

The Hidden Imam

by [David Schenker \(/experts/david-schenker\)](#)

Sep 24, 2008

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[David Schenker \(/experts/david-schenker\)](#)

David Schenker is the Taube Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute and director of the Program on Arab Politics. He is the former Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs.



Articles & Testimony

Conventional wisdom holds that when Iran's supreme leader says, "Jump," millions of Shiites, from the Beirut slums to the Saudi oilfields, ask, "How high?" But a recent meeting in Baghdad between a wealthy Lebanese Sunni politician and an ascetic Shiite theologian twice his age suggests that there is a move afoot to empower Shiite voters throughout the Middle East to cast ballots according to their conscience, not according to the marching orders from Tehran. If that trend gains traction, it could fundamentally alter the political landscape of the region.

In July, a representative of the preeminent Iraqi Shiite religious figure Grand Ayatollah Seyyid Ali Sistani issued a statement expressing the cleric's views on the impending Iraqi elections. Unlike the 2005 national elections -- when Sistani endorsed a single Shiite slate known as the United Iraqi Alliance, handpicked the members of the candidate selection committee, and served as the spiritual figurehead of the list -- Sistani's aide opined that in 2009, Iraqi Shiites needn't vote for an artificially unified list dominated by Iranian-allied parties. Instead, he said, Shiites should cast their ballots for parties who field the best candidates offering the best policies.

Sistani's support for political pluralism among the Shiite community amounts to a decision to sacrifice his own political power in order to break Iran's hegemony over Iraqi Shiites. It's a courageous decision for Sistani, given that other high-profile moderate Shiite clerics, such as Abdul Majid Khoei, have in recent years been killed in Iraq by Iranian surrogates. His shift may be related to the improved security situation, in which sectarian unity is no longer fundamentally necessary to ensure the Shiite community's security. Or perhaps Sistani's change in tact suggests a better appreciation of the pernicious role Iran has been playing in Iraqi politics. In any event, Sistani's new position represents a clear decision to counter Iranian influence in Iraq.

It appears to be a lesson not lost on other Arabs. Lebanon's embattled ruling coalition, a pro-Western bloc dubbed the March 14 group, seems to have picked up the same message.

On July 18, Lebanese parliamentarian and March 14 leader Saad Hariri visited Iraq, where he met with Sistani and other top Iraqi leaders. During his little-publicized visit, Hariri focused on the similarities between Baghdad and Beirut. According to the Lebanese daily Al Mustaqbal, he spoke about the ethnic and religious forces that threatened to destroy the two states encouraged by foreign actors, i.e., Iran, and the need for Lebanese and Iraqi "Arabism," presumably to counter Persian influence.

Hariri's concern with Iran is driven primarily by his own domestic exigencies. Hariri's March 14 coalition, comprised of Sunnis, Druze, and Christians, is increasingly threatened by Lebanon's dominant Iranian-backed Shiite political and military organization, Hezbollah. In May, this Shiite militia invaded Beirut, placing the democratically elected March 14 government in a precarious position. A month later, in Qatar, a victorious Hezbollah dictated the terms of the truce, which stipulated providing the Shiite organization with de jure veto power within the government. Worse, the Doha Agreement deferred indefinitely the critical issue of electoral reform in Lebanon -- cementing the current winner-takes-all system so that Hezbollah and its affiliate appendage Amal are able to secure nearly all the Shiite seats.

Within the context of current political alignments, March 14 can do little to expand its base. Recognizing this limitation, March 14 has seemingly reached the conclusion that the future of Lebanon's pro-West orientation depends on the electoral fragmentation of the Lebanese Shiite community. Even a modest shift in Lebanon's Shiite constituency would represent a significant change in Beirut's political dynamic. Not only would it undermine the legitimacy of Hezbollah's authoritarian monopoly on Shiite politics, it would broaden March 14's currently fragile constituency, better positioning the bloc for when proportional representation is adopted.

At present, March 14 has only a handful of Shiites who are willing to openly support the bloc -- not surprising given Hezbollah's intimidation of non-conforming Shiites. Diversification of its constituency would insulate March 14 from local criticism regarding the party's perceived Sunni domination. The addition of Shiite supporters could likewise conceivably encourage the defection of some of Hezbollah's Christian allies. Perhaps most importantly, by broadening its coalition, March 14 could more credibly claim to be a coalition representing all Lebanese.

There is no doubt that Hezbollah has substantial support among Lebanon's Shiite population, not only due to its military prowess vis-a-vis Israel, but because it provides essential services to an underserved population. Yet the organization does have an Achilles heel: Other than Hezbollah secretary general Hassan Nasrallah and a few thousand hardcore members of the organization, most Shiites in Lebanon do not view supreme leader of Iran, Ali Khomeini as their spiritual guide, or marja'a. Indeed, most Lebanese Shiites consider Sistani their religious authority.

The fundamental difference between Sistani and Khomeini is that Sistani believes in a separation between religion and state, while Khomeini views religion as the state. Most Lebanese Shiites do not favor this formulation, known in Farsi as "Vilayet al-Faqih." While it is too late for Hariri and March 14 to significantly affect the agreement on the electoral law reached in Doha, if leveraged, these divergences could provide an opportunity to erode Hezbollah's political monopoly over the Shiites.

It is for this reason that the likely purpose of Hariri's visit to Sistani was to explore ways to promote Shiite political pluralism. After all, just weeks after Hariri returned to Beirut, Lebanese Prime Minister Fouad Siniora -- a member of Hariri's March 14 bloc -- himself travelled to Baghdad for meetings with senior political leaders. (He did not meet Sistani). And though Hariri has steadfastly refused to discuss the substance of his talks with Sistani, his public statements in Iraq -- urging Shiites to be loyal to their states and condemning illegal militias -- closely echo positions attributed to Sistani.

Since coming to power in 2005, the March 14 coalition has lacked a Shiite strategy. March 14 has not sought to cultivate and co-opt alternative, non-Hezbollah Shiites. In fact, pro-west anti-Hezbollah Shiites have long complained that March 14 has ignored them. Hariri's trip to Najaf is a sign that this might be changing. In Lebanon, senior March 14 leaders -- in particular Hariri and Druze community leader Walid Jumblatt -- appear to now be taking a more active interest in supporting Shiites who are not allied with Hezbollah. Hariri himself is said to be expanding his circle of Shiite consultants, and even took an unprecedented three-day trip to the predominantly Shiite Bekaa valley this month to visit with local leaders. Contacts between the March 14 leaders and fledgling anti-Hezbollah Shiite political organizations, while still admittedly minimal, are also increasing. Perhaps the most significant development in this regard, however, was the July cabinet appointment of Ibrahim Shamseddine -- the scion of one of Lebanon's premier Shiite religious authorities known for opposing Hezbollah and supporting a secular Lebanese state.

Clearly, Beirut's pro-west government cannot counter Hezbollah's overwhelming military capabilities. But it is possible over time to encourage political pluralism among Lebanon's Shiites and chip away at the perception that Hezbollah speaks for all Lebanon's Shiites. Except for the hardcore of Hezbollah supporters, Lebanese Shiites do not possess a natural affinity for Iran and the religious proscriptions of its leadership. Neither, would it seem, do the majority of Iraq's Shiites. Hariri's recent meeting marks a long-overdue effort to exploit this cavernous divergence. Hopefully, Beirut's change in approach is not too late.

David Schenker is director of the [Program on Arab Politics \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateI02.php?SID=1&newActiveSubNav=Program%20on%20Arab%20Politics&activeSubNavLink=templateI02.php%3FSID%3D1&newActiveNav=researchPrograms\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateI02.php?SID=1&newActiveSubNav=Program%20on%20Arab%20Politics&activeSubNavLink=templateI02.php%3FSID%3D1&newActiveNav=researchPrograms) at The Washington Institute. ♦

New Republic

RECOMMENDED

BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Unpacking the UAE F-35 Negotiations](#)

Feb 15, 2022

♦
Grant Rumley

[\(/policy-analysis/unpacking-uae-f-35-negotiations\)](#)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria](#)

Feb 15, 2022

♦
Anna Borshchevskaya

[\(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy](#)

Feb 14, 2022

♦

TOPICS

Arab & Islamic Politics (/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Iran (/policy-analysis/iran)

Iraq (/policy-analysis/iraq)

Lebanon (/policy-analysis/lebanon)