing literature on the Ayatollah's charisma that is compensated for through the affective bond framework. The 'absolute' quality of this trust will be further elucidated upon in the following section.

TRUST AS THE BASIS OF SISTANI'S CAPACITY TO MOBILISE

Shaykh 'Adil al-Sudani (Head of the Committee of Guidance and Mobilization to Defend the Iraq of the Holy Sites) – **“Trust and reassurance between the muqallid and the *marja'* [Sistani] is the basis of the *marja'*'s mobilisation power”**

The Shaykh mentioned here was the head of a committee from the *'Alawi 'Ataba*³³ that sent seminary students to the frontlines of war to motivate and maintain fighters' morale through religious and nationalistic discourse and rituals, during the jihad against Daesh (2014-17). Shaykh 'Adil explains to me that, without the trust embedded within the relationship between the *muqallidin* and Sistani, the Ayatollah would lose *the* key factor that enables his edicts to galvanise his people's emotions and motivate mobilisation. As Juan Cole (2007, p. 71) mentions, it is the “charisma” of Sistani that allowed him to have such power in mobilising people. Despite the correctness of Cole's statement, he does not explain *how* the perception of this charisma translates to a psycho-emotional effect that legitimates the course of action Sistani is promoting. As will be demonstrated, trust, as understood through the prism of Sistani's three affective symbolisms, gives a baseline of legitimacy to his calls to action. The certitude his followers have in his character enables Sistani to have what interviewees mention as a *ma'nawi* effect (effect on morale³⁴) that can motivate action. It is worth clarifying that Sistani's charisma only *enables* the mobilising potential of his words. The framing of his *fatwas*, the extent of the

³² An example of this was when he cut his medical treatment in London short to return to Iraq and find a solution to the Najaf Crisis in dangerous circumstances (Alsayegh, 2024, p. 161-169).

³³ Imam Ali shrine; one of the major institutions under Sistani's jurisdiction.

³⁴ Because of differences in framing, the emotions that constitute 'morale' vary from one call to action to another. Due to space limitations the various emotions that were stimulated due to Sistani's affective bond, in different contexts, are not fully addressed in this paper. For more examples on this see, Alsayegh (2024, p. 125).

muqallidin's Twelver Shi'i religious identity, Iraq's structural conditions, resources, and many other factors also play a fundamental role in actualising this potential, though this cannot be thoroughly addressed here due to the limitations of this paper.³⁵

The Affective Bond Legitimizing Sistani's Calls to Action

Weber seldom refers to how charismatic leaders mobilise their constituents, however he does mention that they do it through a "call" to action (Weber, 1947, p. 331). Despite this being a half-truth (because of the role of framing, structural conditions, dominant identity configurations, etc.), the German sociologist points towards the characteristics embedded within a leader's charisma as primary causal variables in the quest to galvanise the people. Shaykh 'Ali reiterates this when he says:

I answer [Sistani's call] because he is Sistani! Similar to when someone asks me why do you love [Imam] Husayn [third infallible Imam of Shia Muslims], I will respond by saying because he is Husayn!

In effect, the Shaykh says his responsiveness to Sistani is due to what makes the Ayatollah who he is (i.e. his legitimacy, hope, and authenticity symbolisms). These symbolisms coalesce to create the *muqallidin*'s personalised devotion to Sistani, akin to their fervent loyalty to Imam Husayn (AS). Equalising the unfettered affinity to Imam Husayn with the motivation to comply with Sistani's calls, concurrently means that, to the *muqallidin*, the Ayatollah shares in the very authority that the infallible Imams' themselves had. This unlocks the *muqallidin*'s cognitive imaginary of visualising and thinking of Sistani as the closest living human to these divine figures, which encourages the emulators to determine the Ayatollah as the present-day embodiment of them. Being the modern manifestation of such figures then means that Sistani shares in the trust his constituents would typically place in their characteristic of *infallibility*. By virtue of the meaning of infallibility being perfection of what Allah requires in terms of action and character, the trust then becomes absolute or unquestionable. The unquestionable nature of such trust becomes even more apparent in the narrations of the followers as they explain why they complied with Sistani's jihad *fatwa*.

On June 13, 2014, in response to ISIS capturing Mosul (the second biggest city in Iraq), being 15 kilometres away from Baghdad, and proclaiming their intent to destroy Karbala and Najaf (two of the holiest sites of Shi'i Islam), Ayatollah Sistani announced his jihad *fatwa* (Al-'Ataba al-'Abbasiyya al-Muqadasa, 2020). In response, hundreds of thousands of his followers and other Shia mobilised in the fight against ISIS (Sayej, 2019; Isakhan, 2020). The interviewees

³⁵ A more comprehensive discussion of this can be found in Alsayegh (2024).

(all of whom participated in the war against Daesh) reported that the swiftness of their decision to comply with Sistani's *fatwa* as emanating from the perceptions that give birth to the trust placed in his judgement. Taxi Driver 1 reflects the resonance of Sistani's political symbol of hope characteristic when he exclaims "the Sayyid's fatwas benefit the country, none can say they do not benefit the country!". Sayyid 'Ahmad, an ex-muballigh, similarly hints towards Sistani's history of praise-worthy political positions and feats when he states, "his positions are all very precise and wise". In line with the interconnected nature of the affective bond, he then continues to implicitly point toward the Ayatollah's authenticity, and the knowledgeability inherent to his legitimacy symbolism, by saying "you would not doubt that the *marja' iyya*['s *fatwas*] would take you to a place that you will not thank him for". Shaykh Dr. Haydar al-Sahlanî confirms this trust is key to people's responsiveness to Sistani when he says, "the reason for the people's swift responses to Sayyid Sistani's fatwas is the trust people have in his words".³⁶ As is evident, the absolute trust invested within Sistani interacted with his call to action to stimulate the emotion of *hope* in the impending victory against ISIS, a triumph achievable though complying with the jihadi call itself.

However, it is important not to disconnect Sistani's emotional power from the identity of his *muqallidin* and the cultural values that they have acquired through varying religious activities and rituals. Shaykh Muhammad elaborates on why he complied with Sistani's jihad fatwa by saying "we always say, 'we wish we were with you' and now came the day we can be with them". The 'wish' here is a reference to what is said by the audience during the *ta'ziya*³⁷. The repeated utterance of the mentioned phrase *laytana kuna ma'akum* (we wish we were with you) is a way of demonstrating loyalty and love to 'Ahlulbayt (AS) in these spaces and beyond. Vocalising the desire to be *with* them was a way to highlight the *muqallidin*'s readiness to fight by their side throughout the historical hardships they have endured. Moreover, the notion of Sistani as the representative of the Imam due to the culture of *taqlid* (emulation), the cultural reverence of 'Ahlulbayt, and the Ayatollah's perceived characteristics, *interacted* with Sistani's call to jihad against an oppressor in the form of Daesh. It did so by painting Sistani as the modern-day equivalent of Imam Husayn, and his call to fight ISIS as the contemporary manifestation of Imam Husayn's epic revolution against the tyrant Yazid in the Battle of Karbala 680 AD.

Taxi Driver 1 reinforces this notion of the *muqallidin*'s identity interacting with Sistani's

36 Trust also played critical role in validating a core motivator emanating from the jihad *fatwa* itself, which was the proclamation that those who are killed during the struggle against ISIS will be deemed martyrs and guaranteed eternal bliss in paradise. This stimulated the emotions of *hope* and *joy* of martyrdom. For more on this see Alsayegh (2024, p. 348).

37 A ritual conducted daily and/or weekly in different spaces of gathering among Iraqi Shia, wherein an orator narrates stories of hardships that have beset 'Ahlulbayt (Household of the Prophet).

charisma when he explains that responsiveness is due to “the person being a *muqallid* of Sistani on the principle of the Imamate, and secondly, they are religiously committed people”. Shaykh ‘Ali further elaborates upon the engrained values of the *muqallid* identity by stating “I am obligated [as a *muqallid*] to obey the *marja*”. Shaykh Lu’ai summarises the interplay between Sistani’s characteristics and his *muqallidin*’s identity as he says:

The reason for my responsiveness is that I am a Shi‘i belonging to the Household [of the Prophet] and I believe that the *faqih* [jurisprudent; i.e. Sistani] has the criterions that make him the representative of the Imam and obeying him is like obeying the Imam [himself].

In short, Sistani’s characteristics work in tandem with the identity of his *muqallidin* to provide a motivation for responding to his calls to action. The motivations are emotionalised as many explain them through the prism of the *pride* and *joy* of responding to Imam Husayn himself, and the *hope* in the inevitability of victory, as was mentioned in relation to the jihad *fatwa*. Other emotions also arise in different mobilisation instances post-2003 (Alsayegh, 2024) but cannot be accounted for here due to the space limitations of this paper. Nevertheless, while the emotional effects of Sistani’s calls to action can be numerous (because of differences of circumstances and framing), what is constant throughout them is the affective bond’s role as the emotional lifeline of his capacity to motivate his affected *muqallidin* into action. Put simply, the trust they place within him as a charismatic authority that embodies legitimacy, hope, and authenticity, creates an emotional urge to comply with his calls. This is not to say the affective bond is objectively mobilising (mobilisation depends on many other variables to come to fruition), but rather, that it necessarily bestows Sistani with the power, as their leader, to stimulate a sense of *motivation* among his *muqallidin*. This surge of emotions then begins to interact with other mobilisation variables such as Sistani’s framing, Iraq’s socio-political structural conditions, culture, pre-existing emotional states, and other factors, to determine the likelihoods of collective action occurrence. Though, without the affective bond, the Ayatollah loses the core factor that enables him to contribute to the processes of mobilisation.

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