

After the Ayatollah

Institutionalisation and succession in the *marjaʿiyya* of Sayyid

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Abstract

This paper deals with the death of a high religious authority, the Twelver Shiʿi *marjaʿ al-taqlīd*, or “Grand Ayatollah”, Sayyid Muḥammad Ḥusayn Faḍl Allāh. The emphasis given to following a living authority within the Twelver Shiʿi tradition makes their passing a moment of crisis, all the more so in the case of a figure who made “contemporaneity” a cornerstone of his distinctive appeal. I examine not only the events surrounding Faḍl Allāh’s death but also its aftermath, in particular the question of the “succession” to his legacy. In an unorthodox move that maintains his reputation for controversy, Faḍl Allāh’s organisation has continued to operate as an independent foundation in his name without falling under the aegis of a living authority. This serves as an illuminating case study of issues of succession and institutionalisation within the Twelver Shiʿi tradition and beyond.

Keywords: Islam; Shiʿi; authority; *marjaʿ al-taqlīd*; Fadlallah; succession

Lebanon’s late Sayyid Muḥammad Ḥusayn Faḍl Allāh (d. 4 July 2010) was a complex figure and a controversial one, both within the Twelver Shiʿi tradition and

outside of it, the latter chiefly due to his association with the Lebanese Ḥizb Allāh.¹ He explicitly attempted to present a distinctively “contemporary” version of the role of *marjaʿ* (pl. *marājiʿ*) *al-taqlīd*, the “source of emulation” that provides religious guidance to the Shiʿi masses. His *marjaʿiyya* was avowedly politically and socially engaged and nominally unafraid to issue the bold fatwas that the Muslims of today need. This was in contradistinction, he and his school maintained, to more “traditional” approaches to the role. It was thus both materially and symbolically important that this *marjaʿiyya* was based in cosmopolitan and relatively free Beirut rather than the cloistered, if politically fraught atmosphere of the shrine cities of Iran and Iraq. Building and maintaining such authority at the scholarly margins presented its own challenges, as I have explored elsewhere.² But it is perhaps a measure of Faḍl Allāh’s success that his claim of the highest status in the Shiʿi hierarchy of religious authority was the subject of such fierce attack from the establishment during his lifetime.³ The controversy continued after his death in 2010, when his offices further

¹ Faḍl Allāh and his offices were a major focus of my two periods of extended field research in Lebanon in 2003-4 and 2007-8, and I owe thanks to his staff for their generous assistance. I should say that I have not been able to return to Beirut since his death, and so most of my observations here are based on the rich resources of his website and telephone conversations with members of his staff, supplemented by the helpful comments offered at presentations of this work in various forums. Faḍl Allāh’s life and work have been well covered elsewhere: see Martin Kramer, “The Oracle of Hizbullah: Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah”, In R. Scott Appleby (ed.), *Spokesmen for the Despised: Fundamentalist Leaders of the Middle East* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997); Jamal Sankari, *Fadlallah: The Making of a Radical Shiʿite Leader* (London: Saqi, 2005).

² Morgan Clarke, “*Marjaʿiyyat* Beirut: Contemporaneity and Tradition in the *Ḥawza* of Ayatollah Muḥammad Husayn Faḍl Allāh”, In Robert Gleave (ed.), *Religious Authority in Shiʿite Islam: Knowledge and Authority in the Ḥawza* (London: I.B. Tauris, forthcoming).

³ See Talib Aziz “Fadlallah and the Remaking of the *Marjaʿiyya*”, in Linda Walbridge (ed.), *The Most Learned of the Shiʿa: The Institution of the Marjaʿ Taqlid* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Stefan Rosiny, “The Tragedy of Fāṭima al-Zahrā” in

proclaimed him as the once in a century “renewer” (*mujaddid*) of religion announced in the famous *ḥadīth*.⁴

Faḍl Allāh’s death posed in acute form a crucial problem for religious authority in contemporary Shi’i Islam. The emphasis given to following the guidance of a living authority nominally guarantees the vitality of the tradition. Excellence in this “contemporaneity” was, again, a key plank of Faḍl Allāh’s appeal. But the death of the *marja’* must then become in an immediate sense a moment of crisis, and all the more so if engagement and immediacy were key to their distinctive identity. How does the *marja’*’s entourage manage the death of the founder figure and their legacy? Is it in fact possible in what is a highly diffuse system of high religious authority to routinize the charismatic energy of the founding scholar, in the terms of

the Debate of Two Shiite Theologians in Lebanon”, in Rainer Brunner and Werner Ende (eds.), *The Twelver Shia in Modern Times: Religious Culture and Political History* (Leiden: Brill, 2001).

⁴ arabic.bayynat.org.lb/nachatat/bayn_09072010.htm, accessed 9 July 2010. The announcement claimed Faḍl Allāh’s “uniqueness” (*tafarrud*), making him “one of the exceptional ones, gloried across history, who institute a school of thought stretching for decades... which makes him the *mujaddid* of the age”. The claim became routinized, incorporated, for instance, into Faḍl Allāh’s online biography (arabic.bayynat.org.lb/sira/ilm.htm, accessed 25 March 2012), and for some time into the headline of his website www.bayynat.org: *Mawqī’ mu’assasat samāḥat al-faqīh al-mujaddid al-marja’ al-sayyid Muḥammad Ḥusayn Faḍl Allāh* (now changed; see below). The claim is not in itself unusual: see Laurence Louër, *Transnational Shia Politics: Religious and Political Networks in the Gulf* (London: Hurst 2008), 91-95, for the case of Muḥammad al-Shīrāzī, for instance, who also pursued an unorthodox career as a *marja’*. For examples of the continuing controversies over Faḍl Allāh’s *marja’iyya* after his death see the threads “Sayed Mohamad Hussein Faḍl Allāh Good or Bad?” and “In Lebanon, Top Shia Cleric Passed Away”, on www.shiachat.com: www.shiachat.com/forum/index.php?/topic/234965809-sayed-mohamad-hussein-faql-allah-good-or-bad/; www.shiachat.com/forum/index.php?/topic/234977649-in-lebanon-top-shia-cleric-passed-away/. Accessed 30 June and 6 July 2010.

Weberian sociology, or will it simply dissipate? What happens to the intellectual, human and material resources they have accumulated?⁵

This article thus presents a case study of what can be seen in broader comparative terms as the issue of “succession” to the highest authority, in this case religious authority. But as Faḍl Allāh, among others, saw, the problem is also a deeper one, associated with the highly personal, rather than institutional nature of high religious authority in Shi‘i Islam. Somewhat paradoxically perhaps for a figure outside of the establishment, he had himself suggested the need for a more “institutional *marja‘iyya*” (*al-marja‘iyya al-mu’assasa*), which might provide greater continuity and stability. Strikingly, in what appears a new and potentially controversial development for Shi‘i Islam, his offices now claim to be putting into effect what is presented as this deeper plan for an institutionalised *marja‘iyya*, one that can apparently continue, for the moment at least, without a living, “successor” *marja‘*. This may be a transitional phase, before another *marja‘* can take the helm; or it may become a more enduring and potentially transformative form of religious authority. In either case, its fortunes would also speak to the long-term viability of an

⁵ On the relatively diffuse nature of high religious authority in Shi‘i Islam see e.g.: Abbas Amanat, “In Between the *Madrasa* and the Marketplace: The Designation of Clerical Leadership in Modern Shi‘ism”, in Said Amir Arjomand (ed.), *Authority and Political Culture in Shi‘ism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988); Said Amir Arjomand, “The *Mujtahid* of the Age and the *Mullā-bāshī*: An Intermediate Stage in the Institutionalization of Religious Authority in Shi‘ite Iran”, in Said Amir Arjomand (ed.), *Authority and Political Culture in Shi‘ism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988); Mehdi Khalaji, *The Last Marja: Sistani and the End of Traditional Religious Authority in Shiism*, (Washington, DC: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2006); Linda Walbridge, “Introduction: Shi‘ism and Authority” and “The Counterreformation: Becoming a *Marja‘* in the Modern World”, both in Linda Walbridge (ed.), *The Most Learned of the Shi‘a: The Institution of the Marja‘ Taqlid* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). For many of the issues I touch on here, see also Linda Walbridge, *The Thread of Mu‘awiya: The Making of a Marja‘ Taqlid*, John Walbridge (ed.) (Bloomington, IA: The Ramsay Press, 2014).

independent, Beirut-based *marja'iyya* and *hawza* (seminary), and by extension similar projects elsewhere outside of the established scholarly centres of Najaf and Qom, and indeed beyond Twelver Shi'i Islam.

I start by considering the immediate aftermath of Faḍl Allāh's death and its management. Here and throughout I draw heavily on the superb (if shifting, and hardly impartial) resources provided by his website, www.bayynat.org.⁶ The Internet provides rich new possibilities for research; it also provides unprecedented opportunities for maintaining the vitality of an authority figure after their death, their person represented on the website, animated through video and audio recordings. I then turn to the question of the legitimacy of continued "emulation" of a *marja'* after their death (*taqlīd al-mayyit*), which, I argue, is more commonplace than scholarship to date has perhaps acknowledged. I then turn to the issue of "succession", here also seeking to demonstrate something of the complexity of a frequently invoked but under-analysed notion. I end by charting the transition of Faḍl Allāh's offices into an enduring "institution" and thinking through its supposed novelty.

The death of the *marja'*

Faḍl Allāh died on July 4, 2010, aged 74. He had been ill for some time, but his death was nevertheless relatively sudden, and became an event of note, widely reported in the global media. A day of national mourning was declared in Lebanon, and the funeral procession through the southern suburbs of Beirut was attended by thousands (some, such as AFP, reported tens of thousands) of mourners in the

⁶ Some of the pages I cite may have since lapsed; I have, however, archived them.

streets.⁷ Global media coverage was ambivalent in tone, reflecting Faḍl Allāh's own ambiguous and controversial standing: at once a "progressive" and ecumenical figure, and the staunchly anti-Israel and anti-imperialist Islamist who had been dubbed "the spiritual guide of Ḥizb Allāh", a moniker that belied the true complexity of his relationship with that organisation but captured something of his importance in building the generation of committed Shi'i activists that manned and supported it. Notoriously, a positive tweet ("Sad to hear of the passing of Sayyed Mohammad Hussein Fadlallah. One of Hezbollah's giants I respect a lot") from CNN's Octavia Nasr led to her dismissal. Positive comments on the blog of the outgoing British ambassador to Lebanon, Frances Guy, had to be withdrawn.⁸

Faḍl Allāh had been a controversial figure locally too. But his death brought tributes, condolences and delegations from across the Lebanese confessional and political spectrum and the wider region, including then Prime Minister Sa'd al-Ḥarīrī, speaker of Parliament Nabīh Birrī, President Michel Sulaymān and Mufti of the

⁷ Mohamad Ali Harissi, "Thousands Attend Funeral of Lebanon Ayatollah", *Agence France-Presse*, Beirut, 6 July 2010. Accessed online: <http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5jLTcl7TKr1ixpylCNK9OWit-i2pg>, accessed 1 January 2013. See also Patrick Galey, "Hundreds of Thousands Attend Funeral for Sayyed Fadlallah", *The Daily Star*, Beirut, 7 July 2010. Accessed online: <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Politics/Jul/07/Hundreds-of-thousands-attend-funeral-for-Sayyed-Fadl-Allah.ashx#axzz2furcT827>, accessed 25 September 2013. Obviously enough, the extent of the mourning for such a figure reflects on his stature. See Meir Litvak, *Shi'i Scholars of Nineteenth-Century Iraq: The 'Ulama' of Najaf and Karbala'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 98.

⁸ Although the ambassadors of France, Poland and the Vatican, for example, came to pay their respects. Here and below I draw on the rich resources of the website, in the form of the section on Faḍl Allāh's death (*Milaff al-rahīl*), which has had pages listing and linking to tens of telegrams and reports of delegations, commemorations and tributes (which were to be found as of September 2014 at <http://arabic.bayynat.org/ListingByCatPage.aspx?id=3463>). To cite the URLs of every separate file drawn on here would be too cumbersome: I only do so for a few of the most important ones. Press sources from the time mention other details, which I have not attempted to compile here.

Republic Shaykh Muḥammad Rashīd Qabbānī. From further afield, King ‘Abd Allāh and Prince Ḥasan bin Ṭalāl of Jordan both sent condolences by telegram; messages and representations came from the Emir, Crown Prince and Prime Minister of Kuwait, the Emir of Qatar, the King of Bahrain, the Sultan of Oman, the Saudi embassy in Beirut, Yemen’s President ‘Alī ‘Abd Allāh Ṣaliḥ and, in the most gushing terms, President ‘Umar al-Bashīr of Sudan, who also sent a delegation. Colonel Qadhdhāfi wrote; so did the Egyptian foreign minister and the deputy president and Mufti of Syria.

Commensurate with Faḍl Allāh’s long-term support of the Palestinian cause, messages and visits were received from Hamas, including individual ones from Khālīd Mash‘al (“Your brother”) and Ismā‘īl Haniyya, as well as Ramaḍān Shalaḥ and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, the Committee for the Support of the Resistance in Palestine, the Organisation for the Liberation of Palestine in Lebanon, and Maḥmūd ‘Abbās. Condolences also came from Sunni Islamists elsewhere, such as the deputy president of the Algerian FIS, ‘Alī bin Ḥāj, and the Tawāṣul Party of Mauritania, and from the Lebanese Jamā‘a Islāmiyya. Sunni organisations such as the Qatar-based World Union of Islamic Scholars, headed by Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī, the Organisation of the Islamic Conference and al-Azhar wrote in acknowledgement of Faḍl Allāh’s efforts at rapprochement (*taqrīb*) between the Islamic *madhhabs*. So too several Christian figures wrote in praise of his broader ecumenical stance.

Tributes also came flooding in from the wider Shi‘i world. Again, Faḍl Allāh had divided opinion here, and it is tempting to try to read some significance into who did and did not write, and in what terms. Given the controversy over his claim to the *marja‘iyya* in particular, it seems interesting to note whether or not correspondence

acknowledged him as such. The writing of letters and telegrams and the use or withholding of titles certainly have sociological significance in this milieu, although one should no doubt be careful when reading intent into them.⁹

The geographical breadth of the correspondence spoke to Faḍl Allāh's global reach: the Ahl al-Bayt Foundation of Canada (Hamilton) wrote, for instance, as did the Islamic Centre in Brazil, and Faḍl Allāh's students and the staff of his offices in Pakistan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan and India.¹⁰ Leading Shi'i player in Pakistan Sayyid Sājīd Naqwī referred hyperbolically to "the Grand Ayatollah" Faḍl Allāh as "the supreme religious authority" (*al-marja' al-dīnī al-a'lā*). Shaykh 'Abd al-Mālīk al-Ḥūthī, leader of the Zaydi uprising in North Yemen, wrote rather of "this example to all the 'ulamā' of the *umma*".

Numerically speaking, preponderant sets of messages spoke to the presence of core constituencies and relationships in the Gulf, Iraq and Iran. To start with the Gulf, it was Sayyid 'Abd Allāh al-Ghurayfī of Bahrain, sometime director of Faḍl Allāh's *ḥawza* at Sayyida Zaynab in Damascus, his representative in Bahrain and spoken of there as a potential "successor",¹¹ who announced Faḍl Allāh's death at the press conference in Beirut. The Ḥawzat al-Ghurayfī in Bahrain, in the person of Sayyid 'Alawī al-Ghurayfī, also wrote, as did the Bahraini Islamic Consciousness Group (*Jam'iyyat al-taw'iyya al-islāmiyya*). Leading figure Shaykh 'Īsā Qāsim, head of

⁹ See e.g. Peter Harling & Hamid Nasser, "The Sadrist Trend: Class Struggle, Millenarianism and *Fitna*", in Sabrina Mervin (ed.), *The Shi'a Worlds and Iran* (London: Saqi, 2010), 281-302; Walbridge, *The Thread of Mu'awiya*, 51.

¹⁰ There was also a telegram from the Indonesian Students' Union and even, it was noted, a delegation from Australia led by the head of the Municipality of Parrammata, Paul Garrard.

¹¹ Louër, *Transnational Shia Politics*, 109. See also Sajjad Rizvi, "Political Mobilization and the Shi'i Religious Establishment (*Marja'iyya*)", *International Affairs* 86(6) (2010), 1308n24.

the Wifāq party, sent his condolences, referring to Faḍl Allāh as Ayatollah but focusing in his brief message on his resistance efforts. From al-Qaṭīf in Eastern Saudi Arabia came messages from Shaykh Ḥusayn ‘Alī al-Muṣṭafā – speaking of the illuminating (*mustanīr*) *ijtihād* of this Grand Ayatollah and *marja’ mujāhid*, from the Councils for Islamic Government (*Lijān al-wilāya al-islāmiyya*), who refer to Faḍl Allāh as Grand Ayatollah and *marja’* and dub him one of the symbols of the Islamic revival (*al-nahḍa al-islāmiyya*), and from Sayyid Ḥasan al-Nimr, one of the current leaders of radical Saudi opposition group Ḥizb Allāh al-Ḥijāz, who also led a delegation to Beirut.¹²

Strong gestures of support came from Faḍl Allāh’s native Iraq,¹³ and from those connected with the Da’wa party in particular, with which Faḍl Allāh had a long association.¹⁴ Shaykh Muḥammad Mahdī al-Āṣifī of Najaf referred in his telegram to Faḍl Allāh as *marja’* (*marja’ min marajī’ al-taqlīd*), as did Shaykh ‘Abd al-Hādī al-Faḍlī (d. 2013), one of the party’s founders, then based in Jeddah, as head of the King ‘Abd al-‘Azīz university’s Arabic language department, and also long thought of as Khāminā’ī’s chief representative in Saudi Arabia,¹⁵ and Shaykh Muḥammad Bāqir al-Nāṣirī, another leading figure, for whom Faḍl Allāh was one of the great *marja’*s and

¹² In the notices of subsequent memorial events one finds mention of leading anti-government Saudi clerics Nimr Bāqir al-Nimr and Shaykh Ḥusayn al-Rāqī, one of the founders of Ḥizb Allāh al-Ḥijāz. The latter’s sympathisers were apparently arrested after the Khobar bombings for, among other things “possession of books by Khomeini or Fadlallah”; see Toby Matthiesen, “Hizbullah al-Hijaz: A History of the Most Radical Saudi Shi’a Opposition Group”, *Middle East Journal* 64 (2010), 180-1, 192, 197.

¹³ He was born (in 1935) and studied in Najaf before moving to Lebanon in 1966.

¹⁴ See Sankari, *Fadlallah*, 76-7, 170-3, 183.

¹⁵ Faḍlī also contributed a section on Faḍl Allāh the poet to a book in his tribute. Faḍl Allāh’s organisation organised in return several events in mourning of his death in 2013.

singular reformers (*aḥad al-marāji' al-ʿiẓām wa-l-muṣalliḥīn al-afdhādh*).¹⁶ Ex-Prime Minister Ibrāhīm al-Jaʿfarī wrote of the Grand Ayatollah and *marja'* as one of the luminaries of reform (*ʿalam min a'lām al-iṣlāh*) and as a genius (*ʿabqarī*), and led a delegation to pay his respects; he would also host a subsequent delegation from Faḍl Allāh's offices to Iraq. Then Prime Minister and Da'wa party secretary general Nūrī al-Mālikī first wrote and then came in person to offer his condolences and recite the Fātiḥa over the deceased's tomb, saying – provocatively perhaps – that “the last of the greats has gone” (*la-qad raḥal ākhar al-ʿuẓamā*). The deputy president of Iraq also led a large delegation, and noted that Faḍl Allāh had been a source of valuable advice, ever resorted to.¹⁷ The seminaries of the great shrine city of Najaf were less vociferous – Faḍl Allāh had been a controversial figure there. Ayatollah Muḥammad Yaʿqūbī, head of the Faḍila party, wrote referring to him as *al-marja' al-dīnī*, among much gushing praise.¹⁸ Sayyid Jaʿfar al-Ṣadr, son of Muḥammad Bāqir al-Ṣadr, came to pay his respects. But the leading figures of the traditional schools – and especially the most prominent of all, Ayatollah Sīstānī – made no sign it seems, although Faḍl Allāh's website noted in passing that lessons were stopped in the Najaf *ḥawza* for three days as a mark of respect.¹⁹

¹⁶ On these figures, see Amatzia Baram, “The Radical Shiʿite Opposition Movements in Iraq”, in Emmanuel Sivan and Menachem Friedman (eds.), *Religious Radicalism and Politics in the Middle East* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 97; Matthiesen, “Hizbullah al-Hijaz”, 195.

¹⁷ Other Iraqi figures who paid their respects included Iyād ʿAllāwī, the Islamic Union of the Turkomen of Iraq, who noted Faḍl Allāh's support of them from their beginning, and a delegation from the governorate of Najaf.

¹⁸ On Yaʿqūbī see Pierre-Jean Luizard, “The Sadrists in Iraq: Challenging the United States, the *Marjaʿiyya* and Iran”, in Sabrina Mervin (ed.), *The Shiʿa Worlds and Iran* (London: Saqi, 2010), 270.

¹⁹ This was also reported by the BBC: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/10519887>, accessed 22 August 2013.

Given the influence of Iran, across the Shi'i world and in Lebanon in particular, and the complex nature of Faḍl Allāh's relationship with the Islamic Republic, not to say the extreme hostility that his claim to the independent authority of a Lebanese *marja'īyya* aroused in that quarter, the host of messages from Iran are of especial interest. Some reformist figures wrote appreciatively: the office of Ayatollah Muntazirī (d. 2009) specifically spoke of Faḍl Allāh "possessing the position of *marja'īyya*" (*imtilāk-hu li-mawqī' al-marja'īyya*); Ayatollah Ṣāni'ī wrote of Faḍl Allāh's fight against fossilization (*taḥajjur*) and reactionism (*raj'īyya*), and his courage and insight as a jurist. On the conservative side, Ayatollah Makārim al-Shīrāzī was less gushing, speaking more of his resistance credentials. "The Ḥawza of Qom" sent a very brief message noting merely that "History will record his stands by the side of the wronged and down-trodden in its shining pages..." With regard to the Iranian political establishment, Hāshimī Rafsanjānī wrote in reference to Faḍl Allāh's distinguished scholarly family and defence of his country, Hāshimī Shahrūdī referred to Faḍl Allāh as "among the leading *mujāhidīn* clerics of Lebanon" (*min kibār 'ulamā' lubnān al-mujāhidīn*), which seems somewhat faint praise, and President Ahmadinejad talked of "the scholar *mujāhid*" (*al-'ālim al-mujāhid*), "a great jurist" (*faqīh kabīr*).

'Alī Lārījānī made a point of noting, against the grain of actuality, that Faḍl Allāh "always and in all circumstances supported the way of Khumaynī" and "followed the path drawn by" the current Supreme Leader 'Alī Khāminā'ī. This was also the line taken by Khāminā'ī himself, part of what seemed a broader effort to capture Faḍl Allāh for the Islamic Republic's cause. Where the Republican Guards sent a telegram talking of "this great *marja'* for the Shi'a of Lebanon", Khāminā'ī

could hardly acknowledge the highest scholarly status for his rival, and referred to him as “this great scholar and warrior” (*hādhā al-‘ālim al-mujāhid al-kabīr*). But he said that the Resistance in Lebanon had always been under Faḍl Allāh’s care and support, and also claimed that he was a faithful and close friend of the Islamic Republic and its system (*niḡām*), loyal to the path of the Islamic Revolution, as established in his words and deeds over its thirty years.²⁰

Faḍl Allāh’s eldest son Sayyid ‘Alī would reciprocate, travelling to Iran to meet President Ahmadinejad and foreign minister Mutakkī, and thanking Ahmadinejad for his and Khāminā’ī’s telegrams and the funeral delegation sent by the Islamic Republic, one of a number from Iran, and headed by Ayatollah Aḥmad Jannatī, chairman of the Guardian Council. Sayyid ‘Alī mentioned that his father had always valued the President’s character and courage, considering him a model of strength and humility, and further pointed to the “love” (*ḥubb*) that his father had had for the system (*niḡām*) of the Islamic Republic. He even said that his father had thought Iran the headquarters of true Islam and the free world [!] (*al-qā’ida al-ra’īsa li-l-islām al-Muḥammadī al-aṣīl wa-li-kull aḥrar al-‘ālam*).²¹

Despite Faḍl Allāh’s wider identification with the Lebanese Ḥizb Allāh, relations had been cool since Faḍl Allāh had pressed his suit to the *marja’iyya* and adopted a variant of the doctrine of *wilāyat al-faqīh* that allowed for locally independent “guardian jurists” rather than acknowledging the supremacy of Iran’s

²⁰ http://arabic.bayynat.org.lb/nachatat/barkeya_30.htm, accessed 15 July 2010.

²¹ http://arabic.bayynat.org.lb/funeral/moaazin_29072010_2.htm, accessed 12 August 2013.

Supreme Leader.²² Poor relations had ensued with Ḥizb Allāh, who took Khāminā'ī as *marja'* as well as *al-walī al-faqīh*, until the solidarity enjoined by the cataclysmic Israeli assault of 2006, in which Faḍl Allāh's house was targeted and reduced to rubble.²³ Ḥizb Allāh's Secretary General Ḥasan Naṣr Allāh, who had snubbed Faḍl Allāh in 2000 by not mentioning him in his roll call of resistance heroes during Liberation Day come the end of the Israeli occupation, paid him fulsome tribute on his death, claiming him as a father, support and guide (*murshid* – a reference to the long-contested spiritual guide role?), at whose pulpit he had studied from his youth. Naṣr Allāh did not refer to Faḍl Allāh's *marja'iyya*, addressing himself to “our great *marāji'* and at their head His Excellency Imām Khāminā'ī”, a clear indication of his position.²⁴ But Ḥizb Allāh declared three days of mourning, and the funeral was televised on their television station al-Manār, the procession through the streets no doubt facilitated through their auspices. Deputy Secretary General Na'im Qāsim, along with other members of Ḥizb Allāh, paid his condolences in person. The Faḍl Allāh family visited Naṣr Allāh himself, “for two hours”, the website made a point of noting.

It has been suggested that pressure was brought to bear on the Faḍl Allāh family to allow further co-opting of the occasion by Ḥizb Allāh and the Islamic

²² On the latter point see: Muḥammad Ḥusayn Faḍl Allāh, *Fiqh al-sharī'a* (3 vols., 6th printing) (Beirut: Dār al-Malāk, 2002–3), vol. 1, 17-19; idem, *al-Masā'il al-fiqhiyya* (2 vols., 10th printing, revised edition) (Beirut: Dār al-Malāk, 2005), vol. 1, 26; idem, *al-Masā'il al-fiqhiyya tibqan li-fatāwā al-marja' al-dīnī Samāḥat Āyat Allāh al-'Uzmā al-Sayyid Muḥammad Ḥusayn Faḍl Allāh: al-'ibādāt* (new ed.) (Beirut: Dār al-Malāk, 2009), 32, 36.

²³ Sabrina Mervin, “Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah, du ‘Guide Spirituel’ au *Marja'* Moderniste”, in Sabrina Mervin (ed.), *Le Hezbollah: État des lieux* (Paris: Sindbad, 2008), 282-83.

²⁴ http://arabic.bayynat.org.lb/nachatat/barkeya_29.htm, accessed 15 July 2010.

Republic, by, for instance, having Ayatollah Jannatī preside and say the funeral prayers, a role accorded some significance in indicating where the deceased mantle’s might be borne. If that were so, it would seem that the family resisted, Faḍl Allāh’s brother, Muḥammad ‘Alī, apparently reciting the prayer (although not thereby a candidate for the *marja’iyya* I would say [see below]).²⁵

Mourning ceremonies, the further obsequies for the fortieth day after Faḍl Allāh’s death and memorial events, some seemingly now annual, provided further occasions to celebrate his legacy across the world: from Mecca, Aḥsā’ and Qaṭīf to Qom and Tehran, from London to Moscow and Berlin, from Bangladesh to Ivory Coast, Paraguay, Brazil, Sweden, Azerbaijan, Oman, Bahrain, Australia, Iraq, Kuwait, Canada, Damascus and all over Lebanon. I attended two such events in the UK, one Arabic-language event in Manchester in 2011 in a large conference centre, attended not only by Faḍl Allāh’s son Sayyid Ja’far but also Ibrāhīm al-Ja’fari (necessitating tight security), and another (English-language) in London in 2012 at the Mahfil Ali where Sayyid Ja’far spoke via videolink and translator from Beirut. One notes especially again the number of meetings in the Gulf, several in Bahrain, one notably large one organised by the office of ‘Abd Allāh Ghurayfī, where a book in tribute of

²⁵ The suggestion comes from Pierre Akel, “Troubled Funerals in Beirut and Qom”, Gateston Institute, 30 July 2010, online publication: <http://www.gatestoneinstitute.org/1448/funerals-beirut-qom>, accessed 25 September 2013. On Faḍl Allāh’s brother’s role see also Galey, “Hundreds of Thousands”, and http://arabic.bayynat.org.lb/funeral/taabin_11072010.htm, accessed 15 August 2013. On the wider issue of the significance of the prayer over the deceased, see Walbridge, *The Thread of Mu’awiya*, 10-11, and Elvire Corboz, “The al-Khoei Foundation and the Transnational Institutionalisation of Ayatollah al-Khu’i’s *Marja’iyya*”, in Lloyd Ridgeon (ed.), *Shi’i Islam and Identity: Religion, Politicians and Change in the Global Muslim Community* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2012), 103, 105, 111n24. Corboz mentions another such attempt at co-optation in the case of Ayatollah Gulpāyigānī (d. 1993).

Faḍl Allāh was distributed. Such books were also circulated in Qaṭīf, put together by “the Committee for remembrance of the *marjaʿ* Faḍl Allāh”, and Kuwait. Tens of tributes are archived on the website, along with pages of poetry in eulogy of him.

Faḍl Allāh’s complex and contested reputation, legacy and networks were thus being revisited through these various enactments of condolence. But rather than themselves foregrounding, although certainly not denying, his legacy as a leading Islamist and political activist, for instance, his offices chose to mark his death through the projection of softer and more intimate images of love and pious simplicity and asceticism, as in the widely circulated video montage “Because I love you all” (*Li-anna-ni uḥibb-kum jamīʿan*) – footage of a frail and elderly Faḍl Allāh with soft white beard embracing children and being hugged by tender young followers, intercut with footage from a sermon in which he expressed love for all, Muslim and unbeliever, friend or otherwise – and in the photographs of the sayyid at prayer in hospital, in his pyjamas without robes and turban, and, most of all, on his deathbed. His last hours were reportedly spent discussing his latest volume of poetry with his brother, telephoning home, and passing on his wishes to be buried in his mosque. His last act was that of prayer. Nevertheless, asked earlier if he wanted to rest by a nurse, he had said that he would not rest until the end of Israel.²⁶

Although Faḍl Allāh had, controversially, taken a deeply rationalist approach to the Shiʿi tradition, after death his narrative became to a certain extent imbued

²⁶ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PpAWquEL87M>, accessed 1 January 2013; http://arabic.bayynat.org.lb/photo_album/personal/personal_91.jpg, http://arabic.bayynat.org.lb/photo_album/personal/personal_119.jpg, accessed 1 January 2013; http://arabic.bayynat.org.lb/nachatat/kitabab_15072010.htm, accessed 15 July 2010.

with elements of enchantment.²⁷ Some of his supporters went so far as to claim that his was a divinely chosen mission, citing the triumph of the Lebanese resistance movement, his death of natural causes after surviving a number of assassination attempts, and even interpretations of the hidden (*bāṭin*) meaning of the Qur'ān. One particular near miss was frequently alluded to, his survival of a huge car bomb in the southern suburbs of Beirut in 1985, widely attributed to the American Central Intelligence Agency. Faḍl Allāh had been saved only by being delayed by a persistent woman wanting to ask him some questions. In his own reminiscences, his son Sayyid Ja'far mentioned that Faḍl Allāh's birth had come after his mother, who had suffered two miscarriages, prayed for a child at the tomb of Imam Ḥusayn: hence his being called Muḥammad Ḥusayn. On a more banal level, a card posted on the website, amongst a mixture of kindly, academic and stern activist images, sees his face in clouds over the Lebanese coast looking down upon us.²⁸

²⁷ A video was also posted of him talking close to his death with great fondness of his "relative" (given his status as a sayyid), Fāṭima al-Zahrā', in implicit address, as I took it at least, of the controversy over his discussion of the polemical traditions surrounding her death (see Rosiny "'The Tragedy of Fāṭima al-Zahrā'").

²⁸ For supporters' claims see www.shiachat.com/forum/index.php?/topic/234937925-ijtihad-of-sayyid-m-h-fadhllallah, accessed 1 July 2010; http://arabic.bayynat.org.lb/sira/shakhseya_1.htm, accessed 2 August 2010; http://arabic.bayynat.org.lb/photo_album/cards/mohhebin_1.jpg, accessed 2 January 2013. On the 1985 assassination attempt see Markaz Bayyanāt li-l-Internet wa-l-Dirāsāt, *Kay lā nansā. Majzarat Bi'r al-'Abd: dhākirat al-irhāb al-amrīkī* (Beirut, n.d.). Kramer, "The Oracle", 131-32, suggests that it was after this that his followers started referring to him as "Ayatollah". So too, at a memorial event in Bahrain, Faḍl Allāh's student Ja'far al-Shākhūrī stated that Faḍl Allāh started his mission when the United States tried to assassinate him, referring to the 1985 car bomb. An audio clip of Faḍl Allāh talking about the incident and the woman's question was played (http://arabic.bayynat.org.lb/funeral/taabin_15082010.htm, accessed 15 August 2013). Speaking further to the importance of the event to the Faḍl Allāh narrative, it was again commemorated in 2011 after his death (<http://arabic.bayynat.org.lb/news/archive>, accessed 1 January 2013).

Emulation of the deceased

Amidst the mourning and commemoration, which expressed and celebrated the particular authority that Faḍl Allāh had enjoyed as well as the controversies and challenges it had aroused, the question was immediately and naturally raised of the continued validity of his *marjaʿiyya* and “emulation” (*taqlīd*) of it after the *marjaʿ*’s decease. It is a commonplace, both among Shiʿi Muslims and scholarly commentators, that the Uṣūlī Twelver Shiʿi tradition normally demands the following of a living *marjaʿ*.²⁹ According to Juan Cole, that was the position of Murtaḍā Anṣārī (d. 1864), a key figure in the crystallisation of the modern institution of *marjaʿiyya* and *taqlīd*.³⁰ Anṣārī found it impermissible to continue *taqlīd* of one’s *mujtahid* after

²⁹ E.g. Saskia Gierling, “The ‘Marjaʿiyya’ in Iran and the Nomination of Khamaneī in December 1994”, *Middle Eastern Studies* 33 (1997), 779; Walbridge, “Introduction”, 5; Lynda Clarke, “The Shiʿi Construction of *Taqlīd*”, *Journal of Islamic Studies* 12 (2001), 55; Robert Gleave, “Conceptions of Authority in Iraqi Shiʿism: Baqir al-Hakim, Haʿiri and Sistani on *Ijtihad*, *Taqlid* and *Marjaʿiyya*”, *Theory, Culture and Society* 24 (2007), 77n24. According to Lynda Clarke, “The Shiʿi Construction”, 55-57, the concerns are: the reliability of *taqlīd* of someone who cannot testify to their opinion (an objection rendered redundant by the ubiquitous publishing of the *risāla ʿamaliyya*, Clarke notes, and now the advent of the website, I would add); that the authoritativeness (*ḥujjiyya*) of the *mujtahid* disappears with death as with senility and insanity; and, the most commonly cited in my own experience, that the changing circumstances of life continuously demand new interpretations of the religious law (see also Gleave, “Conceptions of Authority”, 77n24). More sociologically, the principle would serve to protect the interests of the scholarly class itself, for with no need for the opinions of a living *mujtahid* it would be threatened with extinction. See also Said Amir Arjomand, *The Shadow of God and the Hidden Imam: Religion, Political Order, and Societal Change in Shiʿite Iran from the Beginning to 1890* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1984), 140, cited by Ahmad Kazemi Moussavi, *Religious Authority in Shiʿite Islam: From the Office of Mufti to the Institution of Marjaʿ* (Kuala Lumpur: International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization, 1996), 86.

³⁰ Juan Cole, “Imami Jurisprudence and the Role of the Ulama: Mortaza Ansari on Emulating the Supreme Exemplar”, in Nikki Keddie (ed.), *Religion and Politics in Iran* (New Haven, CN: Yale University Press, 1983), 43, 45.

his death; rather, one must, if at all possible, follow the most learned living *mujtahid*. So should you wish to know whether you can (or must) continue to follow a ruling of your deceased *mujtahid*, you must consult the most learned living *mujtahid*. Should you continue to follow the deceased *mujtahid* where you could find a living one to emulate then your ritual acts would be invalid.

And yet, this position, which is, again, that fore-grounded in most commentary, no longer seems to hold. If we turn, for instance, to Muḥammad Kaẓim al-Yazdī's (d. 1918) seminal handbook *al-'Urwa al-wuthqā*, an influential model for the contemporary *risāla 'amaliyya*, or legal digest, that a *marja'* must produce for their followers, "the stronger [position] is the permissibility of allowing the continuance of *taqlīd* of the dead [*mutjahid*]", although it is not permissible to begin following a dead *marja' ab initio (ibtidā'an)* or to return to following them after having turned from them to a living one.³¹ And if we turn from there to a cursory survey of contemporary positions, the same would seem to apply.³² To take two of the most prominent figures, Ayatollahs Sīstānī of Iraq and Khāminā'ī of Iran, both allow the continued emulation of a deceased *marja'*, qualified in different ways. Both, one should note, are themselves thought of as in some sense "successors", to

³¹ Muḥammad Kaẓim al-Yazdī, *al-'Urwa al-wuthqā* (with commentary by Sayyid 'Alī al-Ḥusaynī al-Sīstānī) (2 vols) (Beirut: Dār al-Mu'arrikh al-'Arabī, 2007), vol. 1, 11, sections 9-10.

³² I find it striking that Clarke passes from saying that "The Uṣūlī Shi'is ... insist that one can only do *taqlīd* of a living *mujtahid*" to noting that "It is generally allowed" to continue following one's *mujtahid* after their death. This is, she finds, to avoid imposing "unreasonable hardship" (*ḥaraj*) by forcing the *muqallid* to learn a whole new set of rulings, as was the rationale given for continuing *taqlīd* of Khumaynī after his death. Clarke, "The Shi'i Construction", 55, 55n49.

Ayatollahs Khū'ī (d. 1992) and Khumaynī (d. 1989) respectively, both of whom many in Lebanon, for instance, continued to follow after their deaths.³³

On the one hand, it is almost, but not quite, unheard of to allow one to start out emulating a deceased *marja'*. Sīstānī does not allow it, according to his *risāla*, *Minhāj al-ṣāliḥīn*.³⁴ A useful compilation of the positions of some leading *marāji'* confirms this as the ubiquitous view, except in the case of Khāminā'ī, who alone enjoins this position as a matter of caution (*iḥtiyāt*), rather than outright.³⁵ That is confirmed by the Arabic edition of Khāminā'ī's collection of responses to questions, *Ajwibat al-istiftā'āt*.³⁶ Invoking caution implies that he is not wholly convinced of this point, and allows his followers to take up the opinion of another *marja'* in this matter.³⁷ Both Sīstānī and Khāminā'ī note that one cannot return to following the deceased after one has switched to a living *marja'*.³⁸

³³ Lara Deeb, *An Enchanted Modern: Gender and Public Piety in Shi'i Lebanon* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 71. So too Robert Gleave (having first noted that “following a dead *marja'* ... is something normally forbidden”), finds that Ayatollah Kaẓīm al-Ḥā'irī also rules it permitted to follow a dead *marja'* if the most learned living scholar finds it so. As Gleave says, “This question seems of merely technical interest, until one reads Ha'iri's *fatwas* in which he validates those who continue to support Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr (who was killed in 1999) through precisely this mechanism, thereby acquiring Sadiq al-Sadr's numerous supporters”. Gleave, “Conceptions of Authority”, 77n24.

³⁴ 'Alī al-Sīstānī, *Minhāj al-ṣāliḥīn* (3 vols.) (Qom: Maktabat Fadak, 2002), vol. 1, 10, section 6.

³⁵ Ḥusayn Mir'ī, *Jāmi' al-aḥkām fī-l-ḥalāl wa-l-ḥarām: al-'ibādāt* (Beirut: Dār al-Mujtabā, 2001), 10, section 7. The *marāji'* surveyed are Khumaynī, Khu'ī, Sīstānī, Muḥammad Sa'īd al-Ḥakīm, Khāminā'ī, al-Mīrzā al-Tabrīzī, Lankarānī and Bahjat.

³⁶ 'Alī al-Khāminā'ī, *Ajwibat al-istiftā'āt* (6th printing) (Beirut: al-Dār al-Islāmiyya, 2006/1467), part 1, 12, question 22.

³⁷ For this reading of the implications of the injunction of caution see e.g. 'Alī al-Sīstānī, *al-Fiqh li-l-mughtaribīn* (Beirut: Dār al-Mu'arrikh al-'Arabī), 45; Mir'ī, *Jāmi' al-aḥkām*, 17, section 14; Faḍl Allāh, *Fiqh al-sharī'a*, vol. 1, 26, 28.

³⁸ Sīstānī, *Minhāj*, vol. 1, 12, section 14; Khāminā'ī, *Ajwibat*, part 1, 16, question 33. Khāminā'ī, in response to a questioner's dilemma, makes there the interesting qualification that that might be allowed if the purported living *mujtahid* turned out

In the case of continuing to follow one's *marja'* after his death, however, Sīstānī finds that, so long as one did not know of a difference between the opinion of the deceased *marja'* in a given matter and that of the living then one could continue one's emulation of the deceased. But if one were aware of such a difference – as generally happens, he notes – then one must decide which one is more learned (*a'lam*): if the deceased *marja'* were the more learned, then it would actually be obligatory to continue *taqlīd* of him; if the living were, then one must switch to them; if they are equal in learning, another set of complex concerns come into play. If one is to continue *taqlīd* of the deceased, then that must be in reliance on the opinion of a living *mujtahid*, for otherwise “one would be like he who acts without *taqlīd*”.³⁹ As Robert Gleave has noted, this seems to make following the deceased *marja'* tantamount to following the living *marja'* who has sanctified their emulation – a point I return to below.⁴⁰

A whole section is devoted to this topic in Khāminā'ī's question and answer compilation, many of the questions explicitly related to the permissibility of continuing to follow Khumaynī. Asked what the ruling is for continuing *taqlīd* of a dead *mujtahid* if he were the most learned, Khāminā'ī replies that continuing *taqlīd* is permissible in every case; he states it as obligatory in the case of the most learned, but as a matter of caution. In this matter, Khāminā'ī notes elsewhere, it is not obligatory to follow the opinion of the most learned living *mujtahid*, or indeed any particular *mujtahid*, as this is a matter of agreement between scholars; elsewhere he

not to have met the necessary criteria and was thus not a *mujtahid* after all. One wonders which *mujtahid* was in question.

³⁹ Sīstānī, *Minhāj*, vol. 1, 10 section 7, 11 section 12.

⁴⁰ Gleave, “Conceptions of Authority”, 77n24.

speaks of “the agreement of the scholars of the present age” on this point.⁴¹ One would thus escape the need to emulate a living *marjaʿ* in order to continue following one’s deceased one.

The compilation of the opinions of leading authorities confirms the general agreement that Khāmināʾī alludes to, for the *marjaʿ*’s surveyed there at least. The differences are in the detail: for instance, as to whether one follows only the rulings that one had studied and acted upon during the *marjaʿ*’s lifetime, or all his rulings.⁴² It is envisaged, by Khāmināʾī at least, that one might consult a living *mujtahid* on some points while continuing *taqlīd* of the deceased. For example, some continuing *muqallids* of Khumaynī ask whether, given the inevitability of new issues arising (“especially as we live in the age of struggle against idolatry [*tāghūt*] and international arrogance [*al-istikbār al-ʿālamī*]”), they should turn to *taqlīd* of Khāmināʾī instead. Khāmināʾī reassures them that they can continue emulation of the Imam (Khumaynī), and if they feel called to know the ruling of the sharia in some present circumstance, they can write to his (i.e., Khāmināʾī’s) office.⁴³

To turn now to Faḍl Allāh, like Khāmināʾī, he obliged caution against taking up initial *taqlīd* of a deceased *marjaʿ* rather than ruling it out outright.⁴⁴ In answer to questions on the point, he notes the jurisprudential complexity of the issue and what he finds as the absence of a decisive argument or scholarly consensus on it: it is on

⁴¹ Khāmināʾī, *Ajwibat*, part 1, 16-18, questions 35, 36, 40.

⁴² Mirʾī, *Jāmiʿ al-aḥkām*, 15, section 8.

⁴³ Khāmināʾī, *Ajwibat*, part 1, 17-18, questions 37, 43.

⁴⁴ Faḍl Allāh, *Fiqh al-sharīʿa*, vol. 1, 15 section 17. I thus find it a little strong for Clarke to claim that Faḍl Allāh “suggested ... that it is permissible to emulate a deceased *mujtahid* – not only, as the Uṣūlī tradition already accepts, in continuation of emulation begun while the *mujtahid* was still alive, but initially”, although she alludes (without references unfortunately) to ensuing controversy over this position. Clarke, “The Shiʿi Construction”, 61, 62.

the basis of secondary level issues (*al-‘anāwīn al-thānawīyya*) that he obliged caution here.⁴⁵ As for if you follow a *marja‘* and he dies, however, it is certainly permissible to continue his *taqlīd*, although you have to have recourse to a living scholar on this point.⁴⁶

The continuing validity of Faḍl Allāh’s *marja‘iyya*

Upon his death, Faḍl Allāh’s offices were quick to announce via the website the legitimacy of continuing to follow him, and also then to provide a more extensive proclamation (*bayān*) on the matter: today’s scholars, they said, hold that continuing *taqlīd* of the deceased is permissible, or even obligatory, especially where one finds the deceased the most learned; of course, not everyone holds that one has to follow such a figure in any case (so allowing followers not to be forced to take up another *marja‘* on those grounds); and there are scholars who even admit the permissibility of starting to follow a deceased *marja‘*. Comprehensive licence was thus given. In a subsequent page, published in response to the number of questions they had been receiving on the topic, they give their answers to some of the commonest queries.

⁴⁵ Faḍl Allāh, *al-Masā’il al-fiqhiyya* (2005 ed.), vol. 1, 17, question 22, vol. 2, 9, question 1. Faced with the question as to whether being able to follow a deceased scholar might then allow one to consult one of the bygone greats, such as Shaykh al-Tūsī or Mufīd, Faḍl Allāh concedes that indeed it would (*ibid.*, vol. 1, 12, question 7). For a detailed exploration of the issues see, for instance, Khū’ī’s commentary on Yazdī’s *al-‘Urwa al-wuthqā*: Abū-l-Qāsim al-Khū’ī, *al-Tanqīḥ fī sharḥ al-‘urwa al-wuthqā taqrīran li-baḥṡ Ḍāyat Allāh al-‘Uẓmā marja‘ al-muslimīn za‘īm al-ḥawza al-‘ilmiyya al-sayyid Abū-l-Qāsim al-Mūsawī al-Khū’ī* (6 vols), Mīrzā ‘Alī Gharawī al-Tabrizī (ed.) (Qom: Mu’assasat Āl al-Bayt, 1984), vol. 1, 95-118.

⁴⁶ Faḍl Allāh, *Fiqh al-sharī‘a*, vol. 1, 15 section 17, 22 section 40. With regard to the other concerns, as to if this includes opinions you did not act upon as well as those you did, Faḍl Allāh is generous: even just having had the firm intention (*‘azm*) to emulate a deceased *marja‘* without having acted upon any of his opinions would be sufficient. *Ibid.*, vol. 1, 15, section 17; Faḍl Allāh, *al-Masā’il al-fiqhiyya* (2009 ed.), 25, question 54.

Continued emulation could be justified, they said, either by relying on the opinion of a living *mujtahid* who allows it, or relying on the general agreement of living scholars on its permissibility, without needing to have recourse to a particular living scholar. Again, the latter stipulation, importantly, allows one not to have effectively to start emulating another scholar.⁴⁷

Faḍl Allāh had not himself held to the majority opinion that the *marjaʿiyya* should be the preserve of the most learned.⁴⁸ Given the contested nature of his *ijtihād* in clerical circles that was perhaps not surprising.⁴⁹ But, by noting that continued *taqlīd* of a *marjaʿ* might be obligatory by some opinions if one thought

⁴⁷ http://arabic.bayynat.org.lb/nachat/bayan_09072010.htm, accessed 9 July 2010; http://bayynat.org.lb/ahdathwakadaya/IS_Taklid1.htm, accessed 13 June 2011. See also Lara Deeb, "Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah and Shi'a Youth in Lebanon", *Journal of Shi'a Islamic Studies* 3 (2010), 405-6, and Michaelle Browers, "Fadlallah and the Passing of Lebanon's Last Najafi Generation", *Journal of Shi'a Islamic Studies* 5 (2012), 25-27. On the last point, note that Faḍl Allāh's own opinion cited above would not seem to have permitted this. The offices stated several times that some scholars allow one to start following a deceased *marjaʿ*, but without naming them. A thread of discussion on a Shi'i chat site arose around the claim that someone had been referred by Faḍl Allāh's offices to Ayatollah Ishāq Fayyāḍ of Najaf on this point (<http://www.shiachat.com/forum/index.php?/topic/234986573-following-Fadl-Allāh-through>, accessed 23 August 2013; cf. Browers, "Faḍl Allāh", 26). To interpret Fayyad as allowing initiating emulation of a deceased *marjaʿ*, however, is to stretch a point: according to his website, that is only if the scholar concerned is known to be more learned than all living and dead scholars, "up to the time of Shaykh Tūsī" (d. 1067). And it is then further noted that such knowledge is only available to *mujtahids*, and not to the masses or indeed students, who are thus explicitly prohibited from starting to follow a deceased scholar. See questions 10, 21 and 23 of the section on *taqlīd* in the Q&A (*istiftāʾāt*) section of his website: <http://www.alfayadh.com/site/index.php?show=news&action=article&id=176>, accessed 22 August 2013 (and cf. question 15). It seems clear from question 24 that the scholar Fayyāḍ is thinking of is his teacher, Ayatollah Khūʾī. One hardly imagines he has Faḍl Allāh in mind.

⁴⁸ Faḍl Allāh, *Fiqh al-sharīʿa*, vol. 1, 15, section 18.

⁴⁹ See Clarke, "*Marjaʿiyyat* Beirut", on Fadlallah's *ijtihād*, and Gleave, "Conceptions of Authority", on the way in which the opinions of various scholars (here Ayatollahs Bāqir al-Ḥakīm, Ḥāʾirī and Sīstānī) on *aʿlamīyya* and other aspects of the *marjaʿiyya* can be contextualised with respect to their various statuses in the learned hierarchy.

them the most learned, and that initiating their *taqlīd* might according to some be possible on those grounds too, his offices certainly seemed to be implying that there were those among his followers who considered him as such. In 2011, the website reproduced sections of an interview on Facebook with one of Faḍl Allāh's students and teacher at his Beirut *ḥawza*, Shaykh Yāsir 'Awda, who said he was convinced of the "most learnedness" (*a'lamīyya*) of Faḍl Allāh.⁵⁰

It may be worth remembering here that, while acknowledging that "learning" in this context was specifically jurisprudential, Faḍl Allāh, in line with others in the "activist" school, thought that in order to make the right judgements as to the sharia, a *marja'*'s horizons needed to be broader than those of many scholars isolated in seminary culture: they should include a full awareness of the issues and changes that face today's Muslims, including in the field of politics, something which Faḍl Allāh had made a core part of his distinctive appeal.⁵¹ This might lead one to question whether being the most learned in *fiqh* really was the sole or best criterion of being a *marja'* for the world's Shi'a, a task which required a much more comprehensive plan (*mashrū' shāmil*) for the office.⁵² And indeed Faḍl Allāh's "comprehensive" (*shāmila*) *marja'īyya* was cited in a number of the tributes to him after his death, as in that of close associate 'Abd Allāh al-Ghurayfī, for instance.⁵³

⁵⁰ http://arabic.bayynat.org.lb/news/kitabab_05012011.htm, accessed 24 January 2011.

⁵¹ Faḍl Allāh, *Fiqh al-sharī'a*, vol. 1, 16; Salīm al-Ḥasanī, *al-Ma'ālim al-jadīda li-l-marja'īyya al-Shī'īyya: dirāsa wa-ḥiwār ma' Āyat Allāh al-Sayyid Muḥammad Ḥusayn Faḍl Allāh* (Beirut: Dār al-Malāk, 1994), 102-4. See also Faḍl Allāh, *al-Masā'il* (2005 ed.), vol. 1, 24, question 49; Clarke, "Marja'īyyat Beirut".

⁵² Ḥasanī, *al-Ma'ālim*, 94ff., 111-12, 129-31.

⁵³ http://arabic.bayynat.org.lb/funeral/kitabab_1507201_1.htm, accessed 15 August 2013.

Taqlīd of a deceased *marjaʿ* is, as we have seen, often talked of as being necessarily complemented with recourse to a living *marjaʿ* in new matters. The offices conceded that point, but claimed that Faḍl Allāh was so up to date that that need not be a concern for the near future.⁵⁴ And the biographical material issued by his offices indicates that right until the end of his life he was wholly lucid and continuously working. Here again, then, the need to turn to a new *marjaʿ* could perhaps be fended off for the moment. That was potentially important, because there was much speculation, among commentators at least, as to who Faḍl Allāh’s “successor” would be, or whether the two leading, but very different, rivals for his followers in Lebanon, Ayatollahs Sīstānī and Khāmināʾī, might win over the bulk of his *muqallidīn*.⁵⁵

In 2011, the offices told me in telephone conversation (and I saw this reproduced in chatrooms) that, for new issues, they were recommending Shaykh Ibrāhīm Jannatī of Qom as their *marjaʿ* of choice (not to be confused with Aḥmad Jannatī, above), as being of like mind to Faḍl Allāh on many points, such as, for instance, the intrinsic purity of the human being and the possibility of a female

⁵⁴ In the page on Q&A concerning *taqlīd*:

http://bayynat.org.lb/ahdathwakadaya/IS_Taklid1.htm, accessed 13 June 2011. See also Browsers, “Fadlallah”, 27.

⁵⁵ Deeb, “Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah”, 406; Browsers, “Fadlallah”, 26. In the early conversations I had with the offices, the unwelcome possibility was mentioned that, where a new *marjaʿ* held different opinions from the former, previous actions, such as prayers for example, might have to be re-done; but that does not seem to have emerged as a problem since. This is a point dealt with in the *fiqh* discussions, although most authorities do seem lenient (Khūʾī seems to have been relatively strict in this regard) (see e.g. Mirʾī, *Jāmiʿ al-aḥkām*, 18, section 16; Sīstānī, *Minhāj*, vol. 1, 13, section 17; Faḍl Allāh, *Fiqh al-sharīʿa*, vol. 1, 22, section 43, *al-Masāʾil* (2005 ed.), vol. 1, 19, question 3; Fayyad, the Q&A pages cited above, question 20).

marja'.⁵⁶ Shaykh Jannatī would appear to be a relatively obscure figure, without similar institutional resources and comparatively old (born in 1932). He could thus perhaps be seen as an unthreatening interim figure, to paper over an awkward transition. In subsequent conversations with the offices (in 2012), the specific recommendation was downplayed: people make their own choices and do not necessarily pass them on, I was told.⁵⁷

Emulation of Faḍl Allāh can continue then. And the consultation office (*maktab al-istiftā'āt*) has stayed open, by their own account still very busy – just as busy as before Faḍl Allāh's death, its head told me over the telephone in March 2012, and again in September 2014 – not busy issuing new fatwas, that is, but relaying Faḍl Allāh's known position, to his continuing *muqallidīn*, and to those of other *marāji'*, or even those who do not follow a specific *marja'*, but who value their opinion. Before his death Faḍl Allāh would review every response sent. I was initially told that his senior son Sayyid 'Alī had taken on this role; more recent statements indicate that the office staff now rely on the expertise of their many-man scholarly council – an

⁵⁶ See Shaykh Jannatī's website, www.jannaati.com, and the passing mention in Moussavi, *Religious Authority*, 176-7. Browsers, "Fadlallah", 26, also refers to him, commenting that he "overlapped with Fadlallah in Najaf, where they were both students". For the chat, see <http://www.shiachat.com/forum/index.php?/topic/234978549-who-is...>, accessed 13 June 2011.

⁵⁷ Of some further diagnostic significance here is Faḍl Allāh's tribunal (*maktab al-qaḍā'*), which tries disputes, especially marital ones: see Morgan Clarke, "Neo-calligraphy: Religious Authority and Media Technology in Contemporary Shiite Islam", *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 52 (2010), 366-7. As of my conversation with the offices in 2012, it was also reportedly still busy. Here, in judicial matters, recourse to a living *marja'* is required, especially for divorce by the judge without the husband's consent (*ṭalāq al-ḥākim*): in such cases, I was told, they do rely on the imprimatur of Shaykh Jannatī or that of another *marja'*, such as (interestingly) Ayatollah Makārim al-Shīrāzī. When I asked again in September 2014, Shaykh Jannatī was again mentioned, this time alongside Sayyid Maḥmūd Hāshimī Shahrūdī.

unusual resource, they note – and on their archive.⁵⁸ They also continue to announce the date of the commencement of the lunar month, Faḍl Allāh holding the distinctive view that it should be determined through the application of astronomical science. Continuing followers of Faḍl Allāh would therefore, as before, be occasionally marked out by starting fasting or feasting on days different from the followers of others.

It must be true that in the age of the website, crammed with text, photos, video and audio, the home page continuously updated, with a radio and TV station linked in via YouTube, there is sense in which a deceased *marja'* can be more of a continuing presence than in the past. And I would say that Faḍl Allāh's website has if anything become more active, made-over a number of times, with a greater density of material and movement than those of most other *maraji'*, the sense of *actualité* so vital to the image of Faḍl Allāh's engaged and contemporary *marja'iyya* maintained increasingly through the provision of global news stories concerning Islam (and with a moving news bar at the top of the page). The office's presence on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube and its accessibility through Android, iPhone and now WhatsApp are prominently trailed.

⁵⁸ <http://arabic/bayynat.org.lb/ArticlePage.aspx?id=3447>, accessed 12 September 2013. The council members include Faḍl Allāh's sons Sayyids 'Alī and Ja'far and Shaykh Ḥusayn al-Khishn, discussed below, as well as Shaykh Aḥmad Kawrānī, Shaykh Muḥsin 'Aṭwī, Shaykh Muḥammad Qubaysī, Sayyid Maḥdī Faḍl Allāh, Shaykh 'Alī Mir'ī, Shaykh Yāsir 'Awda, Shaykh Ḥusayn 'Abd Allāh, Shaykh Jihād Farḥāt, Sayyid Muḥammad al-Ḥusaynī, Shaykh Yāsir Qaṭīsh, Shaykh Zuhayr Qawṣān and Shaykh Yūsuf Sabītī.

I have discussed elsewhere what I have referred to as the “mutuality” and “immediacy” of Faḍl Allāh’s *marjaʿiyya*.⁵⁹ Faḍl Allāh spoke of being as much pupil as teacher, open to the problems of today’s Muslims and in touch with their needs, a direct and personal engagement that, his school claimed, fed into his progressive and open-minded Islamic legal opinions.⁶⁰ If an air of contemporaneity and immediacy can be maintained through a regularly updated website with a wide variety of changing global news items, mutuality is now effected through the provision of a comments facility on many of the pages, relatively unusual for a *marjaʿ*’s website, more commonly concerned perhaps to police the figurehead’s profile than to open up to their public.

The other crucial domain of religio-legal authority is the seminary, and, as I have argued at length elsewhere, pedagogy was fundamental to bolstering Faḍl Allāh’s *marjaʿiyya* and more particularly in combating the aspersions cast on his right to claim the status of *mujtahid*.⁶¹ He published a very extensive series of his lectures at the highest, *dars al-khārij* level (*taqrīrāt*), edited by his leading students, which allowed a scrutiny of the methods and reasoning that lay behind his many controversial rulings. And this teaching circle was at the heart of a wider programme of founding and supporting institutes for advanced religious studies, “*hawzas*”, in Lebanon and at Sayyida Zaynab in Damascus. There was a sense in which a rebel *marjaʿ*, if I can put it like that, challenging the centre, needed to make a *hawza* of his

⁵⁹ Morgan Clarke & Marcia Inhorn, “Mutuality and Immediacy Between *Marjaʿ* and *Muqallid*: Evidence From Male IVF Patients in Shiʿi Lebanon”, *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 43 (2011), 409-27.

⁶⁰ Munā Sukkariyya, *ʿAn sanawāt wa-mawāqif wa-shakhṣiyyāt: hākadhā taḥaddath... hākadhā qāl* (interviews with Ayatollah Muḥammad Ḥusayn Faḍl Allāh). Beirut: Dār al-Nahār, 2007), 220-21.

⁶¹ Clarke, “*Marjaʿiyyat* Beirut”.

own at the periphery, in part to sustain his claims to religious authority. Of course, these *hawzas* were about much more than that: they were, and will no doubt continue to be, fundamental to the larger project of creating committed generations of Shi'i Muslims in Lebanon and the cadres of clerics needed to lead and shape them. In this sense, they are a key part of Faḍl Allāh's legacy.

That work continues. On the day after Faḍl Allāh's death, his Beirut *hawza*, al-Ma'had al-Shar'i al-Islami, announced the opening of registration for the next academic year, and studies – and financial support of students – seem to have continued as normal.⁶² Of course, Sayyid Faḍl Allāh could no longer give his course at the highest, *dars al-khārij* level; but courses at that level are still offered, in a modern style. Teachers apparently include, among others, Shaykh Ḥusayn al-Khishn, one of Faḍl Allāh's leading students, and, according to his own website, the general manager of the *hawza* and lecturer there in the highest level studies in *fiqh* and *uṣūl*.⁶³

The dynamics of succession

Shaykh Khishn has himself been spoken about as a potential "successor" to Faḍl Allāh, joining a select list of possibilities aired by commentators, including, as already

⁶² http://arabic.bayynat.org.lb/news/nachatat_05072010.htm, accessed 13 June 2011; telephone conversations with the offices in June 2011 and March 2012. A new round of registration was announced for 2013 and the registration forms, dated 21 August, could be downloaded from the home page of the website. But with the political situation in Beirut so unsettled, there was apparently some uncertainty as to whether the *hawza* could open (personal comments from Jean-Michel Landry).

⁶³ Course registration information and documentation, especially the course handbook, *al-Dalīl al-mūjaz li-l-hawza al-'ilmiyya*, all dated 21 August 2013 and downloaded from arabic.bayynat.org.lb, September 2013; <http://www.al-khechin.com/about>, accessed 11 September 2013. See also the *Ma'had*'s own website, www.almaahad.org.

mentioned, ‘Abd Allāh al-Ghurayfī of Bahrain, and nearer to home, Lebanese Shaykh ‘Afīf al-Nābulī, close to Ḥizb Allāh – nothing as yet seems to have come of either of the latter.⁶⁴ The notion of “succession” is frequently bandied about in connection with the *marja’iyya*, but needs some care. What is it that is being succeeded to? The following, the network, the financial resources, the institutions, the teaching circle or the intellectual or political path taken? The *marja’iyya* is not an “office” but an achievement: one does not in principle or practice need to inherit the *marja’iyya* of another; one can aspire to one’s own – but one has to seem plausibly worthy. Even in the case of the “most learned”, supreme *marja’iyya*, rather more rare in practice than in theory, where one is talking about a unique position to be competed over, a “succession” rarely seems to have been a matter of formal arrangement.⁶⁵

Where it has appeared as such, it has largely been appointive, as famously in Muḥammad Ḥasan Najafī’s (d. 1850) death-bed designation of Murtaḍā Anṣārī as the one to follow him (and Anṣārī did take the precaution of offering pre-eminence to another leading figure first). Such appointive succession was familiar for other forms of religious authority, as in succession to the charismatic shaykh in Sufi orders, and by extension among the Shaykhī Shi‘a, but seems to have been unprecedented

⁶⁴ On the last see <https://ar-ar.facebook.com/Nabolsi>. That suggestion comes, for one, from David Schenker, “Passing of Shiite Cleric Fadlallah Spells Trouble for Lebanon”, *The Christian Science Monitor*, 9 July 2010. Accessed online: <http://www.csmonitor.com/layout/set/print/Commentary/Opinion/2010/0709/Passing-...>, accessed 23 August 2013. See also Browsers, “Fadlallah”, 26.

⁶⁵ In mapping out the issues of succession I have found helpful Jack Goody, “Introduction”, in Jack Goody (ed.), *Succession to High Office* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966). Weber’s discussion is seminal: Max Weber, “The Nature of Charismatic Authority and its Routinization”, in S.N. Eisenstadt (ed.), *Max Weber on Charisma and Institution Building* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1968).

among the “orthodox” Uṣūlī ‘*ulama*’.⁶⁶ The procedure was not instituted as the rule for future instances and did not become the norm.⁶⁷ The next plausible candidate for pre-eminence after Anṣārī, Mīrzā Ḥasan Shīrāzī (d. 1895), only emerged after years of activity and the death of his rivals – this the more common mode, what Calmard calls “selection by longevity”.⁶⁸ Again, after Shīrāzī’s death, his authority did not survive as an institution that could be passed on.⁶⁹ Rather, a plurality of leading *marāji*’ vied for constituencies, the fissiparous nature of the highest religious authority re-asserting itself. Khumaynī’s designation of first Muntaẓarī (a classic example of the dangers of pre-mortem appointment⁷⁰) and then Khāminā’ī is rather an example of appointment to high office, that of Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic: manoeuvring Khāminā’ī into a plausible *marja’iyya*, on the other hand, took longer and, again, the death of senior figures.⁷¹

⁶⁶ Litvak, *Shi’i Scholars*, 59, 70-1; Denis MacEoin, “Changes in Charismatic Authority in Qajar Shi’ism”, in Edmund Bosworth and Carole Hillenbrand (eds.), *Qajar Iran: Political, Social and Cultural change, 1800-1925* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1983), 161-2, 166.

⁶⁷ Contra Moussavi, *Religious Authority*, 271. For some other instances of ad hoc appointment or election to the *marja’iyya* see Litvak, *Shi’i Scholars*, 46, 54-5, 93.

⁶⁸ Jean Calmard, “Mardja’-i Taḳlīd”, in Peri Bearman et al. (eds.), *Encyclopedia of Islam, Second Edition* (Brill Online). Litvak, *Shi’i Scholars*, 80, notes that several sources claim that Anṣārī had pointed to Shīrāzī as his designated choice, but doubts the suggestion.

⁶⁹ Litvak, *Shi’i Scholars*, 90.

⁷⁰ Goody, “Introduction”, 3.

⁷¹ Gierling, “The ‘Marja’iya’ in Iran”; Baqer Moin, *Khomeini: Life of the Ayatollah* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1999), 261-5, 277-93, 309-10; Walbridge, “The Counterreformation”; Khalaji, *The Last Marja*; Said Amir Arjomand, *After Khomeini: Iran Under His Successors* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 35-42, 174-7. Succession to the Supreme Leadership has been bureaucratised with the institution of the Assembly of Experts, although how the next leader, should there be one, will actually emerge is still an open question. See Alireza Nader, David Thaler and S.R. Bohandy, *The Next Supreme Leader: Succession in the Islamic Republic of Iran* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2011).

Hereditary succession, according to Robbins Burling the general rule world historically, has not been common either.⁷² Unlike the case of the state-appointed positions of the Ottoman Empire and Safavid and Qajar Iran such as the Imām Jum‘a or Shaykh al-Islām, which were very often monopolised by families, the *mujtahid* class – which resisted institutionalisation as a state-appointed office – could not hand on their status or their networks through hereditary succession. Individual scholarly reputation remained crucial.⁷³ Litvak talks of the “‘mujtahid dream,’ according to which every gifted student could become a mujtahid”.⁷⁴ There are of course distinguished and long-standing scholarly dynasties, and the sons and relatives of leading *marāji‘* have enjoyed great prestige and influence.⁷⁵ But one cannot simply take up the *marja‘iyya* of one’s father without being plausibly qualified to do so. Indeed a son is in some ways handicapped, not least by the necessary generation gap that means one will inevitably be decades younger than one’s father’s most plausible rivals in a system that clearly values the charisma of age.⁷⁶ Close involvement in the affairs of the great father presents a further obstacle to the study required – leaving the son-in-law, the favourite student married to the

⁷² Robbins Burling, *The Passage of Power: Studies in Political Succession* (New York and London: Academic Press, 1974). For some attempts see Litvak, *Shi‘i Scholars*, 51, 54-5, 70.

⁷³ Amanat, “In Between the *Madrassa* and the Marketplace”; Arjomand, “The *Mujtahid* of the Age”; Litvak, *Shi‘i Scholars*, 4, 5, 55, 78, 103.

⁷⁴ Litvak, *Shi‘i Scholars*, 31.

⁷⁵ See Walbridge, *The Thread of Mu‘awiya*, 24ff., and idem, “The Counter-reformation”, 232-3, on the sons of Ḥakīm and Khū‘ī; for the latter see also Corboz, “The al-Khoei Foundation”, 94-5; and see Nader et al., *The Next Supreme Leader*, 34, on the influential roles of Khumaynī’s son Aḥmad and Khāminā’ī’s Muḥtabā.

⁷⁶ Goody, “Introduction”, 9. See Louër, *Transnational Shia Politics*, 65-66, 93, on the controversy over Muḥammad al-Shīrāzī’s self-proclamation of *marja‘iyya* status when still in his thirties and the use of lateral, rather than vertical, succession to his *marja‘iyya* after his death by his younger brother Sadiq.

great teacher's daughter, to be preferred.⁷⁷ Witness the dilemma currently faced by Muqtaḍā al-Ṣadr, for instance, who relies on the fatwas of his deceased father, Muḥammad Muḥammad Ṣādiq al-Ṣadr (d. 1999), while simultaneously having recourse to a living *mujtahid*, Kāẓim al-Ḥā'irī, studying to become one himself and even issuing the occasional precocious fatwa-like statement.⁷⁸

It is Sayyid Faḍl Allāh's eldest son, Sayyid 'Alī, who now regularly delivers the Friday sermon in Masjid al-Imāmayn al-Ḥasanayn, the great mosque in Beirut's southern suburbs associated with Faḍl Allāh, as he had often done in his father's absence before his passing.⁷⁹ It was he who received those paying their respects at his father's funeral. And it is he who is now the public face of the continuing *marja'iyya*, as the regular news postings on the website remind us, continuing his father's social, political and ecumenical engagement, receiving Lebanese politicians – old allies like Salīm al-Ḥoṣṣ, but also talking on the telephone to current players like

⁷⁷ On such marriages see e.g. Litvak, *Shi'i Scholars*, 1998, 26.

⁷⁸ Rizvi, "Political Mobilization", 1304; Reinart Visser, "The Sadrists Between Mahdism, neo-Akhbarism and Usuli orthodoxy: Examples from Southern Iraq", in Lloyd Ridgeon (ed.), *Shi'i Islam and Identity: Religion, Politicians and Change in the Global Muslim Community* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2012), 118-9. According to Luizard, Muḥammad al-Ṣadr himself pointed to Ḥā'irī, saying: "Let my emulators follow Ayatollah Kāẓim al-Ḥā'irī until one of my students becomes a *marja'*". The Qom-based Ḥā'irī has, however, proved incapable of fulfilling the role. Ṣadr's followers thus apparently prefer to continue following their deceased *marja'* rather than Ḥā'irī, and Muqtaḍā al-Ṣadr's spokesmen maintain that Ḥā'irī himself said that was permissible (and see note above) – in case of new issues they should then refer to Muqtaḍā. Muqtaḍā has other rivals, Maḥmūd al-Ḥasanī in Karbalā', and in Najaf Muḥammad al-Ya'qūbī, one of his father's students who has precociously proclaimed his *mujtahid* status and posted a video on his website where Muḥammad Ṣādiq al-Ṣadr indicates him as his heir. See Luizard, "The Sadrists", 258, 269-70; and also Harling and Nasser, "The Sadrist Trend", 288, 293-8.

⁷⁹ Giving the sermon in an important mosque or one under the deceased's patronage is often referred to as another indicator of pre-eminence or succession. Litvak, *Shi'i Scholars*, 56, 97; Rizvi, "Political Mobilization", 1307; Corboz, "The al-Khoei Foundation", 105.

Prime Minister Mīqātī, or the leader of the Future Movement Saʿd al-Ḥarīrī – and meeting with representatives of the various religious communities to discuss, for instance, episodes of especial sectarian tension or to speak at the commemoration of the death of past Mufti of the Republic, Shaykh Ḥasan Khālīd.⁸⁰

He maintains support of Palestinian organisations like Ḥamās and Islamic Jihād and ties with fellow Islamists like the local Jamāʿa Islāmiyya. He also keeps his father's wider regional networks alive, receiving regional delegations and actors, especially from Iraq and Iran, but also Kuwait, Bahrain, Turkey and Yemen, and ambassadors from Egypt, Sudan and Iran; he sends a telegram to then Egyptian president Mursī about the new Egyptian constitution, and one in commiseration for the death of the Saudi Crown Prince. Sayyid ʿAlī himself travels to Iraq, being given a welcoming lunch in the delegation's honour by Ibrāhīm al-Jaʿfarī; he is invited again in 2013 to speak at an Islamic conference and is received by Prime Minister Mālīkī. He makes several trips to Iran, one as noted above, but also to speak each year at the Conference of Islamic Unity in Tehran. In September 2012, he met with Leader Khāmināʾī as well as Sayyid Maḥmūd al-Hāshimī (Shahrūdī), and indeed Shaykh Ibrāhīm Jannatī (see above), although no notion of what was discussed is given. After trips to Kuwait, Australia and Mecca and Medina for the Hajj, in 2013 he went to Egypt, meeting with the Shaykh al-Azhar and the Mufti, discussing, among other things, future co-operation between the Faḍl Allāh foundation and al-Azhar. He was received by the Syrian president. These are all, then, opportunities to look statesmanlike. His reach is international, receiving delegations and actors from

⁸⁰ I draw here and below on lists of his meetings from 2010-13 posted on the website, most recently at <http://arabic.bayynat.org.lb/ListingNewsPage.aspx?id=698>, accessed 12 September 2013, and individual news items, too many to list in full here.

Germany and Australia, the ambassadors of Australia, Poland, Switzerland, China and Latin America, and controversial British MP George Galloway (twice [!]).

In these efforts he is helped by his younger brother, Sayyid Ja‘far, who also occasionally gives the Friday sermon, and is dispatched on some such missions – both frequently resort to a virtual presence at events over a video-link. Their uncle, Sayyid Muḥammad ‘Alī Faḍl Allāh, is also sometimes mentioned as performing minor such roles. But neither Sayyid ‘Alī nor Sayyid Ja‘far (and still less, I think, Sayyid Muḥammad ‘Alī) are claiming the *marja‘iyya* for themselves. The offices are still very firmly in their father’s name. Sayyid ‘Alī is referred to by the office as al-‘Allāma, “The very learned”, which does indicate his scholarship, if not to the level of *ijtihād*.⁸¹ In the 2011 interview cited above, teacher at the Beirut *ḥawza* and member of the offices’ jurisprudential council Shaykh Yāsir ‘Awda stated that he was convinced that both Sayyids ‘Alī and Ja‘far are “on the path of *ijtihād*” (*‘alā khaṭṭ al-ijtihād*) and fit to issue some fatwas, even if in a partial fashion (*juz‘iyyan*, i.e. not absolutely, *muṭlaqan*). But I take it that neither would make such claims themselves. Certainly they are serious scholars: Sayyid ‘Alī edited his father’s lectures on *jihād*, Sayyid Ja‘far the volume on the age of religious majority (*al-bulūgh*).⁸² Sayyid ‘Alī spoke at the American University of Beirut on medical ethics (specifically, organ donation, including the cutting-edge topic of stem-cells), which recalls famous such lectures by

⁸¹ In much of the condolence correspondence he is addressed as Ḥujjat al-Islām wa-l-Muslimīn.

⁸² ‘Alī Faḍl Allāh, *Kitāb al-jihād: taqrīran li-baḥṭh Samāḥat Āyat Allāh al-‘Uzmā al-Sayyid Muḥammad Ḥusayn Faḍl Allāh* (Beirut: Dār al-Malāk, 1998). Ja‘far Faḍl Allāh, *al-Bulūgh: baḥṭh ‘ilmī fiqhī li-Samāḥat Āyat Allāh al-‘Uzmā al-Sayyid Muḥammad Ḥusayn Faḍl Allāh* (Beirut: Dār al-Malāk, 2006).

his father.⁸³ In some of my more recent contacts (March 2012, September 2014), this was downplayed: it was said that Sayyid ‘Alī is not putting himself forward as pursuing the status of *mujtahid*. Rather, he is following in his father’s footsteps in the promotion of an ecumenical Islam of openness (*infītāḥ*) and dialogue through these relationships on the national, regional and global level. The density of his engagements precludes scholarly advancement.⁸⁴

Shaykh Ḥusayn al-Khishn, on the other hand, was one of Faḍl Allāh’s leading pupils, editor of his research lectures on the judiciary, manager and lecturer at his *ḥawza*, as we have seen, and a member of the board of trustees of Faḍl Allāh’s institutions and occasional giver of the Friday sermon in Faḍl Allāh’s mosque.⁸⁵ In my own experience, he is an impressive figure, the author of a number of works very much in Faḍl Allāh’s style, such as “The sharia keeps up with the times” and volumes on Islam and the environment, smoking and violence.⁸⁶ While I dare say he would

⁸³ Morgan Clarke, *Islam and New Kinship: Reproductive Technology and the Shariah in Lebanon* (New York: Berghahn, 2009), 194-5.

⁸⁴ Sayyid Ja‘far, however, does have the time and is advancing in this direction, according to a conversation with the offices in September 2014. He now has his own dedicated “internal page” on the main website, I note: *al-Ṣafḥa al-dākhiliyya li-Sayyid Ja‘far Faḍl Allāh ‘alā mawqī’ bayyanāt*, <http://arabic.bayynat.org.lb/ListingMakalat.aspx?id=6233#>, accessed 2 September 2014.

⁸⁵ For the lectures see Ḥusayn al-Khishn, *Fiqh al-qaḍā’: taqrīran li-baḥṭh Samāḥat Āyat Allāh al-‘Uzmā al-Sayyid Muḥammad Ḥusayn Faḍl Allāh* (2 vols.) (Beirut: Dār al-Malāk, 2004, 2007). I draw on his online biography: <http://www.al-khechin.com/about>, accessed 11 September 2013. See also Browsers, “Fadlallah”, 26, and the interview with Khishn on the *marja’iyya* in Lebanon in Lebanese newspaper al-Liwā’ shortly after Faḍl Allāh’s death (http://arabic.bayynat.org.lb/nachatat/tagtia_27072010.htm, accessed 2 August 2010).

⁸⁶ Ḥusayn al-Khishn, *al-Sharī‘a tuwākib al-ḥayāt: qaḍāyā islāmiyya mu‘āṣira* (Beirut: Dar al-Hadi, 2004); idem, *al-Islām wa-l-bī‘a: khaṭawāt naḥw fiqh bī‘ī* (Beirut: Dār al-Hādī, 2004); idem, *al-Islām wa-l-‘unf: qirā’a fī zāhirat al-takfīr* (Beirut: al-Markaz al-Thaqāfī al-‘Arabī, 2006); idem, *Fī fiqh al-salāma al-ṣiḥḥiyya: al-tadkhīn namūdḥajan*

not consent to the ascription himself, there are those who would claim for him the level of *ijtihād*, or at least proximity to it. Certainly, to teach *dars al-khārij*, as he is said to do at the *hawza*, is in a sense to put oneself on that road.

There is no explicit sense, however, in which Shaykh Khishn, while a core member of the organisation, is being erected as a “successor”. Lately, he seems to be striking out on his own, with his own website, www.al-khechin.com.⁸⁷ That site has links out to a number of other Faḍl Allāh-affiliated sites: the main bayynat site itself, the Faḍl Allāh library, Tawasol Online, and the site of Shaykh ‘Alī Ḥasan Ghalūm, Faḍl Allāh’s representative in Kuwait (see below). Shaykh Khishn’s website does not have a section on “*istiftā’āt*”, so there is no claim to *marja’iyya* there – but it does have Q&A, termed “dialogue” (*hiwār*), which amounts to something similar.⁸⁸ To pretend to the *marja’iyya* requires the cultivation of a certain reputation and networks. As one staff member put it to me, “for ‘ilm [knowledge] Shaykh Ḥusayn doesn’t need to go to Najaf and Qom. But for reputation [*shuhra*] maybe he does.”⁸⁹ Beirut is, in these senses, still not enough. (And Shaykh Ḥusayn has had his works on smoking and Islam and violence translated into Farsi and circulated in Iran.) And again, students as much as sons may not yet be senior enough to plausibly take up one’s mantle: Shaykh Khishn is still relatively young, born in 1966.

(Beirut: Markaz Ibn Idrīs al-Ḥillī, 2007). The online biography notes, in addition to his articles and lectures, sixteen books in all: other notable titles include one on human rights in Islam and one on non-Muslims entering mosques.

⁸⁷ The website was at one point brought down by some cyber-assailants, as Faḍl Allāh’s website reported, testimony to the close links between the two: http://arabic.bayynat.org.lb/news/akhbar_05062012.htm, accessed 8 June 2012.

⁸⁸ <http://www.al-khechin.com/hewar>, accessed 11 September 2013. The leading question on a recent visit concerned attacks on deceased *marāji’*.

⁸⁹ The online biography does, however, note that he studied at the *hawza* in Lebanon from 1983-7 and then in Qom from 1987-2000.

The global institution living through its website

The activities of Faḍl Allāh's offices continue then, but through the combined efforts of a number of figures. Religio-legal authority and personal, political and social representation can no longer be plausibly united in one charismatic founder figure, with both scholarly expertise and socio-political engagement and *savoir-faire*. There is now perhaps a more apparent division of labour, although the offices continue to work under the aegis of the deceased *marja'*.⁹⁰ It is worth noting that Faḍl Allāh's institutions were not, so far as one can tell, dependent on the continuing receipt of the religious tithes of a *marja'*, but seem to have been put on sound financial footing, including through the founding of a number of income-generating enterprises such as the network of petrol stations, Maḥaṭṭāt al-Aytām, and his now global chain of restaurants, al-Sāḥa.⁹¹ The work of the distinct but allied Mabarrāt charitable trust run by Faḍl Allāh's brother Muḥammad Bāqir, including the high-profile orphanages and sizeable Bahman hospital, along with allied clinics, schools and cultural centres, certainly seems to continue.⁹² And so, as we have seen, does the work of the legal arm of the *marja'iyya* and its political engagement.

⁹⁰ Cf. Arjomand (2009: 5-6, 36-7 and *passim*) on how Khumaynī's charismatic *marja'iyya* was in part institutionalised through such a division of labour.

⁹¹ On the latter see Lara Deeb and Mona Harb, *Leisurely Islam: Negotiating Geography and Morality in Shi'ite South Beirut* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), 85-7. In September 2014 I was nevertheless told that the offices can still receive the *khums* religious tithe through the permission of a number of living *marāji'*, with the clear implication that they still obtain some such income; they are free to accept donations (*ṣadaqāt*) in any case.

⁹² As of 2012 the organisation included nine orphanages taking care of 4000 orphans and fifteen schools educating 22,000 children, alongside numerous special needs schools, health centres and hospitals, and religious and cultural centres: http://arabic.bayynat.org.lb/tahkikat/tahkik_12062012.htm, accessed 13 June 2012;

We may, then, be seeing in some sense the fruition of Faḍl Allāh's vision of an institutionalised *marja'iyya*: *al-marja'iyya al-mu'assasa*. He had spoken in interview admiringly of the papacy (especially that of John Paul II) as an alternative model for the *marja'iyya*.⁹³ That was with respect to its comprehensive address – social, political and cultural – also part of his vision for the contemporary *marja'iyya* as we have seen. When one considers the breadth of awareness required for such an effort, one realises that:

[T]his must issue from institutions acting within the greater institution; it must include experts in all the issues it acts on and the studies it needs. It must have an effective global network of representatives. Take the example of the papacy, a comprehensive approach, social, political, cultural, acting through institutions and representatives in a joined-up manner.

Such an institutionalised approach would overcome the great weakness of the *marja'iyya* in comparison: that it is in the end just an individual person – and usually a very old one – and not an institution containing the expertise and research that it could and should rely on. Such an institution could develop and progress, its expertise and archives outliving the individual *marja'* and becoming instantly available to the next incumbent, rather than being dissolved, lost.⁹⁴ The comments

see also <http://www.mabarrat.org.lb/profile/LOCATIONS>, accessed 12 September 2013.

⁹³ Ḥasani, *al-Ma'ālim*, 95-6. It is interesting to note in passing that some Iranian radicals went so far as to suggest that Mīrzā Ḥasan Shīrāzī (d. 1896) be made into “a sort of Shi'i pope”. Shīrāzī won pre-eminence in part by founding an independent centre of learning in Sāmarrā', became truly famous through political engagement, was seen as a figure of “comprehensive qualities” and was termed the *mujaddid* of that century (Litvak, *Shi'i Scholars*, 83-7). There are resonances in Faḍl Allāh's project.

⁹⁴ Ḥasani, *al-Ma'ālim*, 64-5, 114, 121.

are clearly reminiscent of similar ideas on the part of others, not least Muḥammad Bāqir al-Ṣadr, whose thoughts are in fact reproduced in an appendix to the same volume.⁹⁵

Many of those writing in tribute after Faḍl Allāh's death mentioned his prodigious institution building. Some, such as Ibrāhīm al-Ja'fari, specifically referred to the idea of the *marja'iyya mu'assasa* (as he did at the Manchester conference mentioned above). And it started to be highlighted on the website, which now describes itself as "The website of the foundation of His Excellency the Jurist and Renewer, the Marja' Sayyid Muḥammad Ḥusayn Faḍl Allāh" (*Mawqi' mu'assasat al-'allāma al-marja' al-Sayyid Muḥammad Ḥusayn Faḍl Allāh*).⁹⁶ Initially a linked page was put up with a brief exposition of Faḍl Allāh's thoughts on the matter, which clearly drew on the materials cited above.⁹⁷ But later (about summer 2013 I would say) this was expanded into something much grander and really quite extraordinary: a sort of map of Faḍl Allāh's organisation, but referred to as *al-marja'iyya al-*

⁹⁵ Ḥasani, *al-Ma'ālim*, 159-75; and see Talib Aziz, "Baqir al-Sadr's Quest for the *Marja'iya*", in Linda Walbridge (ed.), *The Most Learned of the Shi'a: the Institution of the Marja' Taqlid* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). Similar ideas had been aired by Khumaynī, Muṭahharī and others: Ann Lambton, "A Reconsideration of the Position of the *Marja' al-Taqlid* and the Religious Institution", *Studia Islamica* 20 (1964), 115-35; Walbridge, "The Counter-reformation", 230.

⁹⁶ News items on the website often talk of "the Faḍl Allāh foundation" (*mu'assasat al-marja' Faḍl Allāh*) doing this or that. I am not sure why or when the claim to *mujaddid* status that was previously incorporated (see above) came to be dropped (sometime in 2014 I think). At the time of writing, the front page now describes the website as "sending a Message" (*mawqi' risāli*), regarding "Islam and life" (*li-l-islām wa-l-ḥayāt*).

⁹⁷ <http://arabic.bayynat.org.lb/marjaa/marji3iyat.htm#2>, accessed 11 June 2011.

mu'assasa, made up of a number of different sub-units each of which has a link to an individual page explaining them in more detail.⁹⁸ I reproduce the structure here:

al-Marja'iyya al-mu'assasa comprises:

- The board of trustees (*hay'at al-umana'*).
- The apparatus of the *marja'iyya* (*jihāz al-marja'iyya*), comprising:
 - The Islamic legal office (*al-maktab al-shar'i*), responding to requests for legal opinions (*istiftā'āt*), and also determining the lunar date and supervising the editing and publishing of Faḍl Allāh's *risāla 'amaliyya*.
 - The judicial office (*maktab al-qaḍā'*), arbitrating and judging between parties.
- Religious outreach (*al-tablīgh al-dīnī*): local but also international, especially in the West and countries with large (Muslim) migrant populations.
- The colleges of higher religious education (*al-ḥawzāt al-dīniyya*).
- The charitable association (*jam'iyyat al-mabarrāt*).
- The office for social services (*maktab al-khidmāt al-ijtimā'iyya*), which provides assistance for the poor, disabled and elderly.⁹⁹
- The "Family brotherhood association" (*jam'iyyat usrat al-ta'akhhī*), the original foundation that welcomed Faḍl Allāh when he first arrived in Lebanon in 1966 and which still provides some services.

⁹⁸ The main page is <http://arabic.bayynat.org.lb/HtmlSecondary.aspx?id=2086>, accessed 2 September 2014.

⁹⁹ As of 2012 the office was apparently helping 26,245 poor people, 7640 orphans within foster families, 965 disabled persons and 817 elderly.

- The media apparatus, including:
 - The website, www.bayynat.org.
 - The Faith (*al-īmān*) satellite television channel (not yet fully operational).
 - The Good News (*al-bashā'ir*) radio station.
 - The Bayynāt weekly magazine.
- The centres for research and intellectual concerns (*al-marākiz al-baḥṭhiyya wa-l-fikriyya*), including the publisher Dār al-Malāk, various Islamic centres that organise workshops and other activities, and a foundation for keeping alive the legacy of the *marja'*, which keeps and disseminates his archive.
- Activities outside of Lebanon: these include, among other ventures, charitable institutions in Iraq, mosques and Islamic centres in Sydney, Abidjan (Ivory Coast), Berlin and Brazil and a popular Islamic school in Burkina Faso, as well as the offices in Syria and Qom – the latter not only distributes Faḍl Allāh's books and raises awareness about him there in Farsi, but also supervises the Farsi pages of the website and supports activities in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Azerbaijan, publishing the sayyid's works in Urdu, Azeri and Turkish.¹⁰⁰

A new departure?

¹⁰⁰ The news items on the website frequently mention the activities of these centres abroad, around 'Āshūrā' for instance; Sayyid Aḥmad Faḍl Allāh, stated as the manager of the foundation, seems to have been notably active in West Africa.

This is, then, an explicit attempt to put forward the organisation that Faḍl Allāh had developed, and that continues to operate, as the institutionalised *marjaʿiyya*.

Contrary to that vision, it remains for the moment very much in Faḍl Allāh's name and dependent on his person and enduring charisma and authority. But one can nevertheless discern a certain differentiation of roles within it and a rendering explicit of roles and relationships that were previously less obvious. An intriguing new regular section of the website, "The Friday pulpit" (*Minbār al-jumʿa*), for example, exploits the networking potential of the Internet by making links to the websites of other religious figures, an unusual move in this context. Each week the page brings together summaries of and links to the Friday sermons of a number of figures, including, on a shifting basis: Sayyid ʿAlī Faḍl Allāh; Sayyid ʿAbd Allāh al-Ghurayfī; Shaykh Māhir Ḥammūd, a renegade Sunni Lebanese cleric allied with Ḥizb Allāh; prominent Saudi Shaykh Ḥasan al-Ṣaffār; Faḍl Allāh's past representatives in Australia, Shaykh Yūsuf Nabhā, and Kuwait, Shaykh ʿAlī Ḥasan Ghalūm, who appeared prominently in the reports of the mourning and celebration of Faḍl Allāh; and Sayyid Muḥammad ʿAlī Faḍl Allāh. One sees perhaps an attempt to resituate the *marjaʿiyya* within a larger context, more of an organisation or movement and less the manifestation of just one personality.

I have heard it observed that this is something fundamentally new – with a note of disapproval – for a *marjaʿ*'s office (*maktab, bayt*) to remain open after their death. This claim of novelty extends to the offices' staff, one of whom commented that usually a *marjaʿ* dies just leaving love in the hearts of some devoted followers and a *risāla ʿamaliyya*; Faḍl Allāh stays alive in his students and his sons – and he left an institution where others did not even leave an office open. One could, however,

compare the case of the al-Khū'ī Foundation, whose processes of succession and institutionalisation have been well documented by Elvire Corboz.¹⁰¹ The extent of the institutions founded in Ayatollah Khū'ī's name was unparalleled.¹⁰² And the foundation endured after his death in 1992, still in his name (and the great *marja'*'s image is featured on the front page of the website, www.al-khoei.org). The Ayatollah's family, students and past representatives man the board of trustees – indeed, according to the terms of Khū'ī's will, one of his sons or grandsons who is a cleric must serve as its general secretary. As Corboz comments, “the successive compositions of the board of trustees ... indicate that the leadership of the al-Khoei Foundation has been thought to be – and still is – a continuation of Abu al-Qasim al-Khu'i's *marja' iyya*”.¹⁰³ And again, by drawing on the transnational networks of representation that constituted the *marja' iyya*, the Foundation increases its own transnational potency.¹⁰⁴

The striking difference, however, is that where the Faḍl Allāh foundation is for the moment content to remain under the aegis of his continuing *marja' iyya*, the al-Khū'ī Foundation's by-laws (article 5) stipulate that, after Khū'ī's death, it should “work under the patronage of the *marja' a'lā* [i.e. pre-eminent authority] of Shi'ites recognised by the majority of *'ulamā'* and endorsed by more than three quarters of the members of the Foundation's board of trustees”.¹⁰⁵ The foundation remains

¹⁰¹ Corboz, “The al-Khoei Foundation”. The Imām Shīrāzī World Foundation might offer another, very different, comparison.

¹⁰² Walbridge, “The Counter-reformation”, 239.

¹⁰³ Corboz, “The al-Khoei Foundation”, 94ff., 100.

¹⁰⁴ It is worth noting that according to much opinion, including that of Faḍl Allāh, the power to represent a *marja'* (*wikāla*) lapses after their death: Mir'ī, *Jāmi' al-aḥkām*, 18, section 17; Faḍl Allāh, *al-Masā'il* (2005 ed.), vol. 1, 23, question 46.

¹⁰⁵ Corboz, “The al-Khoei Foundation”, 101-2.

separate from, and nominally subordinate to, the *marjaʿiyya*. Given their weight, this seems to have put them in the slightly awkward position of “*marjaʿ*-maker”, playing a vital, if controversial role in the promotion and realisation of the *marjaʿiyya* of ʿAlī al-Sīstānī as “successor” to that of Khūʾī.¹⁰⁶

That process took some time: two years and an intermediate candidate, Gulpāyigānī, before his own death in 1993. It may be that a similar future beckons over the longer term for what we must now perhaps call the Faḍl Allāh Foundation. For the moment, however, the latter would seem keen to maintain its independence. Earlier talk of a “successor” or a takeover now seems premature. But this is an evolving story, and this paper a snapshot of a moment in what will be a longer process with an as yet uncertain outcome.

Conclusion

Here, as in so many other respects, Faḍl Allāh presents an intriguing case study, of challenge to the dominant paradigms and centres of the Twelver Shiʿi tradition, and now of the ways in which such a project might be consolidated, extended and institutionalised in potentially new modes, drawing on new technologies. His career, despite its frequently claimed anti-establishment character, took the standard path for the tradition of an achieved, personal authority, claimed in the conventional form of the *marjaʿiyya*. His death was celebrated and contested in those terms. But, in weathering the turbulent period of what is generally thought of as contestation of the “succession” to the great personality’s mantle, his staff has attempted, whether

¹⁰⁶ Rizvi, “Political Mobilization”, 1307; Corboz, “The al-Khoei Foundation”, 105-8; Walbridge, *The Thread of Muʿawiya*, 99-102.

temporarily or permanently, the transformation of this personal authority into an enduring institutionalised form.

I have developed the example in some detail. That detail has hopefully given some sense of the richness and complexity of the issues it raises, a complexity that should in turn have helped problematise some of the terms in which such processes have commonly been conceptualised. Succession to and institutionalisation of authority, religious or otherwise, are of course well-known comparative themes, here as elsewhere elaborated in the master terminology of Weber's classic studies. But they deserve closer scrutiny, not least in the context of the turbulent and fragile politics of the Middle East. Robbins Burling has, rather provocatively, drawn attention to the comparative rarity of routinised electoral succession, an elusive good for much of the contemporary world, including the Middle East, but one well-established in Europe and its progeny states elsewhere in the West. He suggests that it was the establishment of electoral succession for the papacy after the reforms of Hildebrand in the eleventh century that influenced the subsequent direction of the transfer of political power in Europe away from the global norm of hereditary succession. As he neatly points out, in this case it was enjoined by Christian clerical celibacy: heredity was the single principle by which the papacy could necessarily not be claimed.¹⁰⁷ In our case here, the Twelver Shi'i *marja'iyya*, hereditary transfer is generally ruled out not by an ethic of celibacy but by the constraints of a meritocratic ethic of achievement and the not so meritocratic charisma of age. If the transfer of high religious authority can shed light on such processes in other political domains, which it surely can, then the comparative study of succession within the

¹⁰⁷ Burling, *The Passage of Power*, 126.

non-celibate setting of Islamic religious authority should be worth further elaborating.