



ḲO'I, ABU'L-QĀSEM

ḲO'I, ABU'L-QĀSEM (1317-1413/1899-1992; [Figure 1](#)), a Najaf-based religious scholar of Iranian origin and prominent *marja'-e taqlid* amongst Shi'ite communities worldwide.

Abu'l-Qāsem Ḳo'i is a typical illustration of an Iranian religious scholar who made a career in the Shi'ite seminaries of Iraq. He was born on 15 Rajab 1317/19 November 1899 in the city of Ḳo'i (see [KHOY](#)) in Iranian Azarbaijan. His family was of clerical and sayyed background, however not one of the most famous families that had produced myriads of scholars over generations. Ḳo'i received his preliminary religious education at the hand of his father, Sayyed 'Ali-Akbar, and enrolled in the *ḥawza* of Najaf (see [IRAQ xi. SHI'ITE SEMINARIES IN IRAQ](#)) after the family migrated there in the early 1910s. Over the years, Abu'l-Qāsem Ḳo'i progressed through the stages of the curriculum. At the *baḥt al-kārij* level (lit. the “externals”), he studied with such prominent *mojtaheds* of the time as Shaikh Faṭḥ-Allāh “Šayḳ-al-Šari'a” Ešfahāni, Shaikh Mehdi Māzandarāni, Shaikh Žiyā'-al-Din 'Erāqi, Shaikh Moḥammad-Ḥosayn Ġarawi Ešfahāni “Kompāni,” and Shaikh Moḥammad-Ḥosayn Nā'ini, until he himself achieved the status of *mojtahed* at the age of thirty-two.



Figure 1. Āyat-Allāh al-'Ozmā Abu'l-Qāsem Ḳo'ī. Photograph in the public domain.

In the following decades, Ḳo'ī continued to consolidate his name as a scholar and teacher in Najaf. His excellence was well established by the time of the death of the Iraqī *marja'* Moḥsen Ḥakim (d. 1970), earning him the endorsement of Najaf's scholarly community for his *marja'iya*. While other high-ranking scholars of Iraq and Iran also held the position of *marja'*, Ḳo'ī became the most widely followed religious authority amongst Shi'ite communities worldwide.

Ḳo'ī was recognized for the quality and breadth of his knowledge and scholarship. He wrote on the main religious sciences of *feqh* (q.v.), *oṣūl al-feqh*, and Qur'anic *exegesis* (q.v.) such as his *Bayān fī tafsīr al-Qor'ān* (The Prolegomena to the exegesis of the Qur'an), which offered critical takes on the collection and canonization of the sacred text (Sachedina, pp. 15-20). Ḳo'ī also developed a particular interest and expertise in *'elm al-rejāl*, the discipline dedicated to the study of the transmitters of traditions. His 24-volume *Mojam rejāl al-Ḥadīṯ* (Biographical dictionary of the narrators of the Traditions) proposed a new methodology by which he evaluated more than 15,000 transmitters (Takim); one biographical entry in volume 23 was dedicated to Ḳo'ī himself. Like any other *marja'*, Ḳo'ī also published treatises of practice



(*resāla 'amaliya*) containing his rulings on various aspects of religious practice to be used by his followers.

Ḳo'ī's contributions as a teacher became another pillar of his scholarly legacy. He taught hundreds of scholars (for a list, see al-Šarīf, pp. 677-95), while many others are considered his indirect students. The notes of his *baḥṭ al-kārij* lectures that were compiled and published as *taqrirāt* by his most promising students (for a list, see Ḥamāda, pp. 262-63) provide an insight not only of his interpretation of the subjects he covered but also of how he taught them. Ḳo'ī's classroom was also a breeding ground for the next generation of *marāje'*. Several of his former students rose to the position following his death, for instance 'Alī Sistāni (b. 1930), Eshāq Fayāz (b. 1930), Bašīr Najafī (b. 1942), and Sa'id Ḥakīm (d. 2021) in Najaf; Moḥammad Ruḥāni (d. 1997), Mirzā-Jawād Tabrizi (d. 2006), and Ḥosayn-Wahid Ḳorāsāni (b. 1921) in Qom; or Lebanon's Moḥammad-Ḥosayn Fażl-Allāh (d. 2010). To this day, a past teacher-student relationship with Ḳo'ī remains a source of "scholarly capital" claimed by most Najaf-educated *marāje'* (Corboz, 2019, p. 454).

Ḳo'ī also supported the training of scholars and preachers outside his own classroom. Several educational institutions were established in his name. In the 1980s, at a time when much uncertainty loomed over the Iraqī seminaries under Ba'thist rule, Ḳo'ī's main representative in Iran built two theological colleges, Madinat al-'Elm (City of Knowledge) in Qom and the Grand Ayatollah Ḳo'ī School in Mashhad, as well as a smaller religious school in Isfahan. Although Ḳo'ī's projects in Iran did not remain immune from state interference, and increasingly so under Supreme Leader 'Alī Ḳāmena'ī (Corboz, 2015a, pp. 97-8), they have been marks of his enduring educational legacy, also after his death. Ḳo'ī's patronage was not limited to the main Shi'ite centers of learning in Iran and Iraq but also offered educational opportunities to aspiring religious scholars further afield, in Pakistan, India, and Thailand for instance.

The establishment of religious schools was only one facet of the wide patronage network Ḳo'ī sustained as *marja'* and recipient of vast amounts of *koms* (q.v.; religious tithes) paid by his followers. His local representatives helped the needy and also established more permanent institutions such as Moḥammad-Ḥosayn Fażl-Allāh's orphanage Mabarrāt al-Emām al-Ḳo'ī in southern Beirut. Founded in 1989 toward the end of Ḳo'ī's life, the [Imam Al-Khoei Benevolent Foundation](#) (q.v.) was a unique initiative aimed at centralizing the management of his religious funds and charitable projects, as



well as to ensure their maintenance after him. Headquartered in London, this international foundation has responded to the growth of Shi'ite communities in the West by opening several Islamic centers and private schools in the United Kingdom, France, and North America. It has also administered religious, educational, and social projects in South Asia and South-East Asia.

Politically, Ḳo'ī is often presented as the antithesis of his contemporary [Ayatollah Khomeini](#) (q.v.), whose doctrine of Islamic government under the guardianship of the jurist (*welāyat-e faqih*) he did not subscribe to. Rather, he maintained the more conventional view that the authority of religious scholars over the affairs of the Muslim community was limited and not equal to the general authority held by the Prophet and the Imams. Accordingly, qualified scholars could assume such functions as issuing legal opinions, adjudicating legal disputes, and serving as guardian of those unable to fend for themselves, but not the mandate of political governance (Mavani, p. 811; on Ḳo'ī's conception of judgeship, see Gleave, pp. 108-9).

Yet the characterization that is often put forth of Ḳo'ī as a quietist can be misleading. While he may not have had a sustained record of political, let alone revolutionary, activism, he did not remain aloof from political affairs altogether. Rather, his career was marked by “moments of activism” (Corboz, 2015a, p. 120) in response to political developments in Iran and Iraq, as well as to events unfolding elsewhere in the Middle East and in South Asia.

Ḳo'ī was particularly critical of the Iranian monarchy during the early 1960s. He denounced the secularizing reforms associated with the White Revolution and what he perceived as the Bahā'ī and Zionist domination of Iranian society and government. He usually privileged a diplomatic approach to the state by sharing his concerns and advice through private missives. Put differently, he did not seek open confrontation nor to incite popular mobilization against the monarchy. This may explain his ambivalent attitude to Khomeini's opposition movement. Ḳo'ī readily condemned the government's repression of the demonstrations of 15 Ḳordād/5 June 1963 and subsequently sent several messages requesting the release of Khomeini and other Iranian scholars who had been imprisoned. He also reacted, though less strongly than before, to the decision to exile Khomeini. However, the two ayatollahs had few interactions during the fifteen years Khomeini spent in Najaf, nor did they discuss politics (Corboz, 2015b, p. 228). In general terms, Ḳo'ī's involvement in the affairs of Iran waned during this period.

Ḳo'ī's reaction to the unfolding of the Iranian revolution was similarly inconsistent. According to reporting at the time by the Sāzmān-e eṭṭelā'āt wa amniyat-e kešvar National Intelligence and Security Organization, commonly known as SAVAK), Ḳo'ī made some gestures in solidarity with the protest movement during the spring of 1978. By September, he however expressed concern at the human cost (Corboz, 2015a, pp. 169-70). Much controversy arose when Queen Faraḥ Dibā of Iran visited him in Najaf later in the autumn. While his supporters later justified this on grounds that he was tricked into this meeting, his detractors continued to hold it against him (Corboz, 2015a, pp. 170-71). After the success of the revolution, Ḳo'ī issued a statement in favor of the March 1979 referendum on the Islamic Republic (for a copy, see al-Jazā'iri, p. 90), but he did not otherwise express his views on the specific system of cleric-run government which was eventually put in place, nor on its domestic or international policies. Significantly, he remained neutral during the Iran–Iraq War (1980-88) despite the efforts of both warring sides to obtain some sign of support from him.

Based in Iraq, Ḳo'ī also had to assess how to engage the Ba'ṯhist regime at a time of mounting state pressures on the religious establishment and Iraq's Shi'ite population more broadly. As an Iranian national who could easily be deported—a fate suffered by so-called Shi'a of Iranian descent in the early 1970s—he chartered a cautious course of action. Throughout the Iran–Iraq War, he resisted the intimidation campaign intended to have him endorse the Iraqi war effort, such as the confiscation of his funds, the arrest and execution of members of his entourage, and other measures of “containment” (Kadhim, pp. 16-36). At least on one occasion, in January 1987, Ḳo'ī sent a letter to Saddam Hussein himself in which he qualified the pressures against the *ḥawza* as intolerable and urged the Iraqi president to lift them or otherwise to have him leave Iraq (for a copy, see al-Jazā'iri, p. 99). Regardless of the effect of this message, which cannot be ascertained, Ḳo'ī is generally credited for having ensured the survival and independence of the *ḥawza* of Najaf in particularly trying times.

During the Gulf crisis of 1990-91, Ḳo'ī condemned implicitly the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait with a *fatwā* (q.v.) that forbade the purchasing of looted goods from Kuwait. More famous are two edicts he issued at the height of the popular uprising of March 1991. At a time when Baghdad had lost control over most of the Shi'ite south, his edict that appointed a committee of religious and tribal dignitaries to supervise the local affairs of the city of Najaf was a particular



affront to Ba'ḥist authority. As soon as the uprising was put down, Ḳo'i was forced to appear on state television with Saddam Hussein and then placed under house arrest, where he died the following year on 8 Ṣafar 1413/8 August 1992.

Ḳo'i marked his era not only during his lifetime but also through his legacy. His writings and the scholars he trained have kept alive his intellectual tradition. Numbers of his followers have continued to refer to his religious rulings, a practice Ḳo'i accepted (Mottahedeh, p. 17). The educational and charitable institutions established in his name in various parts of the world have remained active, a philanthropic network that has further expanded through the work of the Al-Khoei Foundation. Ḳo'i's approach to politics helped the ḥawza of Najaf maintain its independence in challenging times and also remains a model for many current and probably future Shi'ite religious authorities.

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