

Protecting the Citadel of Islam in the Modern Era: A Case of Shi‘i Mujtahids and the Najaf Seminary in Early Twentieth-Century Iraq

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Abstract

The concept of protecting the Citadel of Islam (*Hifẓ Bayzat al-Islam*), is common in the lexicon of Shi‘i political jurisprudence. It refers to those Islamic principles and foundations without which the existence of Islam and the Muslim community would be in danger. During the Occultation Era, Shi‘i mujtahids, as general deputies of the Hidden Imam, are believed to commit their utmost effort to fulfilling this sacrosanct responsibility. The meaning and applications of the concept have been evolved throughout the Shi‘i history. A noteworthy case of protecting the citadel of Islam is the position of Sayyid Abu’l-Ḥasan al-ʿIṣfahānī (1867–1946) and Mirza Muhammad-Ḥusayn Nāʾinī (1862–1937), vis-à-vis the Najaf seminary and the newly established Hashemite dynasty in early twentieth century. This paper aims to shed more light on the concept of the Citadel of Islam, its implications in Shi‘i political thought, and contemporary applications.

Introduction

In one of his speeches given in 1980, Ayatollah Khomeini addressed a group of seminary scholars, exhorting them that as ulama they were preservers of Islam and protectors of the Citadel of Islam (*Bayzat al-Islam*).¹ ‘Citadel of Islam’ is a multivalent term of Shi‘i political jurisprudence that encompasses the meanings ‘genesis’, ‘entity’, and ‘core community of Islam’. It appears in an exceptional principle known as *wujūb hifẓ Bayzat al-Islam* that has shaped the jurisprudential reasoning (*ijtihād*) of qualified Shi‘i jurists (mujtahids) throughout

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¹ R. Khomeini, *Ṣaḥīfah ye-Imam* (Tehran: Institute for Compilation and Publication of Imam Khomeini’s Works, 2010), xiii. 12. All translations, unless otherwise noted, are my own.

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history and encouraged them either to become politically active and/or to remain quiet, as circumstances demand: the obligation to protect the Citadel of Islam. As this paper elaborates, mainstream Shi'i doctrine prescribes that any socio-political aim must be secondary to this unshakeable principle.

In contrast to their Sunni counterparts, at least until recent decades mainstream Shi'i mujtahids have been independent of the state. They relied largely on their individual and organisational capabilities to mobilise the public and claim an exclusive right over their lay followers. The principle of guardianship (*wilāya*), arguably embedded in the Shi'i mujtahids' identity, is rooted in the charisma of the twelve infallible Imams, their so-called general deputies,² the mujtahids, and the loyalty and devotion of their followers.³ The political postures of the Imams and Shi'i mujtahids have stemmed from their ability to consolidate a popular constituency. This is how the pro-*ijtihād* Uṣūlī scholars read the political history of Shi'i Imams and their followers.⁴ In their words, whenever the infallible Imams perceived support from the community, they became actively engaged in politics; otherwise, they remained quiet. Consequently, as the general deputies of the Imams during the Occultation Era, the Shi'i mujtahids have appropriated some of their prerogatives, claimed for themselves similar responsibilities and political postures. For mujtahids, all the deeds of the infallible Imams during their lives from the death of the Prophet Muhammad, 632 CE, to the commencement of the Occultation of the twelfth Imam, 873 CE, could be seen to be actions of a 'Perfect Man'.⁵ In their classical view, Shi'i mujtahids opine that the quietism of 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib, the first Imam, over the question of the Prophet's succession and the caliphate of Abū Bakr was partly due to the fact that 'Alī failed to gain the support of the Muslim majority at the time. He remained quiet and abstained from public affairs for the next two decades.⁶ It was only when scores of Muslims gathered outside his house and asked him to accept the caliphate that he agreed to become politically active once again. 'Alī justified this move from quietism to activism thus:

² Twelver Shi'is believe that their last Imam went into occultation and only a few of the Shi'i elites were able to meet him. Based on this belief, during the period from 873 to 941 CE, known as the 'Minor Occultation', the Imam maintained contact with his followers through four 'Special Deputies', *al-Nuwwāb al-Khās*. Since the beginning of the Major Occultation Era in 941 CE, the Shi'i scholars have been considered to be the general deputies of the Imam, *al-Nuwwāb al-'Aām*. See M. H. Tabātabā'i, *Shi'ite Islam* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1975), 185.

³ M. Dakake, *The Charismatic Community: Shi'ite Identity in Early Islam* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2007), 68.

⁴ In contrast to Shi'i Akhbārīs, whose legal and ritual understandings are primarily based on the traditions of the infallible Imams, Uṣūlī mujtahids form the rational segment of Shi'i jurists who favour the incorporation of the semantic-exegetical methodology, *ijtihād*, in jurisprudence. Terms like 'clergy', 'ulama', and 'mujtahid' refer to the Uṣūlī jurists in this paper, unless otherwise stated. For a background on Usuli-Akhbari schools see, for example, Juan Cole, 'Shi'i Clerics in Iraq and Iran, 1722-1780: The Akhbari-Usuli Conflict Reconsidered', *Iranian Studies* 18, no. 1 (1985), 3-34.

⁵ A. Khamenei, *Enṣān-e 250 Sāle* (Tehran: Sahba Publisher, 2011), 19.

⁶ Tabātabā'i, *Shi'ite Islam*, 170.

Had it not been for the presence of the pressing crowd, were it not for the establishment of (Allah's) testimony upon me through the existence of supporters, and had it not been for the pledge of Allah with the learned, to the effect that they should not connive with the gluttony of the oppressor and the hunger of the oppressed, I would have cast the reins of the caliphate on its own shoulders.⁷

The activism of his younger son, the third Shi'i Imam Ḥusayn b. 'Alī, and his revolt against the then Umayyad Caliph, Yazīd b. Mu'āwīya, resulted in the tragedy of Karbala. The event and its aftermath caused the next Shi'i Imams to maintain a politically quiet posture. For the next two centuries, the Imams mainly focused on teaching the faith's doctrine to their circle of close companions and family members.⁸ With the ever-growing public constituency of the Imams, which also resulted in their gaining financial independence through their followers' donation of alms, the Abbasid caliph al-Ma'mūn (786-833) compelled the eighth Shi'i Imam to migrate from Medina to Tus with the aim of keeping him under the caliph's direct surveillance. The following caliphs, fearing the popularity of the Shi'i Imams, made this a routine practice. Therefore, according to Shi'i mainstream belief, the twelfth Imam was born in the caliph's military garrison; later, because of fear for his life, he entered occultation. Shi'i messianic beliefs emphasise the idea that the twelfth Imam is alive and that the establishment of the 'just Islamic order' is awaiting his re-emergence in the future.⁹ With the Imams out of direct reach of the community, it is up to Shi'i mujtahids to fulfil the relevant responsibilities over this transitory phase.

The very roots of Shi'i mujtahids' authority during the Occultation Era stemmed from this narrative of the Presence of Imams era, from 632 to 873 CE. Every justification of the privileged socio-political roles which the Shi'i mujtahids claim for themselves derives from how they relate their authority to that of the Imams' activities and responsibilities; this is known as the concept of the general deputyship.

According to mainstream Shi'i doctrine, the main responsibilities of the Imams during this 250 year period was to propagate the 'true' message of the Prophet, to safeguard the Muslim community, and to protect the Citadel of Islam. It maintains that it is the duty of the Shi'i mujtahids to take over this responsibility during the occultation of the last Imam. The prominent compiler of Shi'i traditions, al-Kulaynī (d. 941), quotes the seventh Shi'i Imam as saying that

[f]aithful jurists are fortresses of Islam; [they protect Islam] as the walls of a city safeguard it.¹⁰

⁷ *Nahj al-Balāgha*, translated by Yasin al-Jibouri (Najaf: Holy Shrine of Imam Ali, 2013), 70.

⁸ Tabātabā'i, *Shi'ite Islam*, 179.

⁹ A. Sachedina, *The Just Ruler in Shi'ite Islam: The Comprehensive Authority of the Jurist in Imamite Jurisprudence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 79.

¹⁰ Al-Kulaynī, *Uṣūl al-Kāfi* (Tehran: Dār al-Kutub al-Islāmīyya, 1987), i. 38.

The scholarship, activities and political postures of Shi'i mujtahids during the Occultation Era should therefore be examined in relation to this essential responsibility: the protection of Citadel of Islam. This represents one of the very few principles whose execution has been mandated unconditionally. Consequently, each and every other activity, duty, and responsibility of a given mujtahid comes second to the protection of Citadel of Islam. In the early stages of the Occultation Era, the majority of mujtahids believed that fulfilling this responsibility required that they strive towards compiling the teachings of the Imams, establish learning circles and seminaries, and engage in debates with scholars of other Islamic sects.

At a later point in modern history – during the rise of the Safavid dynasty (1501-1722) – some mujtahids considered that they had fulfilled this responsibility by legitimising and advising the Shi'i monarchs.¹¹ Similarly, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, mujtahids sought to exploit their privileged authority by mobilising their followers to fight in the Russo-Persian wars (1804-1828), the Tobacco Revolt (1891), and the Persian Constitutional Revolution (1905-1911).¹² And finally, in the contemporary era, a group of mujtahids led by Ayatollah Khomeini concluded that, to protect the Citadel of Islam, they would have to establish an Islamic government; and of course, there were many other mujtahids who, during that period, believed that, in order to protect the Citadel of Islam, they had to focus on scholarly activities and refrain from direct involvement in politics.

This paper argues that the main reason that Shi'i mujtahids hold different political postures in this regard is that their perception of what protecting the Citadel of Islam entails differs as circumstances change. In other words, if a mujtahid perceives that his engagement in politics would, in any way, threaten the Citadel of Islam, he would assume a quietist posture. This paper attempts to shed more light on the principle of protecting the Citadel of Islam in Shi'i political jurisprudence, its historical development, and how it has shaped both activist and quietist political postures of Shi'i mujtahids in the contemporary era. Reviewing the primary Shi'i sources, the first section of the paper elaborates on the concept, its meanings, cases, and implications. In the second section, the paper tries to explain how the leading Shi'i mujtahids' perception of what constitutes the protection of the Citadel of Islam in any given time shaped their political postures in early twentieth-century Iraq. They became politically active between 1914 and 1924, and moved away from political affairs, remaining quiet, from 1924 to 1958. The paper concludes by discussing the emerging implications of the principle in Shi'i political jurisprudence in the aftermath of the establishment of the Islamic government in Iran.

Protecting the Citadel of Islam: An Indispensable Responsibility in Shi'i Jurisprudence

It has been noted that an influential principle that shaped the political posture of Shi'i mujtahids is the question of protecting the Citadel of Islam. Little research in English, if any,

¹¹ R. J. Abisaab, *Converting Persia: Religion and Power in the Safavid Empire* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2004), 22.

¹² N. R. Keddie, 'The Roots of the Ulama's Power in Modern Iran', *Studia Islamica* 29 (1969), 31-53.

exists on the meaning, cases, and implications of the concept. Saïd Amir Arjomand, who translates *Bayzat al-Islam* as 'Citadel of Islam', mentions it briefly in his study of the role of Shi'i mujtahids during the Persian Constitutional Revolution.¹³ However, the concept and its applications in different socio-political contexts have consistently played an important role in Shi'i jurisprudence from early times. Protecting *Bayzat al-Islam* has been considered an indisputable divine responsibility of the infallible Imams and for Shi'i mujtahids during the Occultation Era. Its importance in Shi'i jurisprudence is such that all mujtahids unanimously believe that, in the likely situation that another obligatory act comes in disaccord with protecting the Citadel of Islam, the latter takes precedence.¹⁴

Meanings and cases

The term *bayza* literally means 'egg' or 'testicles' in Arabic. The lexicographical meaning of *Bayzat al-Islam* refers to the core and essence of Islam, an Islamic attribute without which Islam loses its identity. So, as the masculine identity of a man lies in his testicles, the *Bayzat al-Islam* shapes the religion's identity.

Arab linguists define *Bayzat al-Islam* simply as the 'Islamic community and its principles'.¹⁵ The prominent Shi'i jurist Kāshif al-Ghitā' (d. 1812) states that *Bayzat al-Islam* refers to those critical foundations of Islam without which the existence of Islam and the Muslim community are in danger.¹⁶ Addressing a question about the meaning of the concept, another mujtahid, Mīrzā Qummī (1738-1815) states:

The term *Bayzat* has different meanings. First, egg. Second, testicles. Third, helmet. Fourth, the surroundings of something. Fifth, they say '*Bayzat al-Balad*' which refers to the head of a town whom the community would gather around and follow his orders.... *Bayzat al-Islam* may metaphorically refer to Islam, which is like a warrior wearing a helmet on his head. As the head is the commander of the body and without a head nobody survives, thus to protect one's head is to protect one's life.¹⁷

As a helmet protects and safeguards the head of a warrior and keeps him alive, protecting *Bayzat al-Islam* against enemies keeps Islam and the Muslim community alive. As Qummī explains, protecting *Bayzat al-Islam* involves action that preserves the territory and the essence of Islam. A threat to the Citadel of Islam would imperil the religion's existence, especially when imposed by outsiders. In Shi'i jurisprudence protecting the Citadel of Islam

¹³ S. Amir Arjomand, 'The Ulama's Traditionalist Opposition to Parliamentarianism: 1907-1909', *Middle Eastern Studies* 17 (1981), 174-190.

¹⁴ M. H. al-Najafī (Ṣāhib al-Jawāhir), *Jawāhir al-Kalām fī Sharḥ Sharā'i' al-Islām* (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā' al-Turāth al-'Arabī, 1983), xxi. 18-19.

¹⁵ Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-'Arab* (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-'Arabī, 1994), vii. 127.

¹⁶ Kāshif al-Ghitā', *Kashf al-Ghitā' 'an Mubhamāt al-Sharī'at al-Gharrā* (Qum: Bustan-e Kitāb, 2001), xxi. 18-19.

¹⁷ Mīrzā Qummī, *Jāmi' al-Shitāt fī Ajwibat al-Su'ālāt* (Tehran: Kayhan, 1992), i. 376.

against a perceived threat is a responsibility which fell upon the infallible Imams, and during the Occultation Era, upon their general deputies or qualified Shi'i mujtahids.¹⁸

In addition to this general definition, some Shi'i literature also refers to certain specific locations, such as the religiously significant cities of Medina and Najaf, as Citadels of (Shi'i) Islam. In 630 CE following the rumours of the Byzantine invasion of Medina, the Prophet Muḥammad called upon the Muslim community to prepare for war. Before leaving on the ensuing expedition, he asked his cousin 'Alī not to accompany the Muslim army, but rather to stay in the city.¹⁹ Shi'i scholars justify the Prophet's decision by stating that at the time, Medina, the centre of the Islamic abode, was under constant threat from the group of covert opponents of the Prophet known as the 'hypocrites'. They argue that the Prophet asked 'Alī to protect what is believed to be a Citadel of Islam; had it not been for his guarding the city while the army of Islam was away, 'it would have fallen into the hands of infidels and hypocrites, and then all efforts of the Prophet over twenty-two years would have gone to waste'.²⁰ Similarly to Medina, the city of Najaf is also considered a Citadel of Islam, some notable Shi'i mujtahids argue. For example, Sayyid Jawād al-ʿĀmilī (d. 1811), in the midst of the Wahhabi sack of Karbala and Najaf in the early nineteenth century, wrote the treatise *Risāla fī Wujūb al-Dhab al-Najaf al-Ashraf li'annahā Bayzat al-Islam* on the 'obligation of fearing for the holy Najaf, because it is the Citadel of Islam', encouraged his followers to defend the city, and explained why every capable Shi'i Muslim should rush to protect it and its seminary.²¹

What does protecting the citadel of Islam entail?

Al-Kulaynī refers to a tradition (*hadith*) narrated from the eighth Shi'i Imam, 'Alī b. Mūsā al-Riḍā (d. 819), in which he forbids his followers to assist the army of the (unjust) 'Abbāsīd caliph. In the discussion of this, the lay follower asks the Imam the following

'[Do] you say that if Romans entered the lands of the Muslims, [the Shi'is] should not halt them?'

The Imam responds that his followers should only

'defend themselves and they must not engage in the fight, unless, the Bayzat al-Islam is in danger'.

The Imam goes on to clarify that in this case,

¹⁸ The infallible Imams and a number of mujtahids have been given the title *Ḥāfiẓ Bayzat al-Islam* (Protectors of the Citadel of Islam) in Shi'i literature. For example, the Qajar-era Shi'i biographer, Muḥammad b. Ismā'īl Māẓandarāni (d. 1801), names 'Allāmah al-Ḥillī (1250-1325) as a 'supporter of Bayzat al-Islam who dissolved remnants of corruptors'. See Māẓandarāni, *Muntaha al-Maqāl fī Ahwāl al-Rijāl* (Qum: Mu'assasa Alu'l-Bayt, 1995), ii. 476.

¹⁹ Al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh al-Umam* (Beirut: Dar Seveidan, 1968), iii. 103.

²⁰ M. H. Husseini Tehrani, *Ma'rifat al-Imam* (Beirut: Dar al-Mahaja al-Bayda, 1995), x. 294.

²¹ Āqā Buzurg Tehrānī, *Al-Dharī'a ilā Taṣānif al-Shī'a* (Beirut: Dar al-Adwa, 1983), xxv. 33.

‘Shi‘is are fighting for the protection of Bayzat al-Islam and not the caliph, as in “the wear and tear of Bayzat al-Islam, is wear and tear of the religion of Muḥammad”’.²²

This is the only hadith that explicitly refers to the term *Bayzat al-Islam* in Shi‘i Islam, and has become a basis for mujtahids’ rulings. First and foremost, it is based on this tradition that defensive Jihad during the Occultation Era has been justified in Shi‘i Islam. As Shaykh Tūsī (d. 1067) writes;

Taking part in Jihads under the banner of an unjust ruler [a non-infallible Imam] is wrong and those who ignore this commit a sin. Those who are injured in such wars are not rewarded [by God]...unless there would be a fear over the Citadel of Islam... [In this case] the Jihad to defend Islam becomes obligatory.²³

Many Jihad fatwas in the medieval and modern eras have deployed the same approach, and protecting the Citadel of Islam becomes a salient concept in Shi‘i political jurisprudence. In addition to defensive Jihad,²⁴ and watching and guarding Islamic borders,²⁵ Shi‘i mujtahids have more recently used this principle to justify the establishment of the Islamic government,²⁶ as well as their involvements in restoring internal order and reforming the domestic affairs of the Muslim community. The striking involvement of the purportedly quietist leader of the Najaf seminary, Ayatollah Khomei (d. 1992), during the 1991 Iraqi uprising is a case in point. As the fighting in the streets of Najaf was raging between the rebels and Iraqi forces, Khomei issued an open call addressed to his ‘beloved sons and the faithful people’:

There is no doubt that protecting the Citadel of Islam and observing its sanctities is an indispensable obligation for every Muslim... I urge you to set a virtuous example by following Islamic principles, and minding your behaviour. I urge you to consider God when it comes to people’s properties and belongings as well as public places.²⁷

Nevertheless, protecting the Citadel of Islam does not necessarily entail contention and activism. Of course, in most cases, it has been used to justify Shi‘i political activism, especially to defend the principles of the faith, and to defend the community from the threat of outsiders, but in some instances, the need to fulfil this responsibility has also provided the justification for political quietism. It is worth noting that the very existential question of Shi‘i Islam, the

²² Al-Kulaynī, *Uṣūl al-Kāfi*, v. 21.

²³ Shaykh Tūsī, *Al-Nihāyah fī Mujaḥrad al-Fiqh wa-al-Fatāwā* (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-‘Arabī, 1980), 290.

²⁴ See the verdict of Allamah Hilli (d. 1325) in his book *Muntaha ‘l-Maṭlab fī Taḥqīq al-Madhab* (Mashhad: Āstān-e Quds Razawī, 1992), xiv. 28.

²⁵ See the verdict of Fadhīl al-Miqdād (d. 1423) in his book, *Al-Tanqīh al-Rā‘i* (Qum: Maktabat Ayatollah Mar‘ashī, 1984), i. 569.

²⁶ R. Khomeini, *Kitāb al-Bay‘* [Book of Sales] (Tehran: Moaseseye Tanzim va Nashr-e Asar-e Imam Khomeini, 2010), ii. 619.

²⁷ A. Khomei, *Mawsū‘at al-Imām al-Khū‘i* [Encyclopaedia of Imam Khomei], 4th ed. (Qum: Mu‘assasat Ihya’ Āthār al-Imām al-Khū‘i, 2009), i. 24.

dispute over the right of the caliphate, reveals political quietism for the sake of protecting the Citadel of Islam in Shi'i mainstream beliefs. The Lebanese Shi'i mujtahid, 'Abd al-Ḥusayn Sharaf al-Dīn (d. 1957), justifies 'Alī's quietism over the caliphate of Abū Bakr when he writes,

It was only natural that he abdicated his right of caliphate for the benefit of Islam and in the interest of the Muslim community.... Therefore, he only gave up his dispute with Abū Bakr to protect the *Citadel of Islam*... He, his family members, and companions followed him and opted for quietism while it was like pricking in their eyes and suffocation in their throats.²⁸

To this end, holding different political postures – activist and/or quietist – does not necessarily indicate a strategic disparity among Shi'i mujtahids. It is not a fundamental issue by itself.²⁹ What is fundamental and indisputable is the protection of the Citadel of Islam, and it is the varying contexts which mujtahids faced that determines whether they become politically active or quite.

Shi'i Mujtahids and Protecting the Citadel of Islam in Early Twentieth-Century Iraq

One of the noteworthy modern episodes in which Shi'i mujtahids used the principle of protecting the Citadel of Islam to justify, first their political activism and then their quietism, occurred in early twentieth-century Iraq. In the decade of 1914 to 1924, the perception that mujtahids held of what constituted the 'protection of the Citadel of Islam' led them to assume two seemingly different political postures. Although, in general, many leading Shi'i mujtahids in Najaf, Karbala, and Samarra were actively involved in the politics of Iran during the Russo-Persian wars, Tobacco Revolt, and Persian Constitutional Revolution, they remained relatively quiet with regard to Ottoman Iraqi politics during the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, with the outbreak of World War I, the mujtahids in Iraq assumed a more activist posture: they supported Ottoman forces and encouraged their followers to defend Iraq against the British invaders. In 1921, Britain assumed the mandate over Iraq, and Fayṣal b. Ḥusayn – a Sunni and non-Iraqi notable – was crowned as the first king of Iraq. However later, in 1924, disappointed by the outcome of their activism, the leading Shi'i mujtahids of the time, Sayyid Abū'l-Ḥasan al-ʿIṣfahānī and Mirza Muḥammad-Ḥusayn Nāʾīnī, pledged to the monarch that they would abstain from Iraqi national politics and focus solely on scholarly activity. This section tries to explain how, in both situations, it was their obligation to protect the Citadel of Islam that shaped the political postures of the involved mujtahids.

²⁸ A. H. Sharaf al-Dīn, *Al-Murāja'at* (Beirut: Dar al-Hadi, 1992), 324.

²⁹ M. R. Kalantari, 'The Shi'i Clergy and Perceived Opportunity Structures: Political Activism in Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon', *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* (2019), <https://doi.org/10.1080/13530194.2019.1605879>.

With the outbreak of the First World War in Europe and the Ottoman alliance with Germany, the Mesopotamia campaign was launched, and in November 1914, British troops captured Basra and marched north into Iraq. The leader of the Najaf seminary at the time, Sayyid Muḥammad Kāzīm Yazdī (1831-1919), who had seemingly led the quietist camp during the Persian Constitutional Revolution, issued a Jihad fatwa. To protect the Citadel of Islam, he urged all Muslims to join the forces against the ‘non-believer’ British. In his letter sent to scores of Iraqi tribal chiefs, he wrote:

It is indispensable for all tribes, those inhabitants of the borders, and other qualified Muslims, to protect their borders and to protect the Citadel of Islam to their utmost ability.³⁰

For the leader of Najaf seminary at the time, the protection of the Citadel of Islam compelled a defensive war against British intruders, regardless of whether the Ottoman caliph was, based on Shi‘i jurisprudence, categorically an ‘unjust ruler’. Sayyid Kāzīm al-Yazdī’s reference to the Citadel of Islam to justify the defensive Jihad against British forces, as discussed above, was a routine application of this jurisprudential principle.

Thousands of Shi‘is, including Yazdī’s son, joined the Ottoman armies to defend the borders. To their dismay, however, the British forces captured Baghdad in March 1917 and ended Ottoman rule in Iraq forever.³¹ In the aftermath of the war, Britain sought to consolidate its control over the region.³² Amidst these developments, Yazdī passed away in April 1919, and Muḥammad Taqī Shirāzi (1840-1920) in Karbala inherited the Iraqi Shi‘i leadership. He later played a pivotal role in mobilising the population throughout the 1920 Iraqi Revolt against the British occupation. The revolt, a nationwide struggle for freedom and independence, constitutes the very foundations of what is known as Iraq today.³³ For the Shi‘i community, which played a major role in the revolt, it represents the most significant contribution to national unity, though its outcome never benefitted them as they and their religious leaders had expected.³⁴

In May 1920, a group of Shi‘i mujtahids, notable persons, and tribal chiefs gathered in Karbala and met with Shirāzi to make a joint decision on how to respond to British occupation.³⁵ Upon the convention, Shirāzi issued a proclamation stating the following:

³⁰ K. S. al-Jabouri, *Al-Sayyid Muḥammad Kāzīm al-Yazdī* (Qum: Dhaw al-Qurba, 2007), 549.

³¹ C. Tripp, *A History of Iraq* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 32.

³² D. Fromkin, *Peace to End All Peace: Creating the Modern Middle East, 1914-1922* (New York: Henry Holt, 1989), 415-64: During the 1920 Iraqi Revolt, British hegemony throughout the Middle East was undergoing dramatic changes. Neighbouring Iran, where the majority of Shi‘i Muslims resided, was falling apart, and Britain was forced to propose an Anglo-Persian treaty as a means of protecting its interests. In Egypt and Sudan, there were anti-imperialist rebellions that resulted in restricting British troops to the Suez Canal zone; and turmoil in Palestine appeared increasingly unpromising for British interests.

³³ A. Kadhim, *Reclaiming Iraq: The 1920 Revolution and the Founding of the Modern State* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012), 11.

³⁴ Fromkin, *Peace to End All Peace*, 78.

³⁵ Fariq al-Muzhir al-Fir‘awn, *Al-Haqā’iq al-Nasi‘afi al-Thawrat al-‘Iraqiyya Sanat 1920 wa Natā’ijiha* (Baghdad: Matba‘at al-Nijah, 1952), 9.

Be vigilant, that your brothers in Baghdad, Kāẓemayn, Najaf, Karbala, and other areas have come to a joint decision to demonstrate peacefully and demand their civil rights. They righteously ask for independence of Iraq and establishment of a just Islamic rule. Hence, it is your duty to send your representatives to Baghdad, maintaining peace and order, and trying to prevent any internal schism. I also advise you to respect all opinions throughout this grand Jihad.³⁶

The turn of events and British policies against the call of mujtahids pushed them to orchestrate a popular uprising, and subsequently, Shirāzi issued an open letter followed by the call to Jihad against the foreign occupiers.³⁷ His letter, in part, reads as follow,

It is not hidden to anyone that the situation of the Muslim community today is so onerous and critical, that it requires the distinguished scholars not to remain quiet... today, it is obligatory for all members of the Muslim community to fulfil the duty of defending the Citadel of the religion and protecting the holy sites against the non-believers.³⁸

The letter clearly indicates that the basis of Shirāzi's defensive Jihad was also his ijtihad on what constituted the protection of the Citadel of Islam at the time. In this decision, he had the full support of other prominent Shi'i mujtahids including Mahdi Khalesi (d. 1925) in Kāẓemayn and Shaykh al-Sharī'a Iṣfahānī (d. 1920) in Najaf, who not only succeeded in mobilising the urban population but also encouraged Shi'i tribal fighters throughout the mid-Euphrates.³⁹ By July 1920, vast areas of the mid and lower Euphrates had been liberated under the leadership of these 'fighting' Shi'i mujtahids.⁴⁰ Nonetheless, and to the dismay of the revolutionaries, Shirāzi suddenly died, and the leadership transferred from Karbala to Najaf. The revolt subsided, and the belligerents agreed to a cease-fire by October of that year.⁴¹

The engagement of the Shi'is in the 1920 revolt brought them nothing but despair. The deaths of leading Shi'i mujtahids, who had led the community in independence from Britain, were a drastic blow to the community's political activism. When the dust of the uprising settled, to bolster their presence in Iraq the British established the Hashemite monarchy.

The community then was under the collective leadership of three mujtahids: Mahdi Khalesi, Abu'l-Ḥasan al-Iṣfahānī, and Nā'inī in Najaf. These eventually pledged allegiance to Fayṣal, albeit conditionally.⁴² Khalesi publicly emphasised that mujtahids would support

³⁶ A. al-Wardi, *Lamahāt Ijtima'īya min Tārīkh al-'Iraq al-Hadīth* (Baghdad: Matba'at al-Irshad, 1978), iv, 183.

³⁷ Al-Fir'awn, *Al-Haqā'iq al-Nasi'afi*, 195.

³⁸ Ibid., 192.

³⁹ Y. Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 77.

⁴⁰ J. Luizard, 'Shaykh Muhammad al-Khalisi (1890-1963) and His Political Role in Iraq and Iran in the 1910s/20s', in *The Twelver Shia in Modern Times: Religious Culture and Political History*, eds. Rainer Brunner and Werner Ende (Boston: Brill, 2000), 227.

⁴¹ Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq*, 72.

⁴² M. Khalesizadeh, *Mazālīm Ingilis dar Bein al-Nahraīn* (Tehran: Majles-e Shura Melli, 1924), 13.

Fayṣal as long as he respected Iraq's sovereignty, broke bonds with Britain, and agreed his authority would be bound by an elected assembly of representatives.⁴³

Nonetheless, to further secure their mandate in Iraq, the British laid down the terms of the Anglo-Iraqi Treaty; and for the treaty to be officially ratified, there was a need for the Constituent Assembly.⁴⁴ On 13 October 1922, *al-Iraq* daily published Fayṣal's call for the public to take part in electing the Assembly.⁴⁵ In the eyes of mujtahids, as it was revealed later, the treaty was a 'blatant interference by the British in Iraqi affairs'.⁴⁶ It was seen as a threat to the Citadel of Islam. Therefore, explicitly disputing the monarch's authority in November 1922, Khalesi, Iṣfahānī, and Nāṭinī issued a series of fatwas interdicting participation in the upcoming election.

For example, responding to inquiries by their followers asking for guidance concerning the election, the trio of mujtahids stated:

We have ordered the prohibition of elections and participation in them by whole Iraqi nation. That whoever participates in them or gives the slightest assistance will disobey God, and His Prophet, and Imams.⁴⁷

Khalesi moreover reached out to Sunni notables and tribal chiefs for their support for similar rulings, stimulating considerable government concern.⁴⁸

The escalation of the opposition to the election made the cabinet of 'Abd al-Muḥsin Sa'dūn (in power from 1922 to 1929) orchestrate a campaign which demanded that mujtahids who were 'Persian subjects' and who would not refrain from interfering in national politics be deported from Iraq.⁴⁹ In this, the government had the consent of the king as well. It was in December 1921, in a discussion with Sir Percy Loraine, the newly appointed British ambassador to Iran, Fayṣal clearly stated that until the influence of mujtahids was broken, 'no satisfactory progress could be made in Persian affairs', not to mention Iraqi affairs on his behalf.⁵⁰

Following the government's call, on 24 June 1923 Khalesi was expelled from Iraq.⁵¹ In an attempt to contain any potential turmoil, the government justified its stance and declared that it was not acceptable that 'a group of aliens, who do not have any interest in independence of the Arab Kingdom, fabricate their appalling words in the name of Islam and post them on walls'.⁵² However, to respond to what was perceived as an anti-Islamic act of the government,

⁴³ J. Luizard, 'Shaykh Muhammad al-Khalisi', 228.

⁴⁴ Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq*, 78.

⁴⁵ For a copy of the newspaper see Appendix, FO 371/7772, Foreign Office, The National Archives (TNA), London.

⁴⁶ Khalesizadeh, *Mazālīm Ingilis*, 16.

⁴⁷ TNA: FO 371/7772, 204.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 136.

⁴⁹ A. al-Hassani, *Tārīkh al-Wīzārat al-'Iraqiyya* (Sidon: Matba'at al-Irfān, 1988), i. 130.

⁵⁰ 11 December 1921, TNA: FO 371/7802/414.

⁵¹ Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq*, 82.

⁵² M. Koohestani Nejad, *Chālīsh ha wa T'āmulat-e Iran wa Iraq dar Nime-ye Nukhust-e Sade-ye Bistum* (Tehran: Markaz Nashr Vezarat-e Khareje, 2005), 99.

two prominent mujtahids of Najaf, Iṣfahānī and Nāʾīnī, accompanied by their entourage, migrated to Karbala – where the majority of the population was Persian – aiming to orchestrate a popular movement against the government.⁵³

Despite this effort, the government campaign against the mujtahids was effective, and they failed to gain a meaningful constituency. A student of Nāʾīnī, who was present in Karbala at the time, later confirmed this futile attempt:

Nobody stood behind Nāʾīnī and Iṣfahānī. No shop was closed in their support. No voice was raised against the government. So, the governor ordered cars to carry the two and their companion ulama to the borders of Iran... Unfaithful people witnessed this and waved them off, as a farewell gesture.⁵⁴

In hindsight, it was then that the mujtahids realised they should have never left Najaf in protest. In a conversation with an Iranian officer in the border city of Kermanshah, Iṣfahānī and Nāʾīnī stated the following:

We are not willing to cause any dispute between governments of Iraq and Iran. Nevertheless, as Najaf – which is the Citadel of Islam and the centre of science – should not be deserted, it is only appropriate for the esteemed Islamic government of Iran to make an arrangement for the return of Mr. Khalesi to his home [in Iraq], and also to orchestrate a decent return of us to Najaf, after we visit the holy places of Iran, in a fashion that deserves the Muslim clergy's status.⁵⁵

Eventually, Iṣfahānī and Nāʾīnī, along with a few other Shiʿi mujtahids, left the border for Qum. Although the group of migrating mujtahids were welcomed by their colleagues in Qum, Iran itself was engulfed in chaos in the last months of the Qajar dynasty. Nevertheless, the migrant mujtahids began their circles of teaching at the then one-year-old seminary of Qum. This marked the end of the political Islamic project of the Shiʿi mujtahids in early twentieth-century Iraq.

The rumours of mujtahids' expulsion from Iraq roused a storm of indignation among the Iranian public; the two governments along with British officials in Iran and Iraq were alarmed about their residence in Qum.⁵⁶ In response to Ahmad Shah Qajar's concerns over the exodus of mujtahids from Iraq, Fayṣal explicitly declared that the government of Iraq 'would respect the religious positions of ulama and would be ready to reconsider their return, however, this is possible only after establishment of the Constituent Assembly and its relevant affairs'.⁵⁷ While there was no prospect for the mujtahids to return to Iraq at the time, the government of

⁵³ Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq*, 22.

⁵⁴ M. H. Manzoor al-Ajdaḍ, *Marja'iyat dar 'Arse-ye Ijtima' wa Siyāsāt* (Tehran: Shirazeh, 2000), 22–23.

⁵⁵ For the full text of the dispatch sent by Code Operator at the Iranian border city of Kermanshah to the officials in Tehran, see Archives of the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Asnad-e Qadimeh*, 10 July 1923, no. 1302–27–20–78, document 2143, Tehran.

⁵⁶ TNA: CO 730/59, 23.

⁵⁷ Koohestani Nejad, *Chālīsh ha wa T'āmulat-e Iran wa Iraq*, 105.

Iraq launched the election and convened the Assembly, which later ratified the Anglo-Iraqi treaty in June 1924.

The turn of events was ostensibly to the dismay of the migrant mujtahids. It soon became clear to them that they had been inadvisably engaged in opposition to the treaty, an action in which they were not supported by Iraqi elites.⁵⁸ In contrast, and indeed more essentially, the Najaf seminary and the Shi'i community in Iraq, evident cases of Citadel of Islam, were under threat while the leading mujtahids were miles away in Qum. Without them to manage routine affairs of the seminary and the allocation of religious taxes among prospective students, the Najaf seminary's survival was cast into doubt. Moreover, groups of religious students started to leave Najaf to attend lectures of Iṣfahānī and Nā'īnī in Qum.⁵⁹ This trend of mass migration from Najaf to Qum would eventually dismantle the most prominent Shi'i learning centre of the time, and posed a great threat to the Citadel of Islam as it was perceived by the self-exiled mujtahids.⁶⁰

Consequently, after the ratification of the treaty in Iraq, Iṣfahānī and Nā'īnī sought a way to return to Iraq. In addition, for Fayṣal and his reign to endure robustly, he had to reach an agreement with the Shi'i mujtahids, who still held sway over a large popular constituency encompassing much of Iraq's population, and to ease the tension with neighbouring Iran.⁶¹ This mutual interest resulted in a series of covert negotiations between Fayṣal's envoy and the two mujtahids. Eventually, in March 1924, Iṣfahānī and Nā'īnī sent letters addressing 'His Majesty, the king of Iraq, may God aid his rule and government' and promised their retirement from politics if the king would let them to return to Najaf. An excerpt of Iṣfahānī's letter to Fayṣal reads as follows:

And that we promise not to interfere in domestic politics and to abstain ourselves from those affairs relevant to Iraqis... We are not responsible for these, which are solely on your majesty's and the nation of Iraq ... We are religiously required, however, to support the Hashemite monarchy.⁶²

The negotiations and subsequent commitment of Iṣfahānī and Nā'īnī to abstain from political engagement paid off, and the mujtahids returned to Iraq in late April 1924 to resettle at the Najaf seminary.⁶³ The two mujtahids assumed quietist political postures for the rest of their lives, hoping to safeguard the Shi'i presence in Iraq, to protect the seminary, in what they accounted as a case of Citadel of Islam.

The decade from 1914 to 1924 in Iraq is one of the most extraordinary episodes in the modern history of Shi'i mujtahids with regard to their perception of what constitutes the Citadel of Islam, and the actions they took to protect it. At the beginning, Shi'i mujtahids

⁵⁸ J. Luizard, 'Shaykh Muhammad al-Khalisi', 223.

⁵⁹ Koohestani Nejad, *Chālīsh ha wa T'āmulat-e Iran wa Iraq*, 113.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 109.

⁶¹ A. A. Allawi, *Faisal I of Iraq* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 430.

⁶² Al-Wardī, *Lamahāt Ijtīmā'īya min Tārīkh al-'Iraq al-Hadīth*, vi. 261.

⁶³ TNA: CO 730/59, 23.

in Iraq became actively engaged in politics by the fatwa of Yazdī on the basis of protection of the Citadel of Islam; ten years later, Iṣfahānī and Nāʾīnī gave a written promise that they would not interfere in political matters, and decided to maintain a quietist posture to protect the Najaf seminary which was then, in their eyes, an evident case of the Citadel of Islam. Therefore, the protection of the Citadel of Islam appears to be an exceptional principle in Shiʿi political jurisprudence that could shape the perception of a mujtahid of the need in a given context to either become politically active or remain quiet.

Conclusion

Although there were allusions in the early Shiʿi literature to the concept of the ‘Citadel of Islam’, it is only since the nineteenth century that it has played an increasingly prominent role in shaping the engagement of Shiʿi mujtahids in socio-political affairs. As illuminated here, the quietist and/or activist postures assumed by a mujtahid in a given context are only tactical moves towards what he perceives to be more apposite to protect the Citadel of Islam. Shiʿi mujtahids argue that fulfilment of this responsibility supersedes any other of their actions as guardians of the faith and the community of followers. Hence, the political activism of Yazdī and the quietism of Iṣfahānī and Nāʾīnī were both appropriate postures assumed in response to perceived threats to the Citadel of Islam in different contexts. To protect it, the former issued a fatwa authorising Jihad, the utmost case of political activism on the part of Shiʿi mujtahids, whereas the later mujtahids decided to abstain from politics.

Mainstream Shiʿi doctrine entails that in the legacy of the Prophet, the infallible Imams, as righteous leaders of the Islamic community, are responsible for protecting the Citadel of Islam and safeguarding the community. However, like many other responsibilities, with the occultation of the last Imam, this responsibility has been transferred to their general deputies, known as mujtahids. The necessity and priority of this responsibility are exceptional in Shiʿi political jurisprudence and override any other conflicting rulings.

Indeed, as long as mujtahids claim the general deputyship of the infallible Imams, Shiʿi clerical authority, as an entity itself, is considered to be another case of the Citadel of Islam. Since the community is facing the occultation of its infallible Imam, his general deputies acquire this special authority and their status also follows suit. In this case, any attempt to weaken the clerical authority and damage its consistency would be perceived by mujtahids as a threat to the integrity of the Citadel of Islam and should be avoided.

The logical corollary to this in the contemporary era is protection of the state established by a mujtahid, the Shiʿi Islamic state. Inasmuch as the status of the Shiʿi clerical authority has been intertwined with the so-called state, its protection from potential threats imposed by aliens becomes tantamount to the protection of Islam and community. As the protectors of the Citadel of Islam until the re-emergence of the twelfth Imam, Shiʿi mujtahids would employ their resources to protect the Shiʿi state. While establishing a Shiʿi Islamic state is not necessarily a political act to protect the Citadel of Islam, as soon as the state is established, Shiʿi mujtahids unanimously become vigilant about its security and development, as this responds to the principle of protecting the Citadel of Islam.

During the last four decades, after the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran under the leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini, a stream of Shi'i doctrine has labelled the Shi'i state as a case of Citadel of Islam, making it obligatory and necessary for all Shi'is to protect it from outsiders' threats because its protection is safeguarding Shi'i Islam. In other words, after the establishment of an Islamic Shi'i state, the state achieves the status of being considered as a Citadel of Islam. Addressing groups of Islamic Republic executives in the year 1982, Khomeini warned them to protect the Islamic Republic because with its destruction, 'Islam will be isolated in the way that it cannot raise its voice until end of the time'.⁶⁴

Considering the political implications and related cases of this principle, political postures assumed by Shi'i mujtahids, as protectors of Citadel of Islam, stem from their perception and judgement of a given context. To this end, in modern Shi'i political thought protecting the Citadel of Islam, something on which the perpetuation of the community is dependent, is the mujtahids' top priority. If a mujtahid perceives that the fulfilment of this duty requires his activism, he will become engaged in politics. In contrast, if he perceives that to protect the Citadel of Islam, he should not interfere in politics, he will abstain from politics.

⁶⁴ Khomeini, *Şahîfe ye-Imam*, xvi. 138.