

Passing of Shiite Cleric Fadlallah Spells Trouble for Lebanon

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Articles & Testimony

For Washington, the death this week of Lebanon's most prominent and respected Shiite cleric, Grand Ayatollah Seyyed Mohammad Hussein Fadlallah, was a bittersweet moment.

In 1983, Fadlallah, a vocal proponent of suicide bombings, reportedly blessed the bombers of the US Embassy and Marine Barracks in Beirut that killed over 240 Americans. More recently, Fadlallah's purported dying wish was the destruction of Israel.

Yet his death now paves the way for a more militant, Iranian-influenced strain of Islamic ideology to gain ground in Lebanon.

Fadlallah represented the most credible moral, political, and theological alternative to Hezbollah, the Iranian-backed Shiite militia.

Notwithstanding his fiery Friday sermons targeting Israel and the United States, the Iraqi-trained Fadlallah opposed the concept of velayat-e-faqih, which puts an Iranian mullah at the pinnacle of Shiite theology and politics. He also condemned Al Qaeda and so-called honor killings of Muslim women, stances that led many Westerners to see Fadlallah, a man Washington labelled a terrorist, as a kind of moderate.

To Hezbollah, the departure of Fadlallah is an opportunity to co-opt local Shiites -- traditionally aligned with quietist Iraqi religious leaders -- to the more militant ideology espoused by Iran's supreme leader, Grand Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. The effort to shift the orientation of the community will take time, but should Hezbollah succeed, it will strengthen Tehran and further erode Washington's influence in the region.

Fadlallah was a marja, the most senior rank in the Shiite clerical hierarchy. When he declared himself a marja in 1995 -- some thirty years into his career -- virtually no one else in Lebanon held that status or questioned his credentials. Indeed, Fadlallah's predecessor, the marja Seyyid Moshen al-Ameen, passed away in 1952, leaving a gap of 43 years. In the absence of a formal succession procedure, it's unclear what will happen next.

By tradition, Shiites adopt a marja, or religious guide, whose interpretations and rulings inform the individual's practice. Among Shiites in Lebanon, Fadlallah and the Iraqi Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani -- both trained in the Iraqi city of Najaf and opposed to velayat-e-faqih -- have long been the most influential religious figures. With Fadlallah gone, and Sistani nearly 81, Iran and Hezbollah hope to nudge Lebanon's Shiites toward Tehran and Khamenei.

But this is a long term project. In the short term, Hezbollah seems poised to elevate a sympathetic local cleric to fill the vacuum. Sheikh Afif Nabulsi, a former student of Fadlallah who was among the founders of Hezbollah, is a leading contender in this scenario. Not only does Mr. Nabulsi have close ties to Tehran, he recently visited Damascus where he was feted by top Syrian intelligence official Muhammed Nassif. And Nabulsi is interested in becoming a marja; he has already submitted his obligatory theological treatise nominating himself for the honorific.

Nabulsi has also already demonstrated his bona fides to Hezbollah. Back in December 2005, when Hezbollah ministers bolted from the government cabinet to protest the establishment of an international tribunal to prosecute the murder of former Lebanese premier Rafik Hariri -- Hezbollah's allies in Damascus were the leading suspects in the killing -- the militia got concerned that the pro-West governing coalition would appoint non-Hezbollahis to fill the empty cabinet slots. At the behest of the Shiite militia, Nabulsi issued a successful fatwa, a religious edict prohibiting alternative Shiites from joining the government.

But even if no local marja emerges, in the absence of Fadlallah, Hezbollah and its Iranian patrons will benefit. Without a spiritual guide, religious Lebanese Shiites will choose between Sistani and Khamenei. And with Hezbollah as Khamenei's local campaign manager, it is all but assured that Tehran will strengthen its foothold in Lebanon.

Perhaps an Iranian takeover of Lebanese Shiite religious institutions was inevitable. In recent years, the theocracy in Tehran has made an effort to repopulate Shiite religious institutions throughout the region with its own people. What's happening in Lebanon is a sign of things to come. Since 2003, Iran has been cultivating Moqtada al-Sadr in Iraq, and when the octogenarian Sistani passes from the scene, it is all but assured that Tehran will try to install Sadr in his stead.

Admittedly, US policymakers have typically not been players in the arcane world of Shiite clerical politics. How ironic, though, that Fadlallah -- a man who Washington labeled a terrorist in 1995 -- stood as the last bulwark against near total Iranian hegemony in Lebanon.

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