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When Religious Leaders Make Peace Plausible: The Iraqi Case*

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(Received: Sep. 08, 2023 Revised: Nov. 28, 2023 Accepted: Dec. 07, 2023)

Abstract

This paper discusses the role of religions and specifically, religious leaders, in peacebuilding. To achieve the purpose, in the first place, the authors shed light on the controversial issue among scholars perceiving religion more commonly as a source of conflict, or rather than a tool for peacebuilding. Accepting the constructive and productive role of religions in general, and Islam in particular, in peacebuilding, the paper also explores the role of concepts such as forgiveness, patience, and human dignity in peacebuilding. Having applied this conceptual framework, this article studies peacebuilding in post-war Iraq. The findings revealed that the role of religious leaders (Marjaiah), mainly Ayatollah Sistani, has been significant in the process of peacebuilding in Iraq. He has played a crucial role in this process through the revival of human dignity in light of public will, pursuing justice in terms of the Constitution, self-restraint as a basis for political stability and, religionization of forgiveness and tolerance. Data is accumulated through content analysis of Ayatollah Sistani's speeches and Fatwas.

Keywords: Conflict, Iraq, Marjaiah, Peacebuilding, Religion, Religious Leaders

* The authors have no affiliation with any organization with a direct or indirect financial interest in the subject matter discussed in this manuscript.

Journal of **World Sociopolitical Studies** | Vol. 8 | No. 1 | Winter 2024 | pp. 147-170

Web Page: <https://wsps.ut.ac.ir/> Email: wsps@ut.ac.ir

eISSN: 2588-3127

PrintISSN: 2588-3119

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1. Introduction

Building peace is one of the most important issues in societies with racial, religious, and cultural diversities. In Such societies, where these distinctive qualifications are always considered as a source of conflict, efforts are made to build peace by the entities relying on the contextual commonalities. Religion is one of these commonalities and religious leaders tend to be considered as peacebuilders.

However, the literature related to the issue has mainly narrated the Westphalian approach to religion and its role in inciting wars and conflicts among and within nation-states; and indeed there are numerous cases that confirm this very approach. Nonetheless, it has been more than two decades that social scientists have studied the nature of conflicts and wars, as well as the potentials of religions and religious agents in peacebuilding. In this article, based on the assumption that religion has a positive role in building peace, a theoretical foundation for a synthetic term, i.e. religious peacebuilding, will be elaborated based on an analysis of the text of the *Holy Quran*. In the second part of the paper, the Marjaiah-based approach to peacebuilding will be examined by means of a conceptual analysis of Ayatollah Sistani's speeches and Fatwas.

Examining the religious narrative of peacebuilding encompasses theoretical and practical importance. Theoretically, religious conceptualization of peacebuilding develops knowledge boundaries, and as a result, a broader range of phenomena can be examined. From a practical viewpoint, it is possible to include religion as a factor to resolve conflicts or avoid its adverse role in the fueling violence. Recognizing the positive or negative role of religion in peacebuilding helps peacemakers provide appropriate tools for peacebuilding in religiously oriented societies.

1. 1. Conceptual Framework: Religious Peacebuilding

Earlier studies on the role of religion in a conflict perceive it as a “source of conflict”. The most prominent scholar who referred to religion as a crucial source of conflict is Samuel Huntington. In his nominal work, *Clash of Civilizations*, he distinguishes 9 different civilizations and forecasts that the future conflicts would be between these civilizations, whether at a local or international level. The categorization of the civilizations was mostly based on the type of religions. He argued that the future conflicts mostly would be between Muslim and non-Muslim civilizations (Huntington, 1997). Galtung (1975), in a different conceptualization, calls religion as a source of “Cultural Violence”. According to him, this type of violence can be used to legitimize other types of violence and can lead to a conflict (1969). Other scholars, such as Boulding (1986), however, refrain from perceiving religion as an independent variable in the creation of conflicts, and believe that religions have not been successful in building peace, sometimes even impeding the way to peace.

Since the incidents of September 11, certain politicians and policy wonks accused Islam as a violent-promoting religion and the main cause of terrorist incidents. Muslims across the globe encountered significant pressure and suffered much due to this perception. Modifying this notion, Edward Said argues that religions are not violent at nature, but labelling them in a specific manner can be a source of conflict, itself. Criticizing Huntington’s religion-based distinction between civilizations and putting Western and Muslim Civilizations as the contending ones can foster conflicts (Said, 2001). Berman (2004) also does not recognize religion as an important cause of conflict; fundamental and extremist interpretations of religions’ doctrine could, however,

lead to conflict. Other researchers such as Fox (2001) perceive religion as an intervening variable, which can support the main causes of conflicts such as nationalistic or economic factors.

Conversely, certain scholars (including Appleby, 2001; Silvestri & Mayall, 2015; Johnston, 2003; Little, 2007; Gopin, 2000; Smock, 2002; Coward & Smith, 2004) have done impressive research on the positive role of religion, as a driving force for promoting peace. Appleby, in his well-known work, *The Ambivalence of the Sacred* (2000) has focused on the manipulations of believers' faith by certain politicians and religious leaders to disseminate conflict and grasp their illegitimate goals. They exploit believers' religious illiteracy and their lack of understanding to attain their goals via conflict and tensions. According to Appleby, religions have the potentials to build and promote peace. He argues that ethics and ethical convictions, as expressed through religious beliefs, are important factors for peace-building. Silvestri and Mayall (2015) argue that there is a cliché binary understanding about the role of religion either as a source of conflict or a facilitator of peace. According to them, there is no common and all-accepted definition of "religion" and its role in a society. They put forward a new framework on the issue and argue that institutions, doctrines and rules in a specified religion are not as important as the context and perception of the believers; It does not matter what the rules and institutions stand for. What is important in peace-building is the understanding of individuals from those rules. Thomas (2005) emphasizes the role of faith-based organizations and NGOs to promote dialogue and peace.

Abu-Nimer (2003), a Muslim thinker, insists of conflict resolution mechanism within the Islamic tradition, such as third-party mediation and arbitration and reconciliations based of Islamic

values like forgiveness and public repentance. Others, including Gopin (2001) and Helmick and Petersen (2001), have focused on the notion of “forgiveness” as a mechanism to settle disputes. According to them, it is much more effective, if it is used between different religious groups. “Religious leaders” is another factor that can promote peace and pave the way for dialogue. Other researchers, such as Aroua (2010), have also focused on this factor; in the same vein, Lederage (1999) proposes a top-down approach to peace-building via a pyramidal model, comprised of three levels of leadership: top-level, middle range, and grassroots. The top-level consists of key political and military leaders who get involved conflicts. In a given interstate struggle, these people are the highest representative leaders of the government and opposition movements, or present themselves as such (Lederach 1999: 38). The role of top-level leaders is therefore essential in intensifying or settling of a conflict, which explains the reason for which Lederach has come to the conclusion that top leadership approach is the best approach for peacebuilding. In this approach, peacebuilding should focus on high-level negotiations, in which figures who serve as peacemakers are eminent and notable, and are often supported by their government or international organization such as the United Nations. The main task of these figures is achieving cease-fire (Lederach, 1999, pp. 44-45).

However, regarding the structure and formula of peace-building, we refer to the works of John Paul Lederach. He introduced a framework about peacebuilding, which transforms conflicts into sustainable peace. His framework comprises of four elements: truth, mercy, justice and peace. Each element encompasses several values: truth includes acknowledgment, transparency, revelation and clarity; mercy is comprised of acceptance, forgiveness,

support, compassion and healing; justice refers to equality, right relationship, making things right and restitution; and peace is represented by harmony, unity, well-being, security and respect (Lederach, 1999, p. 30).

Regarding this framework, Abu-Nimer (2000, p. 234) attempts to conceptualize Islamic peacebuilding by means of the conceptual analysis of *Quran* and Hadith. He determines the existence and frequency of peace/war-related concepts in the aforementioned texts. Peacebuilding in Islam, accordingly, comprises certain concepts, including justice, human dignity, forgiveness and patience.

Among these concepts, justice is a fundamental concept as the main mission of the prophet Mohammad (PBUH) was helping people to “establish the scale of justice” (The Quran, 57:25). According to the *Quran*, justice coincides with “equality”, “insight” and “ransom” (Qorashi, 1982, pp. 301-304). In addition, “human dignity” is an important motivation in resolving conflicts, and lies at the heart of any peacebuilding and nonviolent strategies. Human dignity, which is also frequently reflected in the *Quran* and the tradition, contains the value of “sacredness of human life”. Consequently, any peacebuilding initiatives ought to protect and improve human life. Human dignity is defined by adjacent concepts such as “respect”, “sacredness” and “sanctity” (Abu-Nimer, 2000, pp. 241-243).

Forgiveness is another concept that is relatively similar to the Western value of reconciliation in peacebuilding and conflict resolution. Forgiveness can be defined by two concepts, “condonation” and “removal of trace” (Qorashi, 1982, pp. 19-21).

The last value, patience, is a vital requirement for both

peacebuilders and parties engaging in conflict or war (Abu-Nimer, 2000, p. 253) and can be interpreted in terms of “Self-restraint”, “endurance” and “bravery” (Qorashi, 1982, pp. 105-107).

Relying on what has been said, one can conclude that religions have the potentials to foster a conflict or build a durable peace depending on the context, political/religious actors, intervening social, cultural, economic factors and perception/will of the believers. In the following section, assuming the constructive role of Muslim leaders and Islamic values, we will discuss the way in which religion can be used to build and promote peace in Iraq.

2. Modern Iraq: Activism of Religion in a Multicultural Society

Modern Iraq was born from the Ottoman Empire's dissolution following World War I. The country is ethnically and religiously diverse. Religiously, it is composed of Sunni and Shiite Muslims, Christians, Kakais and Yazidis, and ethnically Arabs, Kurds, Turkmen, Armenians and Assyrians. The blending of ethnic and religious borders in Iraq is highlighted by the presence of Sunni Kurds in the north and the northeast, Sunni Arabs in the center and the west, Shia Arabs in the south, and Sunni Turkmen in the northeast and the east. Considering these religious and ethnic distinctions, Article 3 of the Iraqi Constitution introduces this country as an ethnically and religiously diverse territory (Iraqi Parliament, 2005). Despite such ethnic and religious diversity, Iraq's unity was preserved due to the presence of Saddam Hussein and the Sunni elite in the government as well as the army's violent actions such as repression and intimidation of the people. However, this diversity has proven to be a basis for the emergence of violence since 2003.

The Sunni, Shia, and Kurd groups underwent the most violent confrontation during Saddam government period. Sunni minorities were forced to participate in the broader coalition of the Shiite government led by Nuri Maliki due to the reduction of their power. This approach undermined their legitimacy among their Sunni leaders and followers, raising the prospect of violent conflict in Iraq today. Iraqi Shia political factions such as the Islamic Dawa Party, the Iraqi Islamic Supreme Council, and the Sadris have all been involved in the violence. For example, pro-Moqtada Sadr militias fueled the violence by relying on the "Mahdi" militia group. There is also violence among political factions of the Kurdistan Region. An instance is the recognition of the "Gorran Movement" by two dominant political factions of the Kurdistan region, *i.e.*, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan and the Democratic Party of Kurdistan (Katzman, 2014, p. 2). These incidents prompted the post-war Nouri Maliki's government to use violence as a means of repression (Krieg, 2014, p. 1).

Apart from ethnic and religious groups having the potential to incite violence, extreme interpretations of religion are considered to be another factor in this regard. One instance was the rise of the ISIS in Iraq in 2014. This group resorted to violence to weaken and overthrow the Iraqi government. The ISIS represented the exceptional interpretations of Islamic concepts such as *Jihad*, *Hijrah*, and *Jahiliyyah* and also banned Islamic rites, promoting a violent and irrational portrayal of Islam in global public opinion.

On the one hand, all of these incidents marked the post-Saddam government as a failed and extremely fragile administration. According to the Peace Foundation database, Iraq was ranked 27th out of 179 countries in terms of fragility in 2023 (Fund for Peace, 2023, p. 7). Over 207 thousand civilians were killed in this country

from 2003 to 2019, some of whom were naturally the victims of religious conflicts. According to reports, more than 67 thousand Iraqi citizens were victims of such religious violence from January 2014 to December 2017 (Iraq Body Count, 2019). Hence, there is still a long way before peace is achieved in Iraq, as the country's peace prospects are rather uncertain in the eyes of many. On the other hand, in this country some peace-making measures have been taken, which can be analyzed within the framework of Islamic peace-building.

2. 1. Religious Authority (Marjaiah) as a Peacebuilding Actor

The Shiite Marjaiah is among the important internal forces affecting the process of development in today's political society of Iraq. Due to its contact with the Iraqi society, the Shiite Marjaiah has always been the most powerful political figure in Iraq. Some experts argue that Iraqi Shiites and their religious Marjaiah will be the key players in the new Middle East (Gerecht, 2004, p. 18). The role of religious Marjaiah in Iraq is currently influenced by Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Sistani. After Ayatollah Khomeini's death in 1989, many of his followers announced Ayatollah Sistani as their Marjah (Haji-yousefi & Arefnejad, 1389 [2011 A. D.], p. 48). Thus, Sistani took over the authority of Najaf Hawza. Considering that Ayatollah Khomeini had a wide network of Shia representatives and scientific research centers, Ayatollah Sistani became the heir of this influence in the Shiite community. However, this influence, due to the government of Saddam Hussein and the Baath party, was only aimed at the Shiite community in Iraq and not the ruling system of the country. Making an endeavor to preserve and maintain the Hawza, Sistani did not take any oppositional action

during the years in which the country was governed by the Baathi regime. The collapse of Saddam Hussein's regime, however, considered the beginning of a new chapter in the history of Iraq, the Shia authority of Najaf became one of the most powerful entities throughout the country (Ghasemi, 1388 [2009 A. D.]).

Ayatollah Sistani's activism within the framework of democratic rules has promoted his position as a potential peace-builder in Iraq. In fact, Ayatollah Sistani seeks to establish an Iraqi state that is neither merely religious nor a purely secular democracy. Instead, his desired civil order can be in form of a democratic order that is compatible with the principles of Islam and democratic government based on accountability and popular sovereignty (Rahimi, 2007). In addition to such a democratic approach, his stance on the phenomenon of occupation has highlighted his role in Iraq's internal developments. Despite his belief in the urgent departure of the occupiers and the certainty of taking control of Iraqi destiny by their own, Ayatollah Sistani avoided direct confrontation with the occupying forces and maintained a relatively flexible attitude toward them. Although this approach should be analyzed within the framework of expediency mechanisms as well as temporal and spatial conditions, such a possibility can be interpreted as a religious mechanism of crisis management applied by the religious Marjaiah in Iraq. It is worth mentioning that Sistani admitted the temporary presence of foreign forces in Iraq under the auspices of the United Nations (Khaffaf, 2007, p. 75). Ayatollah Sistani's emphasis on "unity" is another factor that has propelled him to prominence in Iraq. Among Ayatollah Sistani's actions for preserving Iraqi religious unity was when the shrines of Shia imams were attacked as Shia-Sunni conflicts intensified. Despite the pressure, Ayatollah Sistani insisted on the principles of mutual

understanding and emphasized the establishment of a united and independent Iraq, while prohibiting retaliatory measures, such as his prohibition of killing former Baath Party members and the people who collaborated with Saddam Hussein's regime until the establishment of legal courts (Khaffaf, 2007, pp. 11-12). Ayatollah Sistani is concerned not only with Iraq's geographical territory, but also with resolving the problems between the Muslim world and others, such as the Palestinian issue. This can be corroborated by his statements and positions, as well as his cultural and social services in other Muslim countries (Sistani, 2017). This elevates Ayatollah Sistani to the status of an eminent Islamic figure in the Muslim world. However, in Iraq's multicultural society, the involvement of religious Marjaiah in peace issues might be considered controversial. As a result, Ayatollah Sistani participates in peacemaking issues based on an Islamic concept known as expediency.

2. 2. Islamic Values and Peace-Building in Iraq

As discussed earlier, Ayatollah Sistani participates in peace-making issues based on his position as a religious leader (Marjah). Religious Marjaiah can benefit from the framework of expediency to intervene in the matter of peace-making, which is not exclusively within the text (*Nass*) or Sharia (Al-Dawalibi 1982, p. 284), but extracted from them. The following section will interpret and report findings. Research data are collected from Ayatollah Sistani's speeches and Fatwas from 2003 to 2022. Categories and themes are defined in connection with the word "peace"

2. 2. 1. Restoring Human Dignity by Means of Public Will

The emphasis of the Iraqi religious Marjaiah on the decisive role of the "Choice Theory" reflects one of Shiism's important political theories in relation to the Iraqi political system. According to this theory, which is the foundation for legitimizing the government, people rely on the Marjaiah that they have received from God to control their social and political destiny by electing the government they desire (Quran, 42:38; Quran, 3:159). Despite acknowledging individual dignity and worth, this theory contends that the best mechanism for defending the sanctity and dignity of society's members is prioritizing the collective wisdom, which will prevent self-opinion dominance and the dictatorship of external and internal agents (Feldman, 2005, p. 8).

Ayatollah Sistani's emphasis on the importance of public opinion in Iraqi politics was actually the beginning of the process of designing the new Iraqi political system. The public opinion represents three categories: majority rule, pluralism, and civil society. Majority rule is the basis for decision-making in this regard; however, this does not imply ignoring the rights of the minority (Rahimi, 2007). Furthermore, Ayatollah Sistani's desired pluralism is manifested in the form of national elections based on open lists. According to him, the electoral system should represent different wills, and election results should reflect the inner convictions of all ethnic groups an Ayatollah Sistani deemed ineffective the 2005 Iraqi parliamentary elections, which were held on closed lists. Concerning the third element, civil society can be a provider of people's effective and constructive participation in socio-political developments. In a civil society, not only the governmental institutions, but also religious figures should avoid dictating their will and forcing people to show blind obedience

(Alshamary, 2022, pp. 5-12). The institutionalization of civil society marginalizes the interests of political groups in obtaining government positions. As a result, the greater ability to ensure general public satisfaction becomes the most important criterion for entrusting executive positions and responsibilities to individuals. In addition, the establishment of the public will highlight the role of Iraqis in their constitution.

2. 2. 2. Pursuing Justice in Terms of the Constitution

The process of drafting the new Iraqi constitution reflected facts about the current state of Iraqi politics and society. For instance, Iraqi politics was intertwined with ethnic and religious meanings, and Iraqis interpreted events along these meanings. Similar to the elections that were held on January 30, 2004, this process exacerbated polarization because different groups sought to their own political weight (Sayej, 2018). Opposing the law that promotes sectarian tendencies, the religious Marjaiah stated, “No group or sect should be different from others... a law that is not based on the supreme interests of the Iraqi people but on bargaining ethnic and religious can harm the peace-making process in this country ... in Iraq's constitution, no element other than religion can bind a society where more than 97% of its people are Muslims” (Sistani, 2003b). A meaning of justice, *i.e.*, “Anything should be placed in its right position,” has been in this framework. Accordingly, the Iraqi Shia Marjaiah opposes any retaliation and violence by the Iraqi army against Iraqi prisoners and their families, noting that the only mechanism for dealing with them is the Iraqi government's legal and official authorities (Jamaran, 1396 [2017 A.D.]). Similarly, Ayatollah Sistani had previously declared it inadmissible to attack

and disclose the documents of Sunnis under the pretext of cooperating with Saddam Hussein's regime (Sistani, 2017)

2. 2. 3. Self-Restraint as a Basis for Political Stability

Another component of religious peace-building in Iraq is to call on the Iraqi people to exercise self-restraint. Considering the emphasis on ethnic and religious differences to be the root of political instability, the religious Marjaiah has repeatedly pronounced the roles of Sunni groups, Kurds, and religious minorities in the political stability process. For instance, while Sunni parties complained about their participation in the Iraqi National Assembly meeting, Ayatollah Sistani called on all Iraqi ethnic groups and religions to exercise self-restraint on the eve of the meeting and demanded the participation of Sunnis in drafting the constitution and the future government of the country, since he believed that Iraq belonged to all Iraqis (Rahimi, 2007, p. 19). The Kurdish issue in Iraq is another example of the way in which religious authorities have contributed to the peace-making process in this country. Given the historical atrocities committed against this ethnic group in Iraq, Ayatollah Sistani agreed with the Kurdish autonomy plan as long as it does not jeopardize Iraq's political stability (Khaffaf, 2007, p. 191). Ayatollah Sistani demanded that the followers of other religions be respected and protected. In this regard, he condemned extremist attacks on holy places of religious minorities, which resulted in the death of innocent people and jeopardized Iraq's political stability. He also urged the Iraqi government and people to protect the rights of religious minorities, particularly Christians, and stated that the right to live in security and peace would be inalienable (Khaffaf, 2007, p. 195).

2. 2. 4. Islamification of Forgiveness and Tolerance

The Iraqi religious Marjaiah has always sought to religionize tolerance both theoretically and practically. Ayatollah Sistani argues that rather than rejecting "the other," it is necessary to focus on the introduction of Islamic teachings that are characterized by "tolerance". In this regard, governmental religious decrees include matters considered permissible by all Islamic sects and religions based on generalities and matters agreed upon by Shia and Sunni. Scholars and thinkers of other religions, according to such decrees, are not rejected based on the accusation of polytheism or disbelief. Accordingly, the Iraqis who practice other religions are considered "human brothers", and other Iraqis must respect them and their beliefs and treat them based on justice and equality (Sistani, 2004).

Ayatollah Sistani's interactions with Muslim and non-Muslim groups and figures are mainly founded on the Islamic principle of tolerance: the way he interacts with Sunnis is one of the most visible instances of Islamic tolerance in his political and social behavior. When Iraqi Sunni Arabs lost their authority following the fall of Saddam Hussein, the ground for Shiite retaliatory measures was provided. However, Ayatollah Sistani obligated the Iraqi government to maintain the security of all Iraqis, regardless of racial, religious, or intellectual affiliations (Sistani, 2005). He also proposed peaceful interaction and coexistence of Shias and Sunnis as well as direct and indirect dialogues and meetings as the best and only way to resolve any potential differences (Sistani, 2003a). These potentials highlight the role of religion in peace-making in the analysis of conflicts and the design of a peaceful life in Iraq.

2. 3. The Reaction of Shia Marjaiah to Public Conflicts in Iraq in 2019

The 2019 protests arose in a context where the formation of Adil Abdul-Mahdi's administration following the 2018 parliamentary elections was considered a watershed moment in Iraq's transition from years of war to the peace process. After months of intense negotiations between political factions in the parliament, Abdul-Mahdi's administration was formed in hope of developing the country. Nearly all Iraqis hoped that Abdul-Mahdi's administration could fulfil their national interests. Furthermore, his administration benefited from the failure of Iraqi Kurdistan's separatist plan, while also having the support of moderate political figures (Palani, 2019, p. 2). However, Abdul-Mahdi's administration was forced to resign just one year after the Iraqi protests. As a result, analyzing the reasons for Iraqi protests requires understanding Iraq's political, security, and economic mechanisms (Palani, 2019, p. 4).

The then political order could be considered the unofficial outcome of the agreement of Iraq's three power blocs, *i.e.*, Shiites, Sunnis, and Kurds, to assign the presidency to the Kurds, the prime minister to the Shia community, and the speaker of the parliament to the Sunnis (Palani, 2019, p. 4). People believed that the administration in that political system owed power to local blocs. This resulted in a national-regional bias (*i.e.*, the primacy of local preferences over national interests) in Iraq's domestic politics. In such circumstances, there were serious questions regarding the political will to combat corruption in Iraq and achieve good cooperation. Moreover, unanimity had been limited to key political elements (*i.e.*, President, Prime Minister, and Speaker of Parliament) and had severed ties with the social body and parties. As a result, the poor performance of the Iraqi administration faded

the glimmers of hope for the country's progress that had been implanted in the minds of Iraqis since 2003 (Palani, 2019, p. 5).

The Iraqi economy is also dealing with the rentier government problem. The country's continued reliance on oil resources has hampered sustainable development. Furthermore, due to the high levels of corruption and public mismanagement, the Iraqi administration has been widely perceived as an ineffective institution. Iraq is also facing security challenges. The lack of an integrated and structured security force has made the country vulnerable to threats and provided a platform for foreign interventions. The absence of a legally integrated security force in Iraq has underlain the reproduction of local military and security forces with no desire to integrate into regular Iraqi security forces (Palani, 2019, p. 6).

Nevertheless, although it was extremely difficult to play the role of religious Marjaiah in the peace-making process in such a situation, Ayatollah Sistani stated his support for the protesters, calling the dead martyrs and blaming the government for the insecurity (Aljazeera, 2019). Highlighting the Iraqi administration's inability to achieve justice within the framework of the constitution, Ayatollah Sistani invited the conflict parties to exercise restraint, introduced legal mechanisms as the only means of resolving the conflict, and urged the danger of the general will of Iraqi society crumbling due to the loss of human dignity. Accordingly, the behavior of Iraqi religious Marjaiah can represent the balance of Islamic values in the peace-making process. In response to Ayatollah Sistani's request, Iraq's then Prime Minister, Adil Abdul-Mahdi, resigned in a statement so that the Iraqi Parliament could consider other options (Davison, 2019). The important point in this process was the fact that the religious

Marjaiah was able to use its influence to make a turning point in the course of the Iraqi people's protests, which led to the gathering and happiness of the Iraqi people in Tahrir Square in Baghdad and other cities such as Karbala, Najaf, Basra, Al-Nasiriya, and Samawah. However, the religious Marjaiah's concerns about the fate of changing the constitution, the election law, and the party law, as well as the risk of any deviation in this popular demand indicated that the religious entity should continue playing its role in Iraq's political developments and the process of religious peace-making. This was emphasized both in the speech of Ayatollah Sistani's representative on November 2019, when interpreting one of Ayatollah Sistani's harshest speeches and statements against Iraq's political structure and support for peaceful protests in recent years, and in Ayatollah Sistani's visit to Jeanine Hennis-Plasschaert, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq on December 2022 (The National News, 2022).

As a result, Iraq's unity and independence with the presence of all Iraqi ethnic groups and religions stands out more than any other issues in the behavior of Iraqi religious Marjaiah in relation to Iraq's internal conflicts. According to Ayatollah Sistani, Iraq belongs to all Iraqis. Being a religious majority, in this opinion, is not a license to establish religion-based sovereignty. Ayatollah Sistani emphasizes that no one should misuse the current situation in Iraq to compensate and exact revenge on other groups that have harmed them in the past and, thus, threaten Iraq's unity and integrity.

3. Conclusion

Following the end of the Thirty Years' War (1618-1648) in Europe, religion was detached from the political sphere and assigned to the personal domain. This cataclysmic event confirmed the hypothesis that religion would act as the sword of Damocles over nations and undermine their integrity, driving them into a state of war. However, the constructive conceptualization of religion for settling disputes was brought up by introducing theoretical frameworks considering those peacebuilders who had normative/religious integration with their conflict counterparts. In the course of scientific works, scholars now and then referred to the cases settled by Christian leaders, including the Pope, concluding the positive role of religion in peacebuilding. Confirming and promoting this approach, some Muslim scholars addressed Islamic peacebuilding by relying on Islamic values. Unlike previous works focusing merely on these values, this article highlighted the role of Islamic leaders as peacebuilders.

Post-2003 Iraq can be an applicable case to investigate the role of religious leaders in peacebuilding, as it has severely suffered from internal and external acts of violence for several years. Ethno-religious divisions and de-Baathism have fueled violence and rendered the failure of the transition process from a temporary government to a stable one in Iraq, and as a result, a novel fragile state came into existence. However, religion and religious leaders (Marjah) have had significant contribution to peacebuilding in Iraq. Understanding the importance and sensitivity of the issue, as well as the mosaic identity of the Iraqi society, Ayatollah Sistani pursued his peacemaking project through his publicly accepted position and influence in the Iraqi society as well as his emphasis on solidarity and peaceful living. To illustrate this, one can refer to

the Sistani's narrative of political Islam, i.e. Islamic values, including human dignity, justice, self-restraint and forgiveness coincided with democratic norms, such as public will, constitutionalism, stability, and tolerance. This conceptual portrait is evident in his speech and Fatwas.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that Ayatollah Sistani's speech acts tend to provide the theoretical and conceptual foundations for religious peacebuilding. This linguistic feature deserves further research in the future.

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