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Kurdistan conflict and Crisis Research Center



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## Introduction

The entire Shia sect of Islam is united in their following of Imam Ali and agree on his descendants. However, they are divided into dozens of groups and schools of thought when it comes to the intricacies of their sect (1). Within some of these groups and schools of thought, there are further subdivisions, such as that which currently exists between the seminaries of Qom and Najaf. While both seminaries subscribe to the Twelver Shia sect and have no notable sectarian differences, they differ in perspective, the manner in which they work, and they demonstrate a level of internal rivalry and competition. This article discusses the background of this difference and rivalry.

## The History of the Seminaries of Qom and Najaf

Najaf: the history of the establishment of the Najaf seminary is as old as the history of the Shia sect itself holding a special place in the spirit of Shi'ism. The reason behind Najaf's special status in Shi'ism is that Iraq does not only contain the Tombs of Imam Ali, Imam Hussain and Imam Abbas, but it is also the place where Imam Mahdi vanished and is said to return (a belief that is fundamental to Shi'ism)(2). Iraq's importance to Shi'a

Islam also owes to the fact that many of the events that founded this sect of Islam occurred in areas that currently fall into the borders of Iraq. What is more, the history of Shi'ism is intertwined with the history of Iraq and its cities of Najaf, Kufa and Karbala are considered the cradle of the Shi'a thought (3).

The history of the Najaf seminary and its Shi'a school of thought traces back to 11th century. During that period Baghdad fell to the Seljuk Turks and as a result the majority of Shi'ism's leading figures and Mullahs migrated from Baghdad to Najaf. This group of Mullahs and religious leaders, who were under the authority of Abu Jafar Muhammad Ibn Hassan Tusi established the capital of their sect beside Imam Ali's Tomb. Abu Jafar Muhammad Ibn Hassan Tusihimseld began teaching in Kufa (4). Kufa had a significant status because it was the location of Imam Ali's home and seat of power and according to the latest surveys the location of Imam Ali's house and tomb in the centre of Najaf is only a distance of 13km away from Kufa.

In Shi'a literature and collective Shia consciousness, Najaf has an incredibly significant status as God deems it the most important location on Earth. Hence it has been nicknamed 'Al-Ashraf'. Some argue that the practice of spending one full day and night beside the tomb of Imam Ali is equivalent to

700 years of religious worship. Others argue that being buried in one of the city's cemeteries protects the deceased from the punishments of the grave. It is these beliefs that have spawned one of the largest cemeteries in the world in Najaf. The cemetery, which is called 'Wadi Islam', hosts over six million graves, called (5).

Qom: regarding the Qom seminary, its establishment and subsequent popularity traces back to the 1920's. This seminary that established beside the Shrine of Fatima, the daughter of Imam Masumeh, the son of Imam Jaffar (the seventh Shi'a Imam - 799AD) by Grand Ayatollah Abdul-Karim Haeri Yazdi, who after completing his studies in Samara, Najaf and Karbala settled in Qom (6). During this period Qom became a haven for dissidents of the secular western orientated Pahlawi regime, and therefore, it grew gradually until it reached the point where it could rival the more apolitical and moderate Najaf seminary (7).

Since the establishment of the Qom seminary the leadership of international Shi'ism (including Iraq) fell under its authority, such as the period of Grand Ayatollah Seyyed Hossein Borujerdi (died 1961) during his Fifteen-year guardianship he was the undisputed Marja of global Shi'ism (8). Nevertheless, global Shi'ism has, for the most part, been led from Najaf (Abu Hussein al-Musawi - died 1946, Muhsin Al-Hakim - died 1970, and Abu al-Qasim al-Khoei - died 1992). Even if they enjoyed Iranian nationality most Shi'a leaders led global Shi'ism from

Najaf (9).

The difficulties encountered by Najaf in its leadership of global Shi'ism came about as a consequence of the emergence of Khomeini, a charismatic Shi'a political and religious leader, and the success of his 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, which changed the Iranian government to one that practices the Vilayat-e Faqih. This development was not only political revolution but also an internal Shi'a Fiqhi revolution, as well as an ideological one. The revolution worked to also increase the status of the Qom seminary to one that rivaled that of Najaf. Since the revolution Najaf came under continuous espionage and surveillance activities until war broke out between Iran and Iraq (10). A number of sources explain that as a direct result of Ba'athist policy in 1985 the number of Iranian Faqehs in the Najaf seminary was reduced to 150 (when eighty years prior they numbered 800). Moreover, in 1994 the Iraqi Ba'athist Government ordered the expulsion of foreign Faqehs and Shi'a mullahs reducing their number from 8000 to less than 1000 (11). It was these initial events and Ba'athist regime decisions that paved the way for Qom's rise as a religious centre for Shi'a students replacing the Najaf seminary.

### **Competition Between the Najaf and Qom Seminaries**

The nature of the competition and disputes between the Najaf and Qom seminaries, which are two of the most famous centres of the Shi'a faith, is rooted in the past generations. However, it is also linked

to the geopolitical disputes between Iran and Iraq and between individual Shi'a Mullahs and personalities (12). When the Safavid Empire controlled Iran in the 16th century and adopted Shi'ism the official religion of their empire, they actively migrated mullahs and Shi'a religious personalities to Qom (and other Iranian cities) from Lebanon. However, they chose not to relocate those that were based in Najaf. It was this migration that led famous Iranian thinker, Morteza Motahhari, to conclude «the wise men from Jabal Amil in Lebanon have many more rights than the Iranian people». What is more, amongst the Iranian Shi'a community there is a common belief that the Iranian Shi'ites owe much to those of Lebanon(13). Before the success of the Islamic Revolution in 1979, Qom was the seat of Iran's Shi'a religious authority for Iranian political personalities who followed the theory of Vilayat-e Faqih. According to the doctrine of Vilayat-e Faqih, a theory developed by Imam Khomeini, the Faqih (Islamic jurist) has the same power and authority as prophet Mohammed (14). It is this belief that roots in the current Islamic government of Iran. Moreover, any mullah in this seminary that didn't support the Vilayat-e Faqih often found themselves silenced and distanced from religious authority (15). For its part, the Najaf seminary continued to follow its methodology and distanced itself from the establishment of an Islamic State and the empowering of religious leaders over the country. This methodology was in particular, the case during the leadership of Abu al-

Qasim al-Khoei (1970-1992-). Al-Khoei chose to distance himself from politics, keeping quiet in Najaf. There are many examples of al-Khoei's apolitical nature, for instance, when the Iraqi Communist Party established one of their bases close to al-Khoei's home in Najaf he refused to send his followers to have it closed down. Another example is al-Khoei refusal to put his support behind the establishment of a Shi'a Religious Governant in Iraq like that achieved by Khomeini. Al-Khoei's refusal became problematic for Iran as the existence of a primary Shi'a leader that did not support the Vilayat-e Faqih put the legitimacy of the entire concept into question. It has been due to this stark contrast between Najaf and Qom that the Vilayat-e Faqih supporting Marja's of Iran have always viewed the Najaf seminary with dislike and criticism and have worked to either achieve control over it or reduce its religious status (16).

Following the death of Abu al-Qasim al-Khoei the Najaf seminary has been divided between Ayatollah Sistani and Ayatollah Sadiq Sadr. Neither of these religious leaders supported the Vilayat-e Faqih, and both believed it better to continue their religious activities in the Najaf seminary in the shadow of the Iraqi Ba'athist government instead of working for a revolution or a coup d'état. When Sistani took over from his teacher Abu al-Qasim al-Khoei in 1992, the Iranians began a campaign of criticism against him accusing him of being the Marjah of the English (17). Like his predecessors and most of the students in the Najaf seminary, he did

not believe in the Vilayat-e Faqih and was not prepared to conduct a religious revolution in Iraq as had occurred in Iran. This difference between Najaf and Qom became even starker after the execution of Shia Sheikh Nimr Baqir al-Nimr in Saudi Arabia in which Sistani's only response was to send his condolences to the Shia community in Saudi Arabia (18). In contrast, the supreme leader of Iran Ali Khamenei condemned the Saudi government and stated that such action could not pass without repercussions (19). Following Ali Khamenei's threat his supporters and the Iranian people attacked the Saudi Arabian embassy in Tehran and set it ablaze.

## **Conclusion**

The Najaf seminary was the first place in which students of Shi'ism from Iraq and around the world received their religious

education. However, geopolitical developments made the Qom seminary a strong competitor to that of Najaf. The rivalry between the two seminaries is rooted in history with their central points of contention being around the question of religious rule and the Vilayat-e Faqih. Najaf has continued to maintain its apolitical position while Iran and the Qom seminary has a determination to criticise and weaken Iraq as the existence of the Najaf seminary and its rejection of the Vilayat-e Faqih is a threat to the foundations of the Iranian revolution. Moreover, Iraq hosts the majority of Shi'ism's holy sights.

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