

Activism in a Structural Crisis: An Analysis of the Relationship between the Authority of Sayyid Muhammad Sadr and the Ba'athist Regime in Iraq (1991–1999)

Mohammad Javad Khalili¹

Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Faculty of Islamic Denominations,
University of Religions and Denominations, Qom, Iran.
mj.khalili@urd.ac.ir



Abstract

The relationship between Shia religious authority (*marja' iyya*) and the modern political structure in Iraq, particularly during the rule of the Ba'ath Party, is one of the key issues in the study of contemporary Iraqi political history. The 1990s—following Iraq's defeat in the Kuwait War (1991) and the imposition of extensive international sanctions—marked a period of deep economic, social, and legitimacy crises for the Ba'athist state. Under these conditions, a distinctive model of religious and social activism emerged from Ayatollah Sayyid Muhammad Muhammad-Al-Sadr al-Sani (the Second Sadr) within Iraq's Shia community, drawing the attention of many researchers. The central question of this study is: How did Ayatollah Sayyid Muhammad Sadr, within an authoritarian yet crisis-ridden political structure, manage to organize his religious and social activism and expand it across society? In the existing literature on Shia religious authority in Iraq, two main models have typically been emphasized: the model of explicit political activism, analyzed in relation to Ayatollah Sayyid Muhammad-Baqir al-Sadr, and the model of caution and preservation of the *marja' iyya* institution, prominent in the activism of Ayatollah Sayyid Abul-Qasim al-Khoei. However, the activism of Ayatollah Sayyid Muhammad Sadr in the 1990s has rarely been analyzed independently and within a theoretical framework. This study, employing the theoretical framework of "structure–agency" and using a historical-analytical method along with library-based data, examines the relationship between the structural conditions of Iraq in the 1990s and the activism of Ayatollah Sadr. The findings indicate that the crisis-ridden conditions of Iraq's political structure during this period created grounds for the emergence of new forms of religious and social activism. Ayatollah Sadr played an active role in organizing this activism by utilizing tools such as reviving

Cite this article: Khalili, M.J. (2026). Activism in a Structural Crisis: An Analysis of the Relationship between the Authority of Sayyid Muhammad Sadr and the Ba'athist Regime in Iraq (1991–1999). *Journal of Islamic Political Studies*, 8(2), pp. 53-70. <https://doi.org/10.22081/jips.2026.74941.1106>

Received: 2025/11/21 ; **Received in revised form:** 2026/02/25 ; **Accepted:** 2026/03/10 ; **Published online:** 2026/07/10

Article type: Research Article

Publisher: Islamic Sciences and Culture Academy

©2026/authors retain the copyright and full publishing rights



Friday prayers, expanding direct communication with the masses, and strengthening the social function of the *marja' iyya*.

Keywords

Sayyid Muhammad Sadr, Ba'athist regime, structure–agency, religious authority (*marja' iyya*), political activism, speaking seminary (Ḥawza Nāṭīqa), structural crisis, *al-Hamlah al-Imaniyya* (The Faith Campaign).

1. Introduction

The relationship between the institution of Shia religious authority (*marja'iyya*) and the modern political structure in Iraq, particularly during the rule of the Ba'ath Party, is one of the most important and simultaneously complex issues in the contemporary political history of this country. During this period, the Shia *marja'iyya*, as one of the most significant religious and social institutions of Iraqi society, confronted a political structure that was authoritarian, ideological, and security-oriented in nature. On the one hand, the Ba'athist regime sought to control or restrict religious institutions to keep the public sphere under the sway of its official ideology; on the other hand, during critical junctures, it was inevitably compelled to engage in a form of interaction with or instrumental use of religion within the social arena. This situation paved the way for the emergence of different models of engagement between the *marja'iyya* and political power. Existing research on the Shia *marja'iyya* in Iraq has largely focused on two prominent models of activism. The first is the model of explicit, struggle-oriented political activism, examined primarily in relation to the thought and activities of Ayatollah Sayyid Muhammad-Baqir al-Sadr. The second is the model of political caution and conservatism, prominent in the analysis of the *marja'iyya*'s conduct during the era of Ayatollah Sayyid Abul-Qasim al-Khoei, in which preserving the seminary institution and safeguarding the existence of the *marja'iyya* under conditions of political pressure were considered the primary priorities. However, between these two models, another form of *marja'iyya* activism emerged in the 1990s that has rarely been studied independently and within a theoretical framework. The 1990s in Iraq, especially following the country's military defeat in the Kuwait War and its far-reaching consequences, was a period of profound political and social transformation. The imposition of international sanctions, the erosion of the state's economic capacity, rising social discontent, and a crisis of political legitimacy presented the Ba'athist power structure with serious challenges. Concurrent with these developments, the passing of Ayatollah Sayyid Abul-Qasim al-Khoei in 1993 created a significant vacuum at the helm of the Najaf *marja'iyya*. Under such conditions, Ayatollah Sayyid Muhammad Muhammad-Al-Sadr al-Sani gradually became one of the prominent figures of the Shia *marja'iyya* and gained an active presence in the religious and social arena of Iraq's Shia community.

The main question of this research is: How did Ayatollah Sayyid Muhammad Sadr, within the context of an authoritarian yet crisis-ridden

political structure, manage to organize a form of religious and social activism that differed in some respects from previous models of *marja'iyya* in Iraq? In other words, the article seeks to explain the relationship between the structural conditions of Iraq in the 1990s and the agency of Ayatollah Sadr in the formation of this model of activism. To answer this question, the article employs the theoretical framework of "structure–agency." This theoretical framework allows social action to be analyzed not merely as a product of the deterministic pressures of political and social structures, nor reduced solely to the individual will of actors, but rather within an interactive relationship between constraints, opportunities, and the capacities for activism. Accordingly, this research attempts to examine the activism of Ayatollah Sadr in connection with the structural conditions of Iraq in the 1990s. The present article is organized into four sections. The first section examines the theoretical framework of structure–agency and the research background. The second section is devoted to analyzing the structural conditions of Iraq in the 1990s. In the third section, the model of religious and social activism of Ayatollah Sayyid Muhammad Sadr and some of its most important dimensions are studied. In the final section, the conclusion and research findings will be presented.

2. Research Background

Studies on the Shia *marja'iyya* in Iraq, particularly in the twentieth century, have largely focused on the relationship between the institution of religion and political power. A significant portion of this research has sought to explain the different models of engagement between the *marja'iyya* and the modern state, colonialism, and authoritarian governments. However, the predominant focus of this literature has been on two main models of *marja'iyya* activism, and the experience of Ayatollah Sayyid Muhammad Muhammad-Al-Sadr al-Sani in the 1990s has rarely been analyzed independently and within a theoretical framework. The first category of research is dedicated to the model of political and revolutionary activism within the Shia *marja'iyya*, which has been examined most of all in relation to the thought and activities of Ayatollah Sayyid Muhammad-Baqir al-Sadr. In these works, Sayyid Muhammad-Baqir al-Sadr is presented as the theorist of the Islamic state and one of the most important figures of Shia resistance against the Ba'athist regime. Researchers in this field have largely focused on concepts such as Islamic ideology, the political revival of Shiism, the connection between the *marja'iyya* and the Islamic movement, and direct confrontation with the Ba'athist state. Within

this framework, the activism of the *marja'iyya* is primarily understood in the form of overt political struggle and ideological engagement with the power structure. The second category of research focuses on the model of political caution and conservatism within the *marja'iyya*; a model that is most prominent in the analysis of the conduct and positions of Ayatollah Sayyid Abul-Qasim al-Khoei. In these works, the primary emphasis is on preserving the seminary institution, ensuring the continuity of the *marja'iyya*, avoiding direct confrontation with the state, and safeguarding the social existence of Shiism under conditions of political repression. Many of these studies have analyzed the conduct of the Najaf *marja'iyya* during al-Khoei's era within the framework of a "politics of silence," "institutional conservatism," or "political dissimulation (*taqiyya*)," interpreting it as a response to the intense repression of the Ba'athist structure.

Alongside these two currents, some historical and sociological studies have examined the transformations in Iraq after the Persian Gulf War and the consequences of the crisis of the 1990s. These works have shown that Iraq's defeat in the Kuwait War, economic sanctions, the weakening of state authority, and the crisis of political legitimacy created the conditions for a transformation in the relationships between the state and social forces. Nevertheless, in most of these studies, the role of the Shia *marja'iyya* and particularly the experience of al-Sadr the Second (Muhammad Al-Sadr al-Sani) has been presented more in descriptive terms and has less frequently been subjected to theoretical analysis as a distinct model of religious and social activism. Regarding Ayatollah Sayyid Muhammad Sadr, a significant portion of the existing works are either biographical and descriptive in nature or focused on the jurisprudential, rhetorical, and social dimensions of his character. In these studies, topics such as the revival of Friday prayers, direct communication with the lower classes, the expansion of the network of religious representatives (*wukala*), and his role in reconstructing Shia identity after the 1991 uprising have been examined. However, few studies have attempted to analyze Sadr's activism within the relationship between "the agency of the *marja'iyya*" and "the crisis-ridden structural conditions of Iraq," and to explain how the structural constraints and opportunities of the 1990s enabled the emergence of such a model of activism. From this perspective, the main gap in the existing literature is the absence of a theoretical analysis of the relationship between the Ba'athist political structure and the model of activism of Ayatollah Sayyid Muhammad Sadr. The present article seeks to partially fill this gap by employing the theoretical framework of "structure–agency" and to

demonstrate that the activism of al-Sadr the Second cannot be explained solely within the framework of the revolutionary model of al-Sadr the First or the conservative model of traditional *marja'iyya*; rather, this activism was formed in connection with the crisis-ridden conditions of Iraq in the 1990s and through the interaction between structural constraints and the capacities of religious agency.

3. Theoretical Framework: Structure, Agency, and Crisis in Post-1991 Iraq

Analyzing the complex relationship between the institution of *marja'iyya* and the Ba'athist regime in Iraq requires a conceptual framework capable of explaining the dialectical interaction between socio-political constraints and individual agency and activism. The structure–agency theory, developed by thinkers such as Anthony Giddens, provides this analytical tool. This theory is based on the concept of the duality of structure; meaning that "structure" (the rules and resources that shape society) and "agency" (social actors) are not two separate phenomena but rather two sides of the same coin. Structure both constrains and enables the actions of agents, and agents, through their actions, either reproduce or transform the structure (Giddens, 2005). In this research, "structure" refers to the Ba'athist regime with all its ideological and repressive institutions, and "agency" refers to the institution of *marja'iyya* and, specifically, the person of the *marja' al-taqlid* (source of emulation). The activism of these agents in confronting the Ba'athist structure was not uniform and depended on the temporal conditions and the perspective of each agent.

3.1. The Powerful Structure and the Conservative Agent (The Pre-Crisis Period)

Under normal conditions, and prior to the 1990s, the Ba'athist structure was a totalitarian and powerful structure that, through intense security control, severely limited the space for activism. In this period, the activism of Ayatollah al-Khoei represents a clear example of an agent reproducing the status quo within a repressive structure. His primary priority, as evident in his statements and conduct, was not the struggle to change the structure, but rather preserving the entity of the seminary and the identity of Shiism (Afzali, 2019, p. 135). His strategy was based on *taqiyya* (dissimulation), caution, and avoiding giving pretexts for intensified repression. This approach, although successful in preserving the institution of *marja'iyya*, in practice led to the reproduction of existing power relations and the political isolation of the *marja'iyya*.

3.2. Structural Crisis and the Opening of a Window of Opportunity (The 1990s)

The 1990s were a turning point that disrupted the previous balance between structure and agency. The heavy defeat in the Second Persian Gulf War (1991), the bloody suppression of the Sha'baniyya Uprising (Intifada), and the imposition of crippling international sanctions plunged the Ba'athist structure into a deep and multi-layered structural crisis. This crisis had various dimensions: an economic crisis that severely reduced the regime's ability to provide services and control society (Carapico, 1998); a military crisis that eroded its authority; and, most importantly, a legitimacy crisis that, following the suppression of the uprising, destroyed the last remnants of the regime's domestic acceptance and brought the state-nation gap to its peak. This multi-dimensional crisis made the structure fragile, vulnerable, and in need of new strategies for survival, thus creating a space for activism that had previously been unimaginable.

3.3. The "Al-Hamlah al-Imaniyyah" (The Faith Campaign) Project: Structural Contradiction and the Creation of Opportunity

The "structure's" response to this crisis was a contradictory ideological turn. To compensate for the legitimacy crisis and counter the threat of Islamism, the Ba'athist regime launched the *al-Hamlah al-Imaniyyah* (The Faith Campaign) project in 1993 (Bengio, 1998). This project, which included building mosques, promoting Islamic rituals, and Saddam's pretense of religiosity, had a strategic goal: to control the religious sphere through the controlled promotion of religion. However, this project unintentionally created a limited but vital space for religious activism that had not existed before. This internal contradiction of the structure became the most important window of opportunity for a new agent. It was in such a context that Ayatollah Sadr emerged as a transformative agent. Unlike previous agents, he saw this limited space not as a trap but as a strategic opportunity to penetrate society and challenge the structure itself. This article will go on to show how, through the intelligent exploitation of this crisis and structural contradiction, he organized a new form of activism that ultimately led to a transformation in the contemporary history of Iraq.

4. Foundational Thought of the Agent: The Ideological Engine of Transformation

The activism of Ayatollah Sadr was not a merely reactive action or one

lacking theoretical support. Unlike many traditional *maraji'* who focused on preserving the status quo (*taqiyya* and silence), he was a thinker-activist who sought to organize his movement on the basis of a coherent intellectual system. His thought both provided the necessary legitimacy for activism and determined its strategic direction. Two key elements within this intellectual system that directly influenced his socio-political approach were his reinterpretation of "Mahdism" and the theory of "Guardianship of the Jurist" (*Wilayat al-Faqih*).

4.1. Mahdism: From Pacifying Waiting to a Transformative Project

In the intellectual system of al-Sadr the Second, the doctrine of Mahdism was transformed from a consoling theological tenet for the era of occultation into a transformative socio-political project. In his major work, *Mawsu'at al-Imām al-Mahdī* (The Encyclopedia of Imam al-Mahdi), he did not merely address theological and narrative (hadith-based) discussions; rather, with a forward-looking perspective, he outlined a normative utopia and a "global state" founded upon the pillars of absolute justice, public welfare, and divine sovereignty (Al-Sadr al-Sani, 1992, vol. 4, p. 554). This idealistic vision stood in complete opposition to the grim and repressive reality of Ba'athist Iraq and served a dual function: First, it gave meaning and purpose to his activism and that of his followers, offering a bright horizon in contrast to the existing situation. Second, it functioned as an ideological tool for criticizing the status quo and challenged the legitimacy of the Ba'athist regime. This transformative mindset prevented al-Sadr the Second from resigning himself to the existing order. Instead of being a "reproductive agent" who accepts the ruling structure and operates within its framework, he became a transformative agent seeking fundamental change in the structure. This thought was the driving engine that propelled him from passivity to active activism.

4.2. Wilayat al-Faqih: The Jurisprudential Basis for Activism in the Grey Space

If Mahdism provided the ultimate goal and the vision for transformation, the theory of *Wilayat al-Faqih* (Guardianship of the Jurist) in the thought of al-Sadr the Second explained the jurisprudential legitimacy and operational framework for action in the present. His position on this matter was complex and, from a strategic perspective, astute. Unlike the theory of the "Absolute Guardianship of the Jurist" (*al-Wilayat al-Mutlaqah li-l-Faqih*) promoted in post-revolutionary Iran, he adhered to a kind of "Limited Guardianship of the

Jurist" (*Wilayat al-Muqayyadah li-l-Faqih*). In his view, the guardianship of the jurist in public affairs is conditional upon two key prerequisites: "expediency" (*maslahah*) and "the absence of another guardian (the Infallible Imam)" (Al-Sadr al-Sani, 2007, p. 51). The significance of this view lay in its strategic function. By negating "Absolute Guardianship," al-Sadr the Second avoided making any claim of completely overthrowing the government and seizing political power—an action that could have led to immediate repression and the total destruction of his movement. At the same time, however, by distancing himself from the traditional current of the Najaf seminary, which negated any involvement in political affairs during the era of occultation, he ascribed an active and extensive role for the fully qualified jurist (*faqih jami' al-shara'it*) in social and judicial matters. The establishment of "religious courts" (*mahakim shar'iyya*) by him was a practical manifestation of this view. This intermediate position created a grey space between absolute silence and complete confrontation. This jurisprudential basis allowed him, without claiming governance, to intervene in areas that were pillars of the Ba'athist state's sovereignty (such as judiciary), thereby practically and gradually challenging the regime's exclusive authority and sovereignty. In effect, this theory provided him with the necessary jurisprudential tools to build parallel institutions and create a sphere of social influence independent of the state's power structure. In sum, Mahdism provided the "vision" and "motivation" for transformation, while *Wilayat al-Faqih* provided Ayatollah Sadr with the "authorization" and "roadmap" for effective activism under the difficult and complex conditions of Ba'athist Iraq (Abd al-Razzaq, 2010, p. 48).

5. The Emergence of the Transformative Agent: The Confluence of Structural Opportunity and Strategic Agency

The death of Ayatollah Sayyid Abul-Qasim al-Khoei in 1993 was not merely a vacuum at the apex of the *marja'iyya* hierarchy; rather, it created a historical juncture for the institution of *marja'iyya* and the Shia community of Iraq. At this critical juncture, two different paths lay before the *marja'iyya*: first, the continuation of the traditional, cautious, and *taqiyya*-centered approach, followed by most of Ayatollah al-Khoei's prominent students (including Ayatollah Sistani), which focused on preserving the entity of the seminary and withdrawing from politics. Second, embarking on an innovative, activist, and social path that would establish direct communication with the masses (al-'Alawi, 2015, p. 213). Ayatollah Sadr, consciously and with a deep understanding of the conditions of the time, chose the second path. This choice

was not merely an individual decision; rather, it was the result of the intelligent confluence of the agent's agency with a structural opportunity that had been paradoxically provided by the Ba'athist regime itself.

5.1. The Structure's Miscalculation: The "Arab *Marja*" Project

The Ba'athist regime, which after the war with Iran and in line with its long-standing policy of Arabization had always been in confrontation with the influence of the Iranian-born *marja'iyya*, sought an Arab *marja'* to achieve three strategic goals: first, to manage the Shia community and prevent its connection with opposition forces; second, to create a rival to the traditional Najaf *marja'iyya*, which was largely in the hands of scholars of Iranian descent; and third, to make instrumental use of such a *marja'* to legitimize the *al-Hamlah al-Imaniyyah* project and present a religious face of the government both domestically and abroad (Kavin, 2022, p. 98). In the view of the Ba'athist "structure," al-Sadr the Second seemed an ideal candidate for several reasons: he came from a great and respected Iraqi Arab family; unlike many Najaf scholars, he did not have extensive organizational ties with Iran; and most importantly, he appeared to lack a coherent, powerful, and organized network to challenge the government. Therefore, the regime not only did not seriously oppose his emergence initially but also implicitly supported him by granting permissions and facilities (such as permission to hold Friday prayers), hoping to use him as a pawn in its political game (al-Zubaidi, 2017, p. 112).

5.2. The Agent's Intelligence: Exploiting Structural Contradictions

This calculation proved to be a fatal strategic miscalculation on the part of the "structure." The Ba'athist regime had underestimated the "agent" and was completely incapable of understanding his long-term goals and transformative mindset, which were rooted in his Mahdist thought. In contrast, Ayatollah Sadr, with a precise and intelligent understanding of the situation, was able to make the most of this opportunity. His strategic agency was based on the precise recognition of three key elements (Habib, 2020, p. 98).

First, he clearly understood the fundamental weakness of the structure. He saw that the deep economic crisis caused by sanctions and the severe fragility of the regime's legitimacy after the Sha'baniyya Uprising had reduced the regime's capacity for all-encompassing repression and made it vulnerable to new challenges (al-'Aliyawī, 2019, p. 111).

Second, he identified the internal contradictions of the regime's policies. He realized that the *al-Hamlah al-Imaniyyah* project, ostensibly designed to

control religion, had paradoxically created a limited but vital breathing space for religious activism that could be used against the regime itself.

Third, he recognized the leadership vacuum in the Shia community. He saw the deep gap between the traditional *marja'iyya* and the masses of the people, and consciously decided to fill this vacuum by offering an activist and populist model of leadership.

Through a combination of apparent simplicity (which caused the regime not to initially perceive him as a serious threat) and strategic intelligence, Ayatollah Sadr used the limited possibilities placed at his disposal by the ruling authority to establish a broad social movement that was not only not in line with the regime's objectives but was completely opposed to them. This movement ultimately targeted the very foundations of the same structure that had created this opportunity for him.

5.3. Dialectical Transformation: From Controlled Agent to Rival Agent

Thus, al-Sadr the Second—who from the "structure's" perspective was initially considered a controlled agent for advancing the regime's objectives—gradually, through the expansion of his social influence and the mobilization of the masses, transformed into a rival agent who challenged the legitimacy, authority, and even the sovereignty of the structure itself. This transformation is a classic example of the dialectic of structure and agency; a situation in which the agent, through the intelligent use of resources, opportunities, and even limitations provided by the structure, ultimately weakens that very structure and paves the way for its transformation. His emergence at this historical juncture marked the starting point for the end of the political passivity of Iraq's Shia community and the beginning of the formation of a new social force that would profoundly influence the country's political future.

6. Tools of Activism: Reconstructing Identity and Social Mobilization in the Field of Practice

To bring about transformation and challenge the power structure, Ayatollah Sadr employed a set of innovative and powerful tools that directly targeted the masses of the people and gradually removed social power from the state's monopoly. These tools can be categorized into three main areas: institution-building, discourse-building, and social mobilization.

6.1. Institution-Building in the Heart of Society: Reviving Friday Prayers and Establishing Parallel Institutions

To implement his transformative project, instead of direct military or political confrontation, Ayatollah Sadr adopted the intelligent strategy of bottom-up institution-building. By creating and reviving institutions that directly dealt with the daily lives and religious identity of the people, he gradually established a sphere of social power parallel to the state.

6.1.1. The Revival of Friday Prayers: From a Religious Obligation to a Socio-Political Institution

One of the most intelligent and pivotal actions of al-Sadr was the revival of nationwide Friday prayers, first in the Kufa Mosque and then across Iraq. Within the Shia jurisprudential tradition, where the widespread establishment of Friday prayers during the era of occultation was a matter of dispute and was generally regarded as a governmental function, this action—taking place within the context of the regime's *al-Hamlah al-Imaniyyah* project—was a bold, complex, and multi-faceted move. The Ba'athist regime could not simply oppose the performance of an Islamic obligation, but this revived institution in the hands of Ayatollah Sadr transformed into a powerful tool with multiple functions:

1) After decades of intense repression, during which any religious gathering had become a dangerous act, Friday prayers suddenly provided a public, legal, and safe space for thousands of Shia to assemble. These weekly gatherings created an unprecedented sense of social solidarity and, most importantly, gradually broke down the wall of fear that the Ba'athist structure had imposed on society.

2) The Friday prayer sermons quickly transcended the framework of purely moral exhortation and became a platform for articulating the grievances of society. Ayatollah Sadr, in simple, direct, and popular language, spoke of poverty, unemployment, administrative corruption, and the collapse of public services, and implicitly, and at times directly, held the government responsible for this situation. By employing clever slogans such as "No, no to America" (*Kallā kallā Amrīkā*) and "No, no to Israel" (*Kallā kallā Isrā'īl*), he outwardly echoed the regime's stance against its external enemies, but in practice, by juxtaposing these with the government's own slogan "Yes, yes to Leader Saddam" (*Na'am na'am li-l-qā'id Saddam*), he created a symbolic front and a discourse of popular resistance against domestic tyranny (al-Mawlla, 2018, p.110).

3) Friday prayers were not merely a weekly event; they became the center of

an organizational network. By dispatching representatives and Friday prayer leaders to various cities and towns across Iraq, Ayatollah Sadr organized a network of loyal representatives (*wukala*) and clerics, which formed the core of his movement. This network became a vital tool for mobilizing, communicating with, and organizing the masses throughout the country.

6.1.2. Establishing Parallel Institutions: Practically Challenging State Sovereignty

6.1.2.1. Establishing Parallel Institutions: Practically Challenging State Sovereignty

Sadr's activism was not limited to the realm of discourse and gatherings. By establishing parallel operational institutions, he directly and unprecedentedly challenged the exclusive sovereignty of the Ba'athist state:

1) In an act that was an open encroachment upon one of the main pillars of state sovereignty (the monopoly on judgment), in 1998 he established religious courts (*mahakim shar'iyya*) across Shia-populated areas (al-Wa'ili, 2013, p. 247). These courts, which resolved people's disputes based on Shia jurisprudence, quickly became an alternative to the inefficient and corrupt state judicial system. This action carried a clear political message: "We do not recognize your system or your judicial legitimacy."

2) By establishing a modern educational center, where traditional seminary subjects were taught alongside modern sciences (such as computer science and the English language), he sought to train a new generation of educated, activist clerics loyal to his line of thought. This institution stood in direct opposition to the traditional and closed educational system of the Najaf seminary, and its goal was to create an intellectual and executive cadre for the future of the movement.

This strategy of institution-building allowed Ayatollah Sadr to transform from a mere *marja' al-taqlid* (source of emulation) into the leader of a shadow state with distinct judicial, educational, and social structures, thereby laying the foundations of a rival social power against the Ba'athist regime.

6.2. Discourse-Building and Othering: The Concept of the Speaking Seminary (*Hawza Natiqa*)

To legitimize his movement and mobilize forces, al-Sadr created a powerful conceptual dichotomy: *al-Hawza al-Natiqa* (the Speaking Seminary) versus *al-Hawza al-Samita* (the Silent Seminary). With this concept, he challenged the traditional and cautious approach of other *maraji'*, which was based

on *taqiyya* and passivity, presenting it as a symbol of silence in the face of injustice. In contrast, he declared himself the leader of the "Speaking Seminary," which is the voice of the people and the defender of their rights against the ruling authority (al-Musawi, 2003, p. 125). This process of "othering" greatly aided in distinguishing and defining the identity of his movement and, by creating a deep rift within the institution of *marja'iyya*, paved the way for the growth of his political project.

6.3. Mobilizing the Marginalized Masses and Crossing Red Lines

Unlike the traditional *marja'iyya*, which was primarily connected to elites (merchants, scholars), Ayatollah Sadr's main strategy was direct communication with the dispossessed and marginalized masses. He reached out to the urban poor, unemployed youth, and tribes, and with simple, popular language, gave them a sense of identity, dignity, and power. His special attention to areas such as *Madinat al-Thawra* (now Sadr City) in Baghdad provided him with an unprecedented social base that was deeply concerning to the ruling structure, which had always feared organized mass gatherings. This popular base became the primary source of the agent's power against the structure.

Ultimately, al-Sadr the Second, by issuing political fatwas, directly crossed the red lines of the structure. His fatwa against the Mujahedin-e Khalq Organization (MEK), a strategic ally of Saddam, and declaring transactions with them forbidden (*haram*), was a direct challenge to one of the regime's security-military instruments (al-Hashimi, 2004, p. 240). Furthermore, fatwas targeting the regime's identity symbols (such as declaring it forbidden to shave one's beard in the Ba'athist style), although ostensibly cultural, carried a clear political meaning in opposition to the structure. This set of tools demonstrates how Ayatollah Sadr, through a combination of institution-building, discourse-building, and social mobilization, systematically extracted a socio-political movement from the heart of a structural crisis and transformed it into a serious rival to the ruling structure.

7. The Final Confrontation: The Structure's Reaction and the Martyrdom of the Agent

Ayatollah Sadr's success in creating an independent, powerful, and mobilized social base confronted the "structure" of the Ba'athist regime with an existential threat. The "agent," who was supposed to be controllable and an instrument for managing society, had now become a rival in terms of legitimacy with a vast popular base, one who not only challenged the regime's

discourse but also, in practice, violated its sovereignty by establishing parallel institutions. His actions, from reviving Friday prayers to establishing religious courts and issuing political fatwas, had crossed the red lines of the structure one after another. The totalitarian logic of the Ba'athist regime, based on eliminating any dissenting voice and the complete monopoly of power, could not tolerate such a rival. The regime, having grasped the transformative and escalating nature of Sadr's movement, reacted to contain him. This reaction took place in several stages:

First, using political and psychological pressure, it tried to force him to retreat. The repeated and increasing demands to pray for Saddam in the Friday prayer sermons, to issue political fatwas in favor of the regime's regional objectives, and to condemn the regime's enemies were part of this strategy to confine him within the framework of the structure's goals. Simultaneously, the regime sent clear messages to Sadr by creating terror. The targeted assassinations of two prominent Najaf scholars, Ayatollah Morteza Borujerdi and Ayatollah Mirza Ali Gharawi, in 1998—both of whom were respected figures close to the traditional current—were a serious warning and a bloody message to al-Sadr the Second. The message was: either return to the conservative approach and silence, or prepare yourself for a similar fate (Gharah Daghi, 1998). The regime hoped that through these actions, it would both wage psychological warfare against Sadr and isolate him by creating division and suspicion within society.

However, these pressures not only proved fruitless but also backfired. Ayatollah Sadr not only did not retreat, but by donning a shroud (*kafan*) at Friday prayers, he brought the confrontation to its peak and symbolically and publicly declared his readiness for martyrdom. This bold act, which demonstrated his fearlessness and determination to continue on his path, was the point of no return in this confrontation. From this point onward, from the perspective of the Ba'athist "structure," all means of controlling, bribing, or threatening the "agent" were exhausted, and only one final solution remained to preserve the regime's exclusive survival.

The structure resorted to its final solution: the physical elimination of the agent. On February 19, 1999 (4 Dhu al-Qa'dah 1419 AH), Ayatollah Sadr, along with his two sons (Muammal and Mustafa), was martyred in a pre-arranged ambush by the regime's security forces on his way back home near the city of Najaf. The structure presumed that by eliminating the agent, it could destroy the brain of the movement and suffocate his socio-political project in its infancy. This was another—and final—miscalculation. The

martyrdom of Sadr did not lead to the end of his movement; rather, his blood became a catalyst, transforming it into a deep-rooted, powerful, and enduring socio-political current that, with an identity based on "oppression" and "resistance," played a decisive role in post-Saddam Iraq.

8. Conclusion

The analysis of the political and social activism of Ayatollah Muhammad Sadr within the framework of "structure–agency" theory demonstrates that he is a prominent example of a transformative agent who, under exceptional circumstances, was able to alter the course of contemporary Iraqi history. At a time when the political "structure" of the Ba'athist regime had been severely weakened due to the multiple crises following the Kuwait War (1991), he, with strategic intelligence, exploited the window of opportunity that had opened—particularly the internal contradictions of the *al-Hamlah al-Imaniyyah* project—and transformed the activism model of the *marja'iyya* institution from a defensive, status-quo-preserving model (exemplified by Ayatollah al-Khoei) into an activist and transformative one. By employing innovative tools such as reviving Friday prayers as a socio-political institution, mobilizing the marginalized masses, creating the identity-forming discourse of the "Speaking Seminary" (*al-Hawza al-Natiqa*), and establishing parallel institutions, he was able to lay the foundations of a powerful social movement. This movement not only gave Iraq's Shia a new identity and a sense of power but also reorganized their social structure for the post-Saddam era. The direct confrontation of this transformative agent with the repressive Ba'athist structure ultimately led to his martyrdom. However, contrary to the regime's belief, the physical elimination of the agent did not result in the destruction of his movement. The legacy of Ayatollah Sadr, in the form of the Sadrist movement (*al-Tayyar al-Sadri*), became one of the most powerful and enduring political and social forces in the new Iraq. This movement, which became a key player on the Iraqi political scene after Saddam's fall in 2003, clearly demonstrates how an agent, through a proper understanding of structural dynamics and through willpower and creativity, can challenge structures even in the most repressive of systems and create a new path for the future. The activism of al-Sadr the Second proved that at historical junctures, human agency can overcome structural determinism. He showed that an individual, relying on faith, intellect, and strategy, can set in motion a social force that continues to thrive even after his martyrdom, leaving behind an enduring legacy in history.

References

- Abd al-Razzaq, S. (2010). *Al-shahid al-Sadr al-thani marji' ummah* [The second martyr Sadr: A source of emulation for a nation]. Muntada al-Ma'arif. [In Arabic]
- Afzali, R. (2019). *Najaf Ashraf: Politics, religion and identity in contemporary Iraq*. Tisa Publishing. [In Persian]
- Al-'Alawi, H. (2015). *Al-marja'iyah al-shi'iyah fi al-Iraq: al-sira' 'ala al-wilayah (1992–2003)* [The Shia marja'yya in Iraq: The struggle over guardianship (1992–2003)]. Al-Markaz al-'Arabi lil-Abhath. [In Arabic]
- Al-'Aliyawi, H. (2019). *Al-intifadah al-sha'baniyyah wa tahawwulat al-sultah: dirasah fi du'f al-mashru'iyah* [The Sha'baniyya uprising and transformations of power: A study in the weakness of legitimacy]. Al-Markaz al-'Arabi lil-Abhath. [In Arabic]
- Al-Hashimi, A. (2004). *Rajul al-fikr wa al-maidan* [The man of thought and the field]. Baqiyat Allah Foundation. [In Arabic]
- Al-Mawla, M. (2018). Al-khitab al-Saddami: Tahawwulat al-aidyulujiya wa idarat al-azamat [Saddamist discourse: Ideological transformations and crisis management]. *Al-Mustansiriyya li al-Dirasat al-'Arabiyya wa al-Dawliyya*, (42), pp.110-129. [In Arabic]
- Al-Musawi, M. (2003). *Minbar al-jumu'ah: Majmu'at khutab al-jumu'ah allati kana yulqiha al-sayyid al-shahid al-sadr fi masjid al-kufah* [The Friday pulpit: A collection of Friday sermons delivered by Sayyid al-Shahid al-Sadr in the Kufa Mosque]. Dar al-Adwa'. [In Arabic]
- Al-Sadr al-Sani, M. (1992). *Mawsu'at al-Imam al-Mahdi* [Encyclopedia of Imam al-Mahdi] (Vol. 4). Dar al-Ta'aruf lil-Matbu'at. [In Arabic]
- Al-Sadr al-Sani, M. (2007). *Al-Qanun al-Islami: Wujduhu, Su'ubatuhu, Manhajuhu* [Islamic law: Its existence, difficulties, and methodology] (A. S. Ansari, Ed.). Publications of the Library of al-Shahid al-Sadr. [In Arabic]
- Al-Wa'ili, A. A. (2013). *Al-marja'iyah al-diniyyah fi al-Najaf: al-dawr al-siyasi wa al-ijtima'i (1991-1999)* [Religious authority in Najaf: The political and social role (1991-1999)]. Center for the Study of Najaf Ashraf - University of Kufa. [In Arabic]
- Al-Zubaidi, K. (2017). *The manufacturing of maraji': The Ba'ath and the management of the Shia file*. Dar al-Tanweer. [In Arabic]
- Bengio, O. (1998). *Saddam's word: Political discourse in Iraq*. Oxford University Press.
- Carapico, S. (1998). The impact of sanctions in Iraq. *Middle East Report*, (207),

pp. 60-107.

Gharah Daghi, K. (1998). Min al-Kho'i ila al-Gharawi [From al-Khoei to al-Gharawi]. *Al-Hayat Newspaper*, 16(63), pp.17-32. [In Arabic]

Giddens, A. (2005). *The constitution of society: Outline of the theory of structuration* (H. Qazian, Trans.). Nashr-e Ney. [In Persian]

Habib, K. (2020). *Muhammad Muhammad al-Sadr: al-mashru' al-mahdawi alladhi arbaqa al-ba'th* [Muhammad Muhammad al-Sadr: The Mahdist project that confounded the Ba'ath]. Dar al-Murtada. [In Arabic]

Kavin, J. (2022). *Saddam's faith campaign: Religion and politics in Ba'thist Iraq*. Syracuse University Press.