Preface

This book has been brewing in my brain for more than fifteen years. I first became fascinated with the political role of ayatollahs when I taught my inaugural class on Iran at New York University in 2002. Since then, I have taught different iterations of that course on the graduate and undergraduate levels in which we explored the creation of an ostensibly Islamic state, the tensions within the clerical class about the direction of the regime, lay versus clerical interpretations of Islam, and a host of other intriguing topics. What most caught my attention was that several journalists—most of them women—had been able to travel to the city of Qom and interview Iranians to ask them questions about politics, gender, and life. Famous reporters such as Robin Wright, Elaine Sciolino, Geneive Abdo, and Jonathan Lyons gained access to the highest-ranking clerics and uncovered the complicated and strained relationships that evolved after the 1979 revolution. Memorably, in her book *Persian Mirrors,* Sciolino related the tale of her plane ride from Paris to Tehran with Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini as he returned from exile. She was the first woman and the first journalist

to interview him. From her vantage point, even Khomeini had no master plan for the future or blueprint for an Islamic state. In her travels to the city of Qom, she spoke with students of the grand ayatollahs and reported that the culture of the clerical system was democratic and therefore would never let the supreme leader rule in peace. The clerical class was increasingly marginalized as Khomeini consolidated his power in Tehran.

Nevertheless, that view of democratic ayatollahs stuck with me after the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Had I attempted to write this book then, it would have been very different and incomplete at that. Admittedly, I was viewing Iraq somewhat in terms of Iran, as most analysts did, but Iraq was even more complex than Iran. After the fall of the Taliban in Afghanistan, Iran had a monopoly on self-declared "Islamic statehood," and this subject occupied the bulk of the energies of US foreign policy analysts focused on the Middle East. Yet Iraq was not Iran. I had the time to reflect on Iraq's complexities. There was the US-led invasion of 2003 and the subsequent decade-long occupation. Iraq also had a multi-ethnic and multi-religious makeup. Its religious class had a different historical experience with the state. There was so much to be explored in how these complexities would play out in the post-2003 political milieu.

I had a chance to explore the role of the ayatollahs during the research for my first coedited book project, *The Iraq Papers*. In that volume I only scratched the surface. Beginning in 2011, I began to pay close attention to the role of the four grand ayatollahs in Najaf. I began collecting fatwas, speeches, *bayans,* and all other written statements and directives by the grand ayatollahs as the state-building project unfolded. I wanted to document the ways in which they were able to shape the narratives surrounding nationalism, democracy, sectarianism, and other prevalent themes of the day. Given the ayatollahs' prominence in society, I sought to document the ways in which they reinvented themselves as political actors and public intellectuals in the new state. I wanted to catalog the areas in which they would intervene to shape policy and the topics that were much more difficult to penetrate, such as the self-fulfilling prophecy of sectarian conflict. Regardless of the outcomes, the ayatollahs' ability to flood the public sphere with poignant and prominent political discourses served an important purpose. Their narratives, because they were repeated often and were sourced to reputable moral guides in society, helped to cultivate a sense of nationalism and political identity that served as a counter to

the prevailing sectarian narratives emanating from those who wanted to derail the democracy project in Iraq. Narratives, when repeated often, take on truth value, and the ayatollahs served an important purpose in directing the conversation and redirecting it when it went off track. In the end, these ayatollahs, revered for their moral authority, used their informal political power to mold the political process in the direction of an Iraq-centric democracy.

With that in mind, the accounts in this book are neither comprehensive nor exhaustive. I followed the data, and the majority of the data pointed to Ayatollah Ali al-Husseini al-Sistani, the most widely followed Shiite cleric in the world. He worked alongside the state to ensure that the democratic project unfolded during the early years after the invasion. He was also the go-to figure for the media, although he almost never granted reporters an audience, and he was the chosen arbiter for the United Nations. I use fatwas, speeches, and *bayans* from the other three grand ayatollahs of Najaf as a check on the viewpoints of Sistani and also to give the reader a glimpse of the broader political culture of Iraq. At the same time, there are many thematic issues that could have been raised in this text, such as the debates between the grand ayatollahs and the lower-ranking clerics who may fill their seats in the decades to come. While of interest to scholars and students of Shiism, this theme was not particularly prominent in the state-building story I wanted to reconstruct about Iraq, with the grand ayatollahs at its center. By following the data, I developed chapters in the book that built on the most pressing discussions that were happening among the ayatollahs and between the clerics and their followers, the state, and the broader international community.

In reconstructing the stories and themes, I used a variety of sources and methods. For example, I relied heavily on fatwas and statements by Sistani, in Arabic. Most of the translations are my free translations of the texts. I also checked these against some English translations from newspapers or statements given by the clerics to the media that had been translated into English. I relied on English translations only when I looked up the context of a historical event from Arabic news sources on LexisNexis and found additional sources such as those from the Associated Press to corroborate information. The fatwas, communiqués, and directives given by the grand ayatollahs are sometimes short and were provided without context. To reconstruct a particular event, I often had to piece together

the story by reading the proclamations of the ayatollahs around that time period, studying the political event in question, and reading additional materials (usually in Arabic newspapers). Often the stories needed to be reconstructed like a jigsaw puzzle.

In addition to the works of Sistani, I used books written by Ayatollahs Muhammad Saeed al-Hakim, Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim, and Muhammad Ishaq al-Fayyad, in Arabic. For sections of these texts, I worked with translators and a translation center for the sake of time and efficiency. Notably, while there has been considerable media attention given to Sistani's fatwas, there has been no previous scholarly attention given to the writings of any of the other senior clerics of Iraq.

This book is ultimately a story about how the grand ayatollahs repositioned themselves from apolitical to political actors after the fall of Saddam Hussein. Yet they were far from copying the Iranian model of the rule of jurisprudence. As Sciolino observed, Khomeini himself had no idea what he would implement or how he would do so when he returned to Iran. That same uncertainty clouded Iraq except that the details of the political process there would take place without the grand ayatollahs at the forefront. They would serve only as guides and allow Iraq's electorate and public officials to make their own choices. The complex relationship between religion and state would unfold in Iraq, as it did in Iran, with the grand ayatollahs wedged in the middle of the debates, though not necessarily perched at the top of the process. This understudied aspect of Iraqi politics challenges simplistic narratives about Iraq and sheds light on crucial issues pertaining to democracy, sectarianism, and the new political role of the grand ayatollahs, all from their unique vantage point. Even for an unstable country with dim prospects for democracy, this study is timeless because it covers an aspect of the Iraqi political system that is foundational and enduring—how crucial religious actors in the informal public sphere negotiated and shaped political discourses and concrete political outcomes in the post-Saddam era.

As the expression goes, it takes a village. This project is not the result of my solitary efforts. Rather, it is the product of critical thinking, engaging conversations, and great relationships that I have cultivated with others over the years. It is with great pride and humility that I recognize the individuals, institutions, and processes that helped lead me down this path.

The idea for this book developed out of a series of excellent encounters with my former department chair at Long Island University, John

Ehrenberg. After reading an early draft of an article, he called to tell me that I had an outline for a book. Over the course of the last decade, John has been my perpetual mentor, interlocutor, and friend. I am deeply grateful for his advice, his willingness to read endless drafts of the manuscript, and his belief in me. I also wish to thank my former colleagues at LIU, Jose Ramon Sanchez and J. Patrice McSherry, for helping to plant the seeds of this project from our previous collaboration on *The Iraq Papers*. Students I have taught over the years have also helped me to refine and revisit my ideas semester after semester. I thank them for the engagement.

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