Al-Najaf, 100 miles south of Baghdad, is a storied city in the history of Shia Islam. It is the final resting place of Ali Ibn Abu Talib, revered particularly by Shia Muslims as the commander of the faithful, the son-in-law and companion of the Prophet Muhammad, and the first of the imams regarded by the Shia as the legitimate successors to the Prophet. Ali is beloved by Shia Muslims for his wisdom, his leadership, his immaculate morals and his membership in the household of the Prophet (ahl al-bayt). In Shia eyes, he is second only to the Prophet in importance. In contrast, Sunni Muslims view Ali as the fourth and last of the rightly guided successors (or “caliphs”), who were chosen to lead the Muslim community in the years following Muhammad’s death in 632 C.E.

The progeny of Ali and Fatimah, the daughter of the Prophet, constitute the imamate, the chain of infallible successors concluding with the twelfth imam, who disappeared into occultation in the ninth century. It is believed that the Mahdi will one day reappear and fill the earth with justice in the days preceding the day of judgment.

Imam Ali was grievously wounded by an assassin in the Great Mosque of al-Kufah in the seventh century. According to legend, Ali ordered that his body be placed on his camel and that he be buried where the camel knelt. Shia scholars dismiss the legend and cite revered sources to establish that Imam Ali instructed his son Imam Hassan that he be buried near the resting place of revered prophets, and that he was buried by his sons Hassan and Hussein close to the burial site of the biblical prophet Noah. The spot is in al-Najaf, about five miles south of the city of al-Kufah. The shrine and mosque that mark the burial site have long been important pilgrimage destinations for Shia Muslims. Indeed, there has been a shrine on the site for more than 1,000 years.

Visitors — shoeless, of course — often kiss the immense wooden doors as they enter the shrine. The chamber containing the mausoleum is alive with light from the glistening ceiling of crystal tiles. The mausoleum containing Ali’s remains is massive. Intricate gold arches and silver grillwork protect the mausoleum. The interior is bathed in a soft green hue, the color of Islam, particularly associated with the ahl al-bayt. Visitors utter prayers and supplications as they press their right hands to the glass behind the grillwork. In recent
years, daily visitors often number 75,000, and on important anniversaries as many as 3 million pilgrims may come to the shrine. Important dates include Ramadan 21, when Ali died; Ashura 10, when his son Imam Hussein was martyred; and Dhu al-Hijja 18, when, according to Shia belief, the Prophet affirmed Ali as his successor, thereby establishing the basis for the imamate, a core aspect of Shiism. Annually, about 14 million people visit the city.

Although all Muslims aspire to perform the pilgrimage (al-hajj) to Mecca at least once during their lives, visits to other hallowed sites are also a common feature of popular religion for many Muslims. Among Shia, visits to sites revered for association to any of the twelve imams are esteemed as devout acts. Al-Najaf is a primary destination for Shia, as is the city of Karbala, about 50 miles to the north. Karbala was the location of the epic battle where Ali’s son Hussein, the third imam and the most famous Shia martyr, fell in battle on the tenth day of Muharram (Ashura) more than 1,300 years ago. Imam Hussein’s remains and those of his half brother, the esteemed warrior Abbas, are believed to be interned in Karbala, where the mosques honoring them attract a flood of visitors annually. After the fall of the Baathist regime in 2003, hundreds of thousands of celebrants walked from al-Najaf and other cities, towns and villages to Karbala to mark the fortieth anniversary (ziyarat al-arbaeen) of Ashura, resuming a custom that was seldom permitted under the former regime.3

Historically, most of the visitors to the Iraqi shrine cities have been from outside the country, particularly Iran and India; this form of pious tourism has been an important source of income for these cities. Even in the late nineteenth century, there were as many as 100,000 visitations by Iranians and Indians, many traveling by foot on difficult journeys lasting many months.4

Al-Najaf is not only an important destination for the living. The vast Wadi al-Salam cemetery adjacent to the city is the preferred burial site for Shia Muslims. The traffic converging on the city includes the corpses of pious, and tens of thousands of funerals are conducted annually.

While the shrines of al-Najaf and Karbala are unrivaled in Shiism, distant shrines have transfixed the imaginations of many Iraqi Shias as well. In his classic account The Marsh Arabs, Wilfred Thesiger recounts that the Shia marsh dwellers of southern Iraq yearned to visit far-away Mashad in Khurasan.5 In those days, half a century ago, this was an arduous journey. Pilgrims made the trip to visit the tomb of the eighth imam, Ali al-Ridha, earning the honorific title zaair (visitor) by doing so. Al-Najaf continued to be uniquely important, and Thesiger emphasizes that people hoped to be buried in Wadi al-Salam cemetery in al-Najaf.6

Al-Najaf may be best known for being the resting place of Imam Ali and the site of a grand cemetery, but the city is also revered as a center of religious scholarship, home to one of the oldest educational institutions in the world. The first religious school (madrasa) in al-Najaf was founded in about 1057 C.E., nearly 150 years before the death of Averroes, the renowned polymath of Andalusian Spain. The founder was Sheikh Abu Jafar Muhammad bin
Hassan al-Tusi (d. 1068 C.E.), a Persian who may have been inspired by the model of a Sunni madrasa in Baghdad. Known in Arabic as al-Tusi, he is considered one of the outstanding intellectual figures of Shiism. His madrasa was established about 20 years before the University of Bologna, Europe’s oldest university. Among the Islamic institutions of higher learning in the Arab world, al-Najaf is the fourth oldest. It was preceded by the University of Zitounah in Tunis (eighth century), the University of Qarawiyyin in Fes, Morocco (ninth century), and al-Azhar in Cairo (tenth century).

If the present-day Shia seminary in al-Najaf, usually referred to as the hawzah, rests on venerable foundations, the importance of the city as an educational center has fluctuated over the centuries. Prior to the establishment of Shiism in Persia by the Safavids, Jabal Amil (in present-day southern Lebanon), Bahrain and Hilla (in southern Iraq) were centers of Shia scholarship. With the collapse of the Safavid state in 1722, the center of gravity for Shia religious education shifted from Isfahan to Karbala. Al-Najaf did not rise to prominence until the middle of the eighteenth century. Qum began to challenge al-Najaf for preeminence by the late nineteenth century, and the rivalry between the two cities continues.

It is no exaggeration to say that for many Shia Muslims their understanding of piety and practice derives from the classrooms of al-Najaf.
the wife follows a different marji, and the teenage children may follow yet another.

One of the most revered senior clerics today is Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani in al-Najaf, but many others are followed, including Qum-based Muhammad Sadegh Ruhani, Iranian leader Ali Khamenei, al-Najaf-based Bashir al-Najafi, and, until his death in July 2010, Lebanon’s Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah. A number of factors influence an individual’s choice of a marji, including ethnicity, nationality, education and age, as well as social and political developments. Each marji has written a *risalah*, or compendium of rulings on a range of practical issues. Precise data on the number of people who follow the respective grand ayatollahs is obviously not available, but the relative popularity of a grand ayatollah may certainly be discerned. For instance, Faleh A. Jabar estimated that Sistani and Ruhani each attracted about 40 percent of all Shias in 1992.11 Since the mid-1990s, Ruhani, who questioned the process of choosing a successor to Khomeini, has been suppressed by the regime in Iran and was long under house arrest. His following may have declined. Sistani may be the most popular marji in Iran today. One measure of popularity is the volume of religious tithes that muqallids donate,12 and Sistani seems to collect more than any Iran-based marji.13 My own impression is that Sistani enjoys the support of many Shia in Lebanon, although among those Lebanese Shia who see Iran as a model state, Iranian leader Ali Khamenei is favored.14 Among Lebanese Shia, Ayatollah Fadlallah also enjoyed a following rivaling Sistani’s, particularly among educated youth and middle-class professionals, who appreciated his embrace of modern science and technology as well as his compelling logic.15 In Iraq, anecdotal evidence indicates Sistani is by far the most popular marji.

Sistani’s importance and power were not well understood in Washington prior to the 2003 invasion. Proponents of the war often tended to exaggerate the secular inclinations of the Shia. They knew little about Shia religious institutions and, in my experience, deprecated scholars who argued otherwise. For instance, former Bush Pentagon official Douglas Feith, a longtime advocate of toppling Saddam Hussein, blames Arab rulers and U.S. diplomats and intelligence officials for ignoring and understating Sistani’s importance. Feith evades admitting that he dismissed contrary reports, not to mention scholars’ assessments, as did many of his high-level colleagues.16 Sistani demonstrated his influence following the U.S.-led invasion and occupation of Iraq. With the exception of a visit to London for medical care, the grand ayatollah remained in al-Najaf, including during a series of violent episodes. His offices (and those of Grand Ayatollah Mohammad al-Fayyad) were besieged in April 2003 by partisans of the young cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, but Sistani’s followers rallied to his defense.17 U.S. officials, not least J. Paul Bremer,
tended to underestimate Sistani, at least until June 26, 2003. On that day, Sistani issued a fatwa calling for a general election and a referendum on a new Iraqi constitution, thereby thwarting Washington’s plans to stage-manage politics through U.S.-created provincial assemblies.

For several years following the invasion, al-Najaf witnessed much bloodshed. On April 10, 2003, Sayyid Abdul Majid al-Khoei, who had recently returned from exile in London and had been cooperating with the United States, was brutally murdered by henchmen of Muqtada al-Sadr near the shrine of Imam Ali. Abdul Majid was the son of Sistani’s mentor, the Grand Ayatollah Sayyid Abu al-Qasim al-Khoei, who died in 1992. Another former grand ayatollah’s son was assassinated on August 29, 2003, when a car bomb exploded next to the shrine of Imam Ali, killing al-Sayyid Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim along with about 100 people. Al-Hakim headed the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), which was also then cooperating with the United States. The culprit was believed to be Abu Musab al-Zarqawi (d. 2006), the al-Qaeda ally who directed many of the most sensational episodes of anti-Shia violence in Iraq, including the infamous attack on Samarra’s al-Askari mosque in February 2006.

In April 2004, Muqtada al-Sadr’s Jaysh al-Mahdi seized the shrine of Imam Ali but withdrew a few weeks later, after taking heavy casualties from U.S. forces. Also in April, Grand Ayatollah Najafi’s offices were attacked by gunfire. Then, in May, mortar fire hit the shrine, causing damage to the gates leading to the tomb of Imam Ali. On August 5, 2004, the Jaysh al-Mahdi again seized the shrine and used it as a military base for launching attacks against the Iraqi police, the provincial government and coalition forces. The fighting, which included battles between guard forces loyal to Sistani and al-Sadr’s forces, was eventually ended by a peace agreement facilitated by Ayatollah Sistani, who once again demonstrated his unparalleled authority. Although the neighboring buildings suffered considerable damage, the mosque itself was only superficially marred by stray bullets and shrapnel.

The subsequent period has not been free of carnage; in August 2006, a suicide bomber wearing an explosive harness blew himself up near the shrine, killing 40 people and injuring more than 50 others. Periodic violence still threatens the shrine cities and surrounding areas: in October 2010, a motorcade that included the top UN official hit a roadside bomb just outside of al-Najaf; and the following month, Iranian pilgrims were the targets of bombs near the Shrine of Ali, as well as in Karbala. In January 2011, 75 pilgrims performing the ziyarat al-arbaeen were killed in two separate incidents. Despite the sporadic incidents of terror violence, al-Najaf has been reasonably peaceful, particularly in comparison with other Iraqi cities.

According to the number of government-issued ration cards, the population is about 1,200,000 people, and al-Najaf appears to be thriving. Local businessmen and entrepreneurs are enjoying an upsurge of pious tourism. The city has 80 hotels either in operation or under construction, and the flow of visitors from all corners of the Shia world has resumed. Plans are underway to improve the infrastructure of the city and renovate the shrine in order to make al-Najaf second only to Mecca and Medina as a destination for Muslims.

During a visit to the city in 2009, I had the opportunity to meet at the shrine with the chief engineer to review the ambitious
NORTON: AL-NAJAF: ITS RESURGENCE AS A RELIGIOUS AND UNIVERSITY CENTER

Islamic jurisprudence, philosophy, history or knowledge of the Quran. Some of the schools typically attract students from a specific region, such as the Madrasat al-Irawani, which serves Turkish students, while others attract a more eclectic student body. The oldest school is the Madrasat al-Sadr, built about 1824.

In the Iraqi context, the hawzah is also a shortcut reference to the four grand ayatollahs who constitute the marjiiyya, the clerics whose judgments are usually taken to be definitive by many Shia. They are Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, certainly the best known and the first among equals; Grand Ayatollah Mohammad Said al-Hakim; Grand Ayatollah Bashir Hussein al-Najafi; and Grand Ayatollah Mohammad Ishaq al-Fayyad, who succinctly described the role of the marjiiyya as offering guidance (ishraf) for citizens and state, observing (riqaba) responsible officials and unifying the population (tuwahhid). During our visit to al-Najaf, we were not able to meet with Sistani, but we did meet with each of the other grand ayatollahs for extended and freewheeling discussions. These scholars, each with more than half a century of accumulated wisdom, sit at the pinnacle of Shia scholarship. The youngest, al-Najafi, is in his late sixties. Expounding on questions asked by their followers is part of their daily routine; they are accustomed to debate and well practiced in serious argument. At times, I was reminded of the academic rigors of the seminar room at the University of Chicago.

Throughout the discussions in al-Najaf, our interlocutors often emphasized их role was to persuade people to follow the best course of action, to provide guidance, not to exercise power or govern.
that their role was to persuade people to follow the best course of action, to provide guidance, not to exercise power or govern. Either explicitly or tacitly, they contrasted Iraq to Iran, where official doctrine involves the “rule of the jurisconsult” (wilayat al-faqih, Arabic; vilayat-e faqih, Persian). Disapproval of this doctrine prevails in al-Najaf, and it is well known that a number of venerable Iranian ayatollahs have challenged its validity. During the October visit, a hawzah faculty member suggested that scholarship in Qum has suffered from being in the ideological grip of the regime rather than independent of state power, like al-Najaf. Grand Ayatollah al-Hakim argued that the strength of the marji was to persuade, “to tell the politicians the best course of action,” and that “our advice to the secular politicians (almaniyin) is to be truthful.” Grand Ayatollah al-Fayyad emphasized the role of marji in providing guidance and direction in the law and illuminating the path of Islam (sabil al-Islam).

If the grand ayatollahs of the hawzah keep politics at arms length, other senior Iraqi clerics have not shared this reticence. For instance, Ayatollah Muhammad Bahr al-Uloum springs from a family well-known for its commitment to reform and education. After spending many years in exile as an opponent of Saddam Hussein, he returned after the dictator was toppled. He was a member of the Governing Council established in the summer of 2003 by U.S. proconsul J. Paul Bremer, although he “froze” his participation in August 2003, to protest the failure of U.S. troops to protect Ayatollah Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim, who was killed by a car bomb in al-Najaf.

The fortunes of al-Najaf and the other Mesopotamian shrine cities have often been hostage to geopolitics. Rival empires fought periodically over the course of three centuries. The last Ottoman-Persian war ended only in 1823. While Persian-Turkish disputes fomented Sunni-Shia tensions, there were also periods of disorder when Karbala and al-Najaf thwarted Persian and Ottoman might.22 The Ottoman government insisted that its subjects contribute annual forced labor (amaliyya mukallafa), which was much resented and evaded, including among the Shia. Indeed, the impetus for some of the Sunni tribes’ conversion to Shiism in recent centuries was to elude Ottoman exactions. By thus aligning themselves with Persia, they provided a context for discriminatory policies throughout the Ottoman Empire that presage the current vilification of Shia by Arab leaders in the twenty-first century.

Britain’s creation of the kingdom of Iraq in 1920 provoked the Iraqi Revolt, which the clerics of al-Najaf encouraged as a jihad, although Sunnis also participated. The rebellion was defeated, and a Sunni monarchy was installed in 1921. King Faysal, the Hashemite prince supported by Britain, distrusted the Shia and ruled Iraq to the advantage of the Sunni minority. Al-Najaf was progressively marginalized. The British authorities, not least the indomitable Gertrude Bell, were intent on breaking the power of the Shia clerics. Bell alluded to them as “alien popes” (most of the senior mujtahids were Persian, not Arab) who obstructed government authority and the implementation of its secular agenda. As for al-Najaf and Karbala, the cities were described by Bell as permeated by a “baneful atmosphere.”23

In 1918, there were about 6,000 students in al-Najaf, many of them non-Iraqis.24 The number declined for decades thereafter.
Government-encouraged secular education reduced the incentives to seek a religious education in the shrine cities. To meet the demand for a more relevant education, the Muntada al-Nashr (Forum for Dissemination) was created by Ayatollah Muhammad Rida al-Muzaffar in 1935. The new institute offered a modern curriculum and an updated religious one. The Muntada did enjoy some success; two widely revered figures studied there: Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr (executed in 1980), who was instrumental in creating the Hizb al-Dawah, and Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah (died in July 2010), the highly influential Lebanese cleric. The Muntada, however, was closed in 1958 and replaced by the state-recognized Kulliyat al-Fiqh, which lasted until 1991, when it too was shut down by the Baathist regime.

Over the course of the twentieth century, the numbers of students in al-Najaf declined, in some periods quite drastically. Several factors drove the decline, in addition to the pragmatic interests of students seeking work after graduation. After World War II, secular ideologies were ascendant: variants of Arab nationalism — including Baathism and communism — enjoyed remarkable success in mobilizing Shia across the Arab world, especially in Iraq and Lebanon. The secular regime in Baghdad certainly did little to promote Shia religious institutions. The clerics were convinced that the secular state was the enemy, and this perspective was not merely paranoia, as Arjomand notes aptly. By 1957, there were only 1,954 students, including 326 Iraqis.

By contrast, the 1960s and 1970s are sometimes described as a “golden age” for the al-Najaf hawzah, particularly because of the leadership of Grand Ayatollah Muhsin al-Hakim (died 1970). The community of scholars and students grew to over 3,000.

Meanwhile, in neighboring Iran, the “Islamic Revolution” toppled the shah in 1979, and the fear of contagion became an obsession of the Baathist regime, as well as of prominent Western officials. The Iraqi government responded with yet more intimidation, repression, arrests and killings. Non-Iraqi students fled, leaving the people of al-Najaf to endure waves of pitiless tyranny. By the late 1970s, only 600 students and scholars were found in al-Najaf.

In September 1980, Iraq invaded Iran, imagining a quick victory as the revolutionary regime struggled to consolidate power. Instead, the war lasted eight years. By 1985, the number of mujtahids, students and functionaries in al-Najaf had shrunk to 150, according to Nakash. After teetering close to defeat, Iraq emerged as the victor in 1988 and within two years invaded Kuwait to precipitate another Gulf war. When the Iraqi army was driven out of Kuwait in 1991, many observers, including U.S. president George H. W. Bush, expected Saddam Hussein to fall from power. When Bush called upon the Iraqis to rise up against Saddam, the 1991 intifadah was already underway in southern Iraq, but the core element of the regime’s power, including the Republican Guard, were largely intact. The rebellion would
be brutally crushed while the United States and other powers watched. Iraqi Shia remember this period as “the betrayal” (al-khiyanah). This betrayal hardly registered in U.S. neconserative circles prior to the 2003 invasion, despite its deep imprint on the psyches of Iraqi Shia.

State repression grew after the 1991 intifada, as was often noted in the conversations that our group was able to have with the members of the hawzah, especially with Grand Ayatollah Muhammad Said al-Hakim, who reflected poignantly on this period. We met with al-Hakim in his simply furnished majlis. Like the facilities of his cohorts, it is found on a non-descript street, marked only by a metal barrier and few guards. Al-Hakim entered the room slowly, carrying the burdens of his years. He was in jail during the 1990-91 war and recalls one day hearing gunfire just outside his cell block. Initially puzzled, after a few moments he understood that his guards were celebrating that the regime and those who served it would survive. He declared, “It was a great mistake of the United States not to overthrow Saddam in 1991.” He knew that Saddam would take revenge on the Shia and that a “great hurricane” would afflict the community.

He recalls that in al-Najaf the “collected scholars…were less than in this room,” which is to say, fewer than a dozen. Most significant scholars were jailed or killed. Starting in the 1980s, the former regime had a scheme to demolish the hawzah. Al-Najaf had been deeply infiltrated by agents of various Iraqi security elements, and there were no students from outside of Iraq. All of the students were asked to work harder and to research and study with sincere devotion to God. He insists that the regime’s repression did not stop the scholars from doing their research, although they could not publish. “We felt the support, the hidden hand, of God,” he recalls.

Ayatollah al-Hakim speaks softly in a funereal cadence. He is riveting because his listeners cannot help but imagine all that he has seen and felt. More than 60 members of his extended family died at the hands of the former regime, often in revenge for external opposition activities. He remembers one night in 1983 when 70 family members were detained. People were held without charges; sometimes charges were only announced when they were released or killed. When he or other family members refused to cooperate with the president or his deputies, perhaps simply declining to attend a state-organized conference, retaliatory arrests would follow.

After listening to Ayatollah al-Hakim’s poignant narrative, I alluded to the truth commissions in South Africa and asked him under what circumstances those responsible for the cruelties that he described might confess their crimes and enjoy some level of forgiveness. His response left no room in this life for repentance or Truth Commissions: “Allah is going to avenge these sacrifices. The punishment of those who repent before Allah may be lessened in the afterlife. But, in this life you cannot avoid paying for your sins.”

Al-Hakim then turned to the core responsibility of the al-Najaf hawzah: to interpret God’s law. He notes that the institution has continued for 1,400 years, and the rules have been preserved. “We are not working to simply add to the heritage of knowledge,” he insists, “but to be sure that some people are not judged poorly on the Day of Judgment. Like medicine, we are trying to save people. If you decide to say something else than I have said, you will see the consequences [i.e., on the Day of Judgment].”
Like many of the scholars in al-Najaf, al-Hakim emphasized that the depth of scientific research carried out in the hawzah was unique, as was its setting in al-Najaf, a city linked to the Imam Ali, the commander of the faithful and the person who is second in importance only to the Prophet.

He observed that, until the eighth Islamic century (fourteenth century C.E.), the scholars were able to teach one another morals and jurisprudence (fiqh), because those were simpler times. He pointed to the need today for specialization, due to the multiplicity of views that need to be weighed and evaluated as “scientific complications” proliferate. He used the parallel of a heart specialist to illustrate the specialized knowledge that mujtahids must now master.

Al-Hakim noted that he had no time to study other Islamic sects. His responsibility is to be sure that he doing what he can to save his people. Those who follow him depend on his scholarship to direct them to the right path. He recalls that Allah instructs Muslims: “Don’t follow what you do not know” (probably referring to Quran 17:36). His priority is to serve his people in order to save them: “I preserve the law,” he declared. To emphasize his responsibility for avoiding error, he recalled his grandfather, Grand Ayatollah Muhsin al-Hakim. He recounted that one night his grandfather was about to go to bed but returned to his desk to correct an error in a document he was writing; he would not have been able to fall asleep knowing that, if uncorrected, the document would mislead a believer. Other branches of knowledge may not have heavy consequences if there is an error, but al-Hakim bears the weighty responsibility of saving people’s souls.

Earlier in the discussion, he noted that the other Muslim sects (namely, the Sunnis) are easy to understand compared to Shiism because Shiism continues its scientific exploration. “It is as simple as reading a newspaper to understand the other sects since their laws stopped evolving 1,000 years ago. We spend more time reviewing Shia scholars than reviewing other sects.” He did acknowledge that some scholars (ulama) write from a comparative perspective, but he alluded to this field with the enthusiasm of a classics professor for pulp fiction.

Al-Hakim left no doubt that he is following events outside Iraq, including those in Afghanistan. He reminded us that there are many Shia in Afghanistan (the Hazara), arguing that if the United States deserts the country, it will be a repeat of 1997, when the (rabidly anti-Shia) Taliban came to power in Kabul. His dour observation was that the West was losing credibility.

If al-Hakim was somber, Grand Ayatollah al-Najafi was lively and witty by contrast. His majlis is a short walk from the Imam Ali shrine, not far from the heavily guarded home of Ayatollah Sistani. About a dozen South Asian students were meeting with him when our small group arrived, but he welcomed us within minutes. Al-Najafi was born in colonial India, but his family moved to Pakistan at the time of partition. He arrived in al-Najaf nearly 50 years ago. In contrast to Ayatollah al-Hakim, al-Najafi enjoyed a Socratic style of engagement, jousting over ideas. Since his visitors were from the United States, he wanted to talk about terrorism. Dubious about how the label “terrorist” is used in Western debates, he was also intent to note that people who use violence against civilians are not true Muslims and do not speak for Islam — nor will violence affect the principles of religious scholars: “Someone who devotes himself to the
hawzah is not swayed by guns.” His comments about the double standards inherent in U.S. rhetoric about terrorism would be familiar to anyone who has ever discussed the subject with an open mind.

Ayatollah al-Naja fi was asked about the rivalry between al-Najaf and Qum. He began by commenting on the great efforts required for scholars to become learned and master their fields. He took the rivalry between the two hawzahs as a given, emphasizing that competition strengthens the spirit and dignity of the person; competition is essential for progress. Asked about the number of students in al-Najaf as compared to Qum, he replied predictably that it is quality that counts, not numbers.

Citing the Imam Jaafar al-Sadiq, the sixth imam, al-Naja fi stated that materialism is bad and that people should instead worship God. Asked whether artificial insemination was permitted in Shia Islam, he replied that men may not overcome all problems in life, and that people may not get all they seek. After a graphic discussion of the difficulties some couples face in conceiving a child, he ultimately rejected the technique as impermissible (as did Ayatollah al-Fayyad). Some people are luckier than others, he humorously added: Some women have an American passport in their wombs, while others have Pakistani ones; that is just the way it is. Smiling, he remarked that he would like to have been a descendent of the prophet (a sayyid), but he was not. Returning to the question of artificial insemination, he was especially concerned with the question of who the father would be from the standpoint of Islamic law; the legal ramifications troubled him.

Midway through the visit, a senior mujtahid, Sheikh Shams al-Din arrived, and we all stood to greet him. Ayatollah al-Najafi then resumed, perhaps wanting to share his unusual visitors. He distinguished between two types of reasoning. The first involves the immutable laws found in the Quran, Hadith, Sunnah and the words of Ali and the other imams. The second, which preoccupies scholars such as al-Najafi, is categorization: understanding how to think about questions that do not have clear a priori answers, such as whether artificial insemination is permissible.

Over the course of the discussion, al-Najafi made several allusions to the poor and underprivileged. What does he tell someone living in horrible circumstances? He answered that his responsibility is to create a true personality, a wise person (insan), to separate lions from wolves, as he put it.

In contrast to Ayatollah al-Najafi, Ayatollah Fayyad seemed a bit perplexed by our meeting, as though — understandably — he was not quite sure who we were. Ayatollah Fayyad is much respected for his erudition, and it is said that he took on Muqtada al-Sadr as a student earlier in the decade. He entertained a few questions, but he was intent on having us understand that Islam is a complete set of laws that does not require changes. Like his colleagues, he stressed that his role was to provide guidance and direction (irshad wa tawjeeh) for Muslims to find the path of Islam (sabil al-Islam) and to follow its laws. As with many of the scholars we encountered in al-Najaf, he wished to point out that Islam does not promote terrorism.

**CONCLUSIONS**

The hawzah bears a resemblance to a university, especially in the sense that there is a centralized leadership with important but limited prerogatives, beneath which is a collection of independent colleges with
In the past, the majority of students in al-Najaf were non-Arabs, especially Iranian or Indian. That is not the case today. In 2009, there were about 5,000 students, all but 500 Iraqis, including 20 Afghans, 30 Saudis, 10 Bahrainis, 30 Indians, 200 Iranians and 30 Lebanese. There were no Egyptian, Tajik or Yemeni students, notwithstanding accusations in recent years of Shia proselytism in those countries.

Most of the students arrive after completing a secondary education (85 percent have completed the baccalaureate, we were told), and, of course, today’s cohort of students is well-versed in the internet and other elements of the electronic media. There are three major phases of a hawzah education:

1) The preliminary phase (al-muqadimat), which typically lasts four years or longer. This instruction is carried out in small classes usually taught by scholars who have progressed to the third level.

2) The secondary phase (sutuh), which often comprises six or seven years of study.

3) The graduation phase (bahth al-khārij or dārs al-khārij), which usually entails mentoring by a marjī.

The goal is to be certified (to receive an ijāza) as competent to perform ijtihād, to become a mujtahid. In 2009, students at higher levels received a monthly stipend of about $250. Since the money is distributed, in part, on the basis of need, students with families are likely to be paid more. Major foundations, such as the Muhammad Baqr al-Hakim Foundation, also dispense a significant number of resources in al-Najaf.

In the past, the majority of students in al-Najaf were non-Arabs, especially Iranian or Indian. That is not the case today. In 2009, there were about 5,000 students, all but 500 Iraqis, including 20 Afghans, 30 Saudis, 10 Bahrainis, 30 Indians, 200 Iranians and 30 Lebanese. There were no Egyptian, Tajik or Yemeni students, notwithstanding accusations in recent years of Shia proselytism in those countries.

For at least a quarter century preceding the 2003 invasion, foreign students were under heavy scrutiny in Iraqi shrine cities, and most chose to leave rather than risk running afoul of the Baathist security apparatus. Arab Shia students, who otherwise would have preferred the cultural affinity of an Arab city, often chose to study in Qum instead. In some southern Lebanese villages with longstanding links to al-Najaf, the insecurity of Iraq, coupled with attractive facilities and stipends in Iran, persuaded students to forgo Iraq. If the security situation in Iraq continues to improve, it is likely that the proportion of non-Iraqi Arab students will grow dramatically.

While the al-Najaf hawzah is often described as being committed to a “quietist” tradition, this is somewhat inaccurate. No doubt, there is widespread rejection of clerical rule, particularly Iran’s model of the rule of the jurisconsult. Nonetheless, the senior figures in the al-Najaf hawzah provide guidance to lay politicians, and they certainly expect to be consulted. Although the grand aytollahs live in very modest settings, they are not hermits; they seem well informed about what is going on inside and outside of Iraq. They are also keen to preserve their independence and have been alert to the threat of Iranian meddling in the shrine cities and in Iraq more generally.
The hawzah, though venerable, is not anachronistic. If the certitude of faith prevails, it is leavened by intellectual curiosity and an openness to serious debate that may be appealing. One leaves the revitalized al-Najaf with the impression that it is confident of its place in modern Shiism.

1 The author would like to thank Dr. Ibrahim Bahr Alolom, Dr. Zuhair Humadi and Professor Dale F. Eickelman for their expert comments and invaluable suggestions on the draft manuscript. Obviously, any errors or defects are the responsibility of the author.

2 The Sunnis are usually thought to account for nearly 90 percent of all the 1.2 billion plus Muslims in the world, but this is debatable. Shia scholars argue that all of the Shia sects combined account for about one fifth of all Muslims. The largest Shia sect is the *ihna ashariyah* (or “Twelvers”), the focus of this article, who easily account for ten percent of the total population. The Twelvers constitute the majority in Iran, Iraq and Bahrain and the plurality in Lebanon; and significant Shia communities are found in India, Kuwait, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia.

3 The arbaeen marches were seldom permitted by the Baathist regime, and when they were organized, as in 1977, they met violent repression.


5 Many of the Iraqi tribes only converted to Shiism in the nineteenth century. As a result, Shiism was far less densely institutionalized outside the shrine cities than in neighboring Iran. The late Hanna Batatu noted that, in Iraqi rural areas in 1947, there was only one religious institution per 37,000 people. In some rural areas, there were no institutions at all. See Hanna Batatu, “Shi'i Organizations in Iraq: al-Daw'ah al-Islamiya and al-Mujahalin,” in *Shi’ism and Social Protest* (Yale University Press, 1986).


8 Yitzhak Nakash, *The Shi’is of Iraq*, op. cit., pp. 163-64.

9 The city has also been an important literary center. The renowned poet Muhammad Mahdi al-Jawahiri (1899-1997) was a native son, as was the novelists Jafar al-Khalili (1914-84).


12 As Mohsen Milani notes in an October 2010 private message, contributions are an inexact measure of popularity, since figures with a popular following among the lower classes may bring in less money but enjoy much more widespread and intense support. Grand Ayatollah Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr was an example. In defiance of the Baathist regime, Ayatollah al-Sadr delivered Friday sermons to large crowds. He was building a strong base of enthusiastic followers among the Shia underclass in Iraq during the 1990s, until he was assassinated along with two of his adult sons in 1999. No doubt, al-Sadr was killed to deny the restive Shia a popular leader.


14 The German sociologist Theodor Hanf reports that, in a 2009 public-opinion survey in Lebanon, 19 percent of the Shia polled viewed Iran as the model state, and of that group nearly 60 percent named Khamenei as their religious guide. His analysis of the data, tentatively titled “Opinion Survey, Lebanon: 2009,” will be published in 2011.

15 Fadlallah’s legacy includes an impressive array of institutions, which his sons Ali and Jafar now superin-
tend. It remains unclear whether either of the sons will be able eventually to fill their father’s shoes.


18 The others were Gary Sick, Dale F. Eickelman and Glen Howard. Sick’s reflections on the visit may be found at http://garysick.tumblr.com/post/247478146/will-iran-dominate-iraq-gary-sick-in-the-daily-beast.


21 Haider Hamoudi, an Iraqi-American law professor from Northwestern University, accompanied our group to al-Najaf; he is the source of al-Fayyad’s description of the marjiyya. Hamoudi’s memoir of Iraq, *Howling in Mesopotamia*, offers a warm and informative personal account of life in post-Bathist Iraq.


30 Ibid.

31 Yitzhak Nakash, op. cit., p. 259.

32 The UN special rapporteur for human rights in Iraq calculated that, in 1991, there were only 800 Shia clergy in all of Iraq, as compared to 8,000 in 1971. See Patrick Cockburn, *Muqtada*, op. cit., pp. 51-2.

33 A younger scholar recalled that one of the ayatollahs would ask his students to remove and unfold their turbans, knowing that spies would be more likely to have difficulty refolding it properly.


36 This data, and the breakdown that follows, was provided by faculty members of the hawzah, at a meeting at the Institute of Heritage in al-Najaf, October 20, 2009.