

## Iran, Lebanon: Fadlallah and Tehran Make Up

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**Summary:** A reconciliation is taking place between influential Lebanese Shiite cleric Grand Ayatollah Sayyed Mohammad Hussein Fadlallah and Iran, according to Stratfor sources. After years of bitter relations, Iran now appears to be reaching out to Fadlallah to shore up support among the wider Shiite community in the Arab world and to further Iranian interests in Iraq.

### Analysis

Stratfor sources connected to Hezbollah say Iran is mending ties with Lebanese Shiite cleric Grand Ayatollah Sayyed Mohammed Hussein Fadlallah.

Fadlallah is an influential figure in the Shiite community and considered worthy of emulation by a number of Shiite leaders, including Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. (Unlike the role of the religious scholar in Sunni Islam, in Shiite Islam ayatollahs hold powerful influence over the laity, given their authority to make legal decisions for followers and lesser clerics.)

Fadlallah spent more than three decades studying in the Iraqi Shiite holy city of An Najaf, where he attained the honorific title of ayatollah. He is a well-respected cleric, even among Sunni and Christian communities in Lebanon. His fame dates to the 1980s, when Iran's Islamic Revolution put down its roots and Shiite fervor swept Lebanon. Fadlallah had long lived in the shadows of Sayyid Musa al-Sadr, a Shiite cleric of Lebanese descent who organized Shiite followers in Lebanon through his ties to Tehran, Damascus and the Amal movement until his mysterious disappearance in 1978. Fadlallah moved quickly to fill the power vacuum and became a spiritual guide to Hezbollah, an Iranian-backed organization that at the time was still getting off the ground in Lebanon.

Despite his ties to Iran, Fadlallah refused to subscribe to the Vilayat al-Faqih (Guardianship of the Jurists) concept, which regards a relationship with Iran as religiously sanctioned. When Fadlallah publicly reduced Vilayat al-Faqih to a mere theory, claiming that most Shiite Arabs disapprove of the overall concept, the Iranians began viewing him as a threat. Hezbollah accepted Vilayat al-Faqih, and for the most part unquestioningly implemented the dictates of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (and later Ayatollah Ali Khamenei). Soon enough, a charismatic Shiite cleric by the name of Hassan Nasrallah emerged as a rival to Fadlallah in Lebanon in the early 1990s. Nasrallah, who lacked the religious credentials of Fadlallah, feared being overshadowed by Fadlallah in the Lebanese Shiite community, but he consolidated his power base in 1992 when Hezbollah chief Abbas Musawi was assassinated and Iran endorsed Nasrallah as Hezbollah's new leader.

Fadlallah kept a safe distance from Hezbollah, continuing to deny any formal link to the organization. The Iranian clerical establishment saw him as a rival to Persian religious hegemony in the Shiite world and worked to discredit his religious credentials. The cleric's relations with Iran and Hezbollah eventually soured to the point that Fadlallah would publicly criticize the Iranian regime, and up until a few months ago, Hezbollah activists would issue him death threats and vandalize his compound in Lebanon.

The tide has now apparently turned, however. Members of Hezbollah are privately discussing how a rapprochement has taken place between Fadlallah and the clerical regime in Iran. This shift was illustrated in a recent fatwa issued by Fadlallah against the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) negotiations between Iraq and the United States. In his religious edict, Fadlallah essentially echoed Iran's line in stating that, "No authority, establishment or an official or nonofficial organization has the legitimacy to impose occupation on its people, legitimize it or extend its stay in Iraq."

As Stratfor has discussed previously, the SOFA negotiations are of paramount importance to the Iranians, who are fighting tooth and nail through their Iraqi Shiite proxies to prevent the United States from hardening its military presence in Iraq with a bilateral agreement. The reconciliation between Fadlallah and Tehran was evidenced by Fadlallah's agreement to issue the fatwa against SOFA. Iran had earlier sought to get influential Iraqi Shiite leader Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani to issue a fatwa to ban the agreement, but al-Sistani, who has maintained some degree of independence from Tehran and espoused a far more ambiguous stance toward the SOFA, declined.

The Iranians are now hoping that Fadlallah's influence will give them more authority over the Iraqis to delay the agreement — at least until U.S. President-elect Barack Obama takes office and negotiations between Iran and the

United States can start anew. Moreover, by restoring ties with Fadlallah, Iran is working to consolidate its position among Shia in the Arab world as Sunni Arab regimes and the United States are intent on containing Iran's rise as a regional player.

In return for toeing the Iranian line on issues like the SOFA, Fadlallah looks to be aiming to earn Iranian backing to enhance his role among the wider Shiite community. His move comes at a time when Sunni-Shiite polarization in the region is growing more and more severe, particularly after influential Sunni cleric Yusef al-Qaradawi set off a firestorm between the two groups when he recently warned of the violence to come from the rise of Iranian-led Shiism throughout the Arab world.

To become a more influential player in Lebanon, Iraq and the wider region, Fadlallah is seeking the endorsement of Iran. There are, of course, limitations to Fadlallah's influence in Iraq. Though he is a widely respected figure in the Shiite community and spent decades studying in the religious seminaries of An Najaf, his roots — and thus his influence — are concentrated in Lebanon. A figure like al-Sistani, who carefully balances the interests of Iraq with those of Iran, is far more likely to influence the direction of negotiations in Iraq than Fadlallah.

The apparent reconciliation between Iran and Fadlallah is as much about ego-driven rivalries as it is about fighting a history of deeply fractured Shiite politics. Encircled by rival Arab regimes and pressed up against the United States in Iraq to the west and Afghanistan to the east, Iran has a strategic need to shore up support among Shiite leaders in the Arab world to consolidate its gains in spreading Shiite influence in Iraq. With Fadlallah back on its side, Iran now has an additional Shiite asset to help promote its interests in the region.

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