

The Oracle of Hizbullah: Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah

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This is the full text (excluding notes) of the study by Martin Kramer, "The Oracle of Hizbullah: Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah," in R. Scott Appleby, ed., Spokesmen for the Despised: Fundamentalist Leaders in the Middle East (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), pp. 83-181. Refer to the paper version for the 324 footnotes. Much of the study, with notes, can be previewed at [Amazon](#) and [Google Books](#) (also embedded at the foot of this page). A slightly expanded version was published in 1998 in Hebrew as a [monograph](#) by the Dayan Center at Tel Aviv University.

The prerecorded audiocassette market of Beirut is one of the more sensitive measures of the city's fever. In the 1970s it was dominated by immensely popular tapes of Palestinian nationalist hymns. But in the mid-1980s, according to a Lebanese weekly, these lost their market share to the record-breaking sales of cassettes bearing the voice of a Shi'ite cleric. In the marketplace of inspiration-on-demand, nothing could match the tapes of Friday sermons delivered by Ayatollah Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah. One vendor, operating from a cassette store in the neighborhood of Fadlallah's mosque in a poor Shi'ite quarter of Beirut, taped the sermon each week from the pulpit. The entrepreneur claimed to have sold more than a hundred thousand copies throughout Lebanon. Orders also arrived from West Africa and the United States, centers of the Lebanese Shi'ite diaspora. Heavy demand doubled the price of many tapes.



Fadlallah spoke for Hizbullah, "the party of God," a movement of Lebanese Shi'ites that captured the world's attention beginning in 1982. Obscure men

carried out the acts of violence that made Hizbullah renowned—suicide bombings, airliner hijackings, hostage takings. But it was the ubiquitous Fadlallah who processed the rage of Hizbullah into speech, in sermons and lectures, on tape and in print. Borne aloft on a wind of words, he made himself the voice of Hizbullah's conscience and its spokesman to the world. His very ubiquity suggested that he led the movement, a supposition that drew diplomats, mediators, and assassins to his door. Turban, beard, and spectacles combined in a countenance that, alone among the faces of God's partisans, became internationally famous and infamous. Fadlallah's place in the movement eluded definition; the precise boundaries of his role ran through Hizbullah's secret space. But in no other single instance did individual and collective needs so obviously combine for mutual gratification. Hizbullah's deeds amplified Fadlallah's words, carrying his voice far beyond his own pulpit to the wider world. Fadlallah's words interpreted and justified Hizbullah's deeds, transforming resentment into resistance.

Fadlallah personified the role of leaders in the emergence and transformation of contemporary Islamic movements. Islamic fundamentalism is deeply rooted in the social and economic crisis that has overwhelmed so many peoples of the Middle East and North Africa, and its power cannot be understood as the achievement of a few individual leaders. Yet the appearance of dynamic leaders has constituted a necessary condition for the forging of discontent into discipline, and the creation of organized movements. When Bernard Lewis wrote his prescient essay on "The Return of Islam" in 1975, he attributed the failure of earlier Islamic movements to an absence of such leadership:

One reason for their lack of success is that those who have made the attempt have been so unconvincing. This still leaves the possibility of a more convincing leadership, and there is ample evidence in virtually all Muslim countries of the deep yearning for such a leadership and a readiness to respond to it. The lack of an educated and modern leadership has so far restricted the scope of Islam and inhibited religious movements from being serious contenders for power. But it is already effective as a limiting factor and may yet become a powerful domestic political force if the right kind of leadership emerges.

Such leadership appeared several years later in the person of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, who launched a movement that swept aside Iran's monarchy and established a regime of divine justice. As the 1980s unfolded, more leaders emerged as additional Islamic movements gained momentum—

leaders who had mastered the power to persuade, and who knew enough of the discourse of modernity to puncture it. They convinced masses of people that a return to Islam meant not a step backward, but a leap forward into a postmodern world where the preeminent values of the West would be challenged by their own adherents. The certainties of Islam would prevail, and believers who held tightly to them would be empowered. The logic of these new leaders was a combination of the Cartesian and the Qur'anic, and they appealed directly to those scarred deeply by religious doubt, especially the ever more numerous young. In the span of a few years, these leaders came to stand at the head of mass movements, well positioned to bid for ultimate political power.

Hizbullah arose in Lebanon from a fusion of many discontents. It drew upon Shi'ite frustration with endemic poverty and the collapse of civil society into civil war. It received inspiration and direct support from Islamic Iran and won a following among those who suffered as a result Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon. It benefited from the indulgence of Syria and the fragmentation of Lebanon's Shi'ites themselves. Yet it is difficult to imagine how Hizbullah would have evolved without the omnipresence of Fadlallah. Others may have made Hizbullah's choices, but the movement bore his mark. For he was Hizbullah's oracle—a fount of infallible (if ambiguous) guidance, fed by an unfathomably deep well of wisdom. He rallied the masses to the movement, and then kept them from following paths to self-destruction. The movement and the man guaranteed one another's survival—and together they wrote history.

Precocious Poet

Fadlallah was born in the Iraqi Shi'ite shrine city of Najaf on 16 November 1935. His father, Sayyid 'Abd al-Ra'uf Fadlallah, had migrated there from the village of 'Aynata in South Lebanon in 1928 to pursue religious learning. Najaf sits astride the sluggish Euphrates, on a baked plain 150 kilometers south of Baghdad. At the heart of this city of domes is the revered tomb of the Imam 'Ali, the Prophet Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law. In past times of prosperity and peace, this gateway to the predominantly Shi'ite south of Iraq teemed with pilgrims from throughout the Shi'ite world, who sought communion with God and fed the city's hoards of beggars. But Najaf also encouraged another kind of purposeful travel, for alongside the shrines were some of the most renowned Shi'ite seminaries of learning. Great ayatollahs, scholars, and students assembled from throughout the Shi'ite world—the majority from Iran, others from Iraq, Lebanon, the Arab Gulf, Afghanistan, and the Indian subcontinent. In Najaf they studied sacred law, theology, and philosophy, according to the medieval pedagogical methods of the Islamic seminary. The schools were free of government control and submitted to no external academic authority. No presidents, deans, or masters

presided. The ayatollahs maintained their seminaries through donations and alms, which arrived from throughout the Shi'ite world. Students paid no tuition, teachers received no salaries; all drew small stipends which allowed them to pursue pious learning in conditions of the utmost austerity. Some eventually returned to their own lands to preach; others spent lifetimes in the seminaries. Stories of deprivation and hunger suffered by students and teachers filled many memoirs of life in Najaf, but all attested to the city's tenacious hold upon those who dwelled within it.

Upon entering the city, pilgrims and scholars stepped out of time. Shi'ism had survived as a negation of temporal Islamic history. In the Shi'ite view, the ship of Islam had been run aground immediately after the death of the Prophet by those who ignored his specific instruction that his son-in-law 'Ali be placed at its helm. Later the usurpers would compound the crime of disobedience with that of murder, when they slew 'Ali's son, Husayn rather than recognize his divine right to rule. There followed a succession of violations against the just claims of 'Ali's descendants and their supporters. They and their truths were forced underground by a false Islam. So thoroughly did the usurpers suppress truth that the Shi'ite tradition did not expect wrongs to be righted before the end of eschatological time. The partisans of 'Ali nursed their grievances, mourned their martyrs, and scoffed at the wars waged by false Muslims for the expansion and defense of Islam. For them, history itself had gone into hiding. Nowhere did temporal time seem so completely suspended as in Najaf and Karbala, the burial places of 'Ali and Husayn. There Shi'ites came as pilgrims to lament the injustices of this world, and there they were brought for burial to speed them to the next. Najaf did not always know tranquility, but a succession of Sunni Islamic empires recognized its sacred character and granted immunities that formed a wall around the city.

The sacred space on the Euphrates traditionally gripped the imagination of young Shi'ites in Jabal 'Amil, the mountainous south of Lebanon. Through some study in Najaf, one might become a shaykh and gain some of the prestige traditionally accorded to the learned. But Najaf exercised a particular pull upon those who already claimed authority by descent and for whom acquired learning compounded distinguished lineage. They were *sayyids*, descendants of the Prophet Muhammad through the Imam Husayn, who were believed to possess *baraka*, an inherited grace that infused their blessings with potency. They were much in demand in all forms of religious ritual; in return, they laid a recognized claim to the alms due to the Imam. While shaykhs of undistinguished lineage wore white turbans, sayyids were entitled to wear black or green.

Beyond the hereditary title of sayyid, affirmed for the world by the color of one's turban, there were more prestigious titles associated with learning. Through a

short period of study in Najaf, one might aspire to the title of *imam* and *khatib*, prayer leader and sermonizer in a mosque. More protracted study in the law of Islam might earn one the formal title of *mujtahid*, one empowered to interpret the law of Islam in binding ways for believers. When respect for one's learning became great enough that one could accredit others as mujtahids, the title of ayatollah might be accorded by informal acclamation. Such titles could only be acquired through study in Najaf. Thus learning was pursued both for its own sake and as a credential of spiritual authority and social preeminence.

When Sayyid 'Abd al-Ra'uf departed for Najaf, he did what was expected of him. His family were the most notable sayyids of the village of 'Aynata, which sat astride the then-open frontier between Lebanon and Palestine; his father, one of the foremost clerics in the district, supervised a local seminary. Najaf captured Sayyid 'Abd al-Ra'uf as a young man, and held him close for thirty years. He finished his own studies under the leading teachers of the city, and taught a generation of aspiring young scholars from Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon. He returned to south Lebanon in the summer of 1956, but the scholarly ways of the shrine city did not leave him. When he died in 1984, his body was flown back to Iraq for burial in Najaf, far from his place of birth but at the sacred center of rebirth, so that he might be among the first to be resurrected on the appointed day.



Abd al-Ra'uf Fadlallah and his son Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah

His son, Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah, passed his formative years in Najaf's rarified climate of scholastic piety. Like his fellow students, the young Fadlallah had to master a curriculum unaltered by the passage of time, which stressed grammar, logic, and rhetoric in the early years of study. This emphasis reflected a deep-rooted appreciation for the relationship between formalized language and power. A mastery of formal conventions of speech set a Najaf-educated man apart from all others; the mark of learning was an instrument of social power. The elements of this formalized language were control of classical Arabic combined with appropriate and precise quotation of the Qur'an and the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad and the Imams. These conventions, rigorously cultivated in seminary and mosque, affirmed the power of speaker over listener.

Fadlallah was gifted and precocious. At the age of ten, he and some friends

even put out a handwritten literary journal. His mastery of the word distinguished him from his contemporaries, and he progressively advanced to the highest stages of learning in theology and law under Najaf's most esteemed teachers. The most venerated of these were ayatollahs Muhsin al-Hakim and Abu al-Qasim Kho'i—the former an Arab (and related to Fadlallah through his mother), the latter an Azeri. Yet from the outset, Fadlallah demonstrated a will and a talent for stretching convention, for putting his mastery of language to original use. He first did so in poetry, which constituted the most intimate and original form of expression among the ostensibly staid scholars of Najaf. After prayer or a visit to the public baths, students and teachers alike would meet in séances where they exchanged gossip and recited verse.

In 1953, at the age of sixteen, Fadlallah visited Lebanon to attend a commemoration ceremony for a leading Shi'ite cleric. The teenager appeared on the occasion wearing the turban of a learned man and recited a poem “which astonished people at the time.” As a result, the young prodigy from Najaf stirred some comment in the Lebanese press. In later life he would continue to write poetry, in his spare time and on plane flights, and published several books of collected verse, almost all on Islamic themes.

Fadlallah's composition of free verse hinted at a daring willingness to defy convention, even while mastering its complex forms. But he was not alone in testing the limits of convention. While he acquired the practical tools of a scholar and jurist, winds of change blew through Najaf, scattering timeworn assumptions about the role of Shi'ism in the temporal world. The collapse of the Ottoman Empire had breached the walls that separated Najaf from the tumult of this world. When Fadlallah's father arrived there in 1928, the city was already under the rule of British unbelievers. Many of the leading Shi'ite clerics had fled to the city of Qom in Iran, after supporting a failed rebellion against the English occupation in 1920. Qom had thus come to rival Najaf as a center of Shi'ite learning, and would later surpass it. When Iraq became nominally independent in 1932, and again after the revolution of 1958, the centralizing nationalist state sought to establish its control over the autonomous Shi'ite shrine cities. While the state tightened its grip, contenders for power bombarded the new generation of young Shi'ites with the ideological messages of Arab nationalism, Arab socialism, and communism. Redemption from oppression, alienation, and poverty need not wait, proclaimed the new ideologies. Leave the clerics to their redemptive suffering and dogmatic messianism, and join the struggle for liberation.

Younger Shi'ite clerics understood the threat to their standing, their autonomy, and their survival. Fadlallah recollected that after the fall of the Iraqi monarchy in 1958, confronting communism became the great preoccupation of Najaf's

clerics. Islam would remain relevant to the needs of a doubting generation only if it became a theology of liberation. The young would go elsewhere unless given a Shi'ite Islamic response to their yearnings for political, social, and economic justice. Clerics could not continue to preach patience and damn politics as hubris. So began the revolution that would turn Shi'ism inside out, from a creed of pious resignation to a slogan of liberation. The best young talents of Najaf began to think, lecture, and write on such subjects as Islamic government, Islamic economics, and the ideal Islamic state. Justice could no longer be deferred, they proclaimed; Muslims had a duty to pursue it here and now. They should not wait passively for divine redemption, but must plan for it now, as though the fate of God's creation depended solely upon their own acts.

"My studies, which were supposed to be traditional, rebelled against tradition and all familiar things," Fadlallah later said. He felt an irresistible attraction to this new reading of Islam, and particularly its presentation by his Najaf contemporary, Sayyid Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr, a brilliant scion of one of contemporary Shi'ism's leading families. Together the two young scholars collaborated on a journal. Fadlallah's own editorials dealt with the need to make the teachings of Islam relevant to changing circumstances and called for a more open approach to Islamic studies among the scholars themselves.

These essays conveyed the vitality and originality of his intellect, and above all his ability to stretch convention without breaking it. But Baqir al-Sadr wished to take his message beyond the seminaries, to the displaced Shi'ite masses who had left the countryside for Iraq's cities. These could not be reached through learned articles in journals. And so the clerical theorists of an Islamic state wove a clandestine network that became known as Hizb al-Da'wa—the "Party of the Calling." The Iraqi regime regarded this passage from arid intellectualism to committed activism as an impertinent challenge to its own legitimacy and began to intimidate the clerics and laymen who had joined together in the network of Al-Da'wa.

The electrifying atmosphere of Najaf, the controversies which raged there, the inspiration of great teachers, the growing repression by the Iraqi regime—all of these left their mark on Fadlallah's character, his beliefs, his understanding of



Fadlallah (right) with Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr

the world. He came to personify the great tradition of the seminaries of Najaf. In any other generation, he might have moved inexorably toward recognition as a first-rank academic scholar. Such standing had its rewards, and Fadlallah could have laid claim to a place on the higher faculty of an esteemed seminary. But he had matured on the brink of a war—an undeclared war against Islam, waged by the forces of alienation and secularization. In Najaf Fadlallah made a commitment that would bind him—a commitment to the survival of an Islam besieged by daunting enemies. Even for those who preferred to avoid the brewing battle, the seminaries could not offer sanctuary. With the emergence of Al-Da'wa, the Iraqi regime began to show a heavier hand in the intimidation of leading Shi'ite clerics and their disciples. The regime well understood the dangers implicit in the network's new preaching and threatened its members with imprisonment or exile. The ever-encroaching state seemed poised to throw out that most fundamental of all immunities, the physical inviolability of the clerics themselves.

At the same time, Lebanon beckoned. Fadlallah had maintained his ties to the country and had visited it occasionally over the years. He knew that there no government cajoled or threatened Shi'ite clerics. Lebanon had become a sanctuary for ideas and people unwelcome everywhere else in the Middle East. Why not for Shi'ism's theologians of liberation? In Lebanon, an enterprising young cleric could also make a mark; before Fadlallah lay the example of Sayyid Musa al-Sadr, a Shi'ite cleric about seven years his senior, whose family had deep roots in Najaf but who had been born in Qom in Iran. Sayyid Musa had spent four years studying in Najaf, and had been persuaded to go to Lebanon by Ayatollah Muhsin al-Hakim, one of Fadlallah's own mentors. Sayyid Musa did so in 1959, and by the mid-1960s he had won a considerable following. Soon he would be acclaimed the Imam Sadr by his supporters.

Fadlallah's decision might have been influenced by Sayyid Musa's success. In 1962 Fadlallah visited Tyre, in Lebanon, and helped Sayyid Musa draft a protest against the policies of the Shah of Iran. He saw how Sayyid Musa had become a maker of Lebanese politics, despite his foreign birth. But Fadlallah's move to Lebanon may also have been encouraged by those who wished to bring down Sayyid Musa's rising star. Sayyid Musa had antagonized many of the landed families in south Lebanon, whom he accused of exploiting and misrepresenting the Shi'ite community. As it happened, Fadlallah's maternal grandfather had been the baron of the powerful and landed Bazzi clan of Bint Jubayl. They had bought and elbowed their way to respectability, eventually installing Fadlallah's maternal uncle as a parliamentary deputy from Bint Jubayl and then as a government minister. They would have been eager to groom one of their own as a counter to Sayyid Musa, whose call for internal social reform threatened to erode what remained of their privilege.

First Pulpit

It would be difficult to find two more apparently irreconcilable cities than Najaf and Beirut in the 1960s. Najaf's domes professed the sublime nature of God and submission to his will; Beirut's concrete citadels declared the supremacy of secular man, in commerce, journalism, literature, art, and revolution. Yet they were both cities under siege. In the heart of Beirut, the Arab world came the closest to creating an island of secular tolerance and intellectual freedom; the American University of Beirut, in particular, had become a byword for provocative thought and free expression. "There was room for everyone," remembered one observer of Beirut's free-wheeling ambience: "the devout and heathen, pious puritans and graceless hedonists, left-wing radicals and ardent conservatives, foot-loose and self-centered Bohemians and steadfast chauvinists and conventional patriots." The city was governed by "respect for differences." Yet like Najaf, Beirut had come under relentless pressure, not from a centralizing state, but from masses of refugees from the despair and deprivation that surrounded the island. Like Najaf, Beirut saw its defenses crumbling.

And like Najaf, Beirut rewarded the talented manipulation of words. When Fadlallah decided to come to his ancestral Lebanon, the eloquent and slightly unconventional cleric from Najaf knew where his art would be most appreciated. He arrived in Beirut in 1966 and selected as his arena the mixed Shi'ite-Palestinian shantytown of Nabaa in East Beirut. Nabaa was the poor relation of the neighboring Burj Hammud, one of the oldest of the city's Shi'ite communities, dating back to the 1940s, when Shi'ites first began to leave the countryside in pursuit of economic opportunity. The Shi'ites, made to feel unwelcome in Sunni West Beirut, had preferred Burj Hammud, settled between the world wars by Armenian refugees. Poorer and more recent Shi'ite arrivals squatted in neighboring Nabaa, and were joined by Palestinian refugees of war. In Burj Hammud and Nabaa, Shi'ite entrepreneurs had opened workshops and small factories. Those Shi'ites who came from the southern town of Bint Jubayl and its vicinity brought with them their traditional craft of shoemaking and established a number of shoe factories which supplied the Lebanese market. There were as many people from Bint Jubayl in Nabaa, as in Bint Jubayl itself, and the transplanted community readily accepted this brilliant native son, who had all the right credentials of descent and learning. Community leaders welcomed Fadlallah for their children's sake as well. In the crush of the city, young people were moving away from their rural ways and even their faith. Their confusion could not be addressed by the corrupt and obscurantist shaykh who presided over the neighborhood before Fadlallah arrived.

Fadlallah immediately identified the malaise of the confused young men and

women who had distanced themselves from religious belief, and set out to redeem them through a socially aware reading of Islam. He opened a *husayniyya*, a place of communal gathering where Shi'ites mourn the martyrdom of the Imam Husayn. There he established a social and cultural association known as the Family of Fraternity (*Usrat al-Ta'akhi*), which supervised clinics, youth clubs, and a middle school for Islamic studies called the Islamic Law Institute (*al-Ma'had al-Shar'i al-Islami*). The best of the students at the Institute went on to Najaf for further studies.

Fadlallah now made excellent use of the sermonizing conventions he had acquired in Najaf. He would begin his sermons with formal invocations and quotations from the Qur'an, intoned sonorously as though to cast a spell. This would draw the audience into a state of attentiveness, and confirm his authority as a master of the sacred text. Then he would introduce his general theme, discussed on a high level of abstraction in the formal cadences of classical Arabic. In many of Fadlallah's written pieces, he went no further, leaving the reader with an impression of a rather formal brilliance. But in sermons, a clear break would occur, signified by his passage to a more colloquial Arabic. Here came the transition from the sacred to the temporal, as Fadlallah descended from his broad theme to the trying questions posed by the present. At this point, his speech became feverish; in an arresting mannerism, he would wipe his high forehead with a handkerchief, as if to cool a mind racing past safe limits. Fadlallah performed like an artist on the pulpit, deftly weaving words into a dense and intricate carpet of quotations and allusions of immense suggestive power.

Fadlallah simultaneously developed a freer style of lecturing for youth clubs and groups. A lecture differed in many subtle ways from a sermon, but the most obvious departure came at the end, in the question-and-answer period. Not every sermonizer could think quickly enough on his feet to answer impromptu questions and summon the necessary quotations from Islamic sources. Fadlallah had that talent, and it endeared him to the inquisitive young, who were eager for dialogue and wrestled with difficult dilemmas that other clerics preferred to avoid.

Fadlallah's words derived their power from their combination of traditional Islamic themes and the fashionable rhetoric of anti-imperialist nationalism. The young generation that Fadlallah sought to touch had been nurtured on the ideas of Arab revolution championed by Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser, the paladin of pan-Arabism. These ideas revolved around the belief that, despite the coming of formal political independence, a disguised imperialism thwarted the Arab advance toward true independence. Fadlallah, too, believed that imperialism remained the paramount obstacle to self-fulfillment, and he borrowed heavily

from the vocabulary of Arab revolution. Fadlallah held that “imperialism cannot bear having Muslims proceed from a premise of intellectual self-reliance and it cannot bear having the Muslims act through economic and political self-sufficiency. It wants us to continue sitting at its table, feeding ourselves with the thought and consumer products it offers us.”

There was nothing original in this idea of economic and cultural imperialism sucking the lifeblood of its victims. But Fadlallah’s formulations diverged from the prevailing discourse in this important respect: for the Arabs, Fadlallah substituted the Muslims, and for Arabism he substituted Islam. Imperialism had to be fought “in order to weaken it, limit its interests and break its spine, exactly as imperialism endeavors to weaken poor peoples economically, politically, militarily, by all available means.” But Arabism was a false god; only Islam could serve as the basis for a viable struggle against imperialism. Unlike some Islamic theorists, Fadlallah did not deny the values of Arab nationalism, particularly its emphasis upon unity in the struggle for Arab liberation. But the ethos of Arabism had failed to unify the Arabs. Nationalism’s incapacity to stir the deepest commitment was demonstrated by the failure to liberate Palestine. Most of the positive values of Arab nationalism had been derived from Islam in the first place, and the liberation of Palestine and the Arabs could be hastened only by returning to an Islamic conceptualization of struggle and sacrifice.

The searing issue of the early 1970s for Lebanon’s Shi’ites was the emergence of a Palestinian resistance on Shi’ite ground. Expelled from Jordan in 1970, Palestinian armed organizations relocated to Lebanon and began to attack Israel across Lebanon’s border. Israel retaliated with uneven accuracy, often at the expense of Shi’ite bystanders. Should the Shi’ites turn their backs on the Palestinians or demonstrate solidarity by facilitating the attacks and sharing the consequences? This dilemma confronted Shi’ites not only in the south, in places like Bint Jubayl, but also in Beirut, where their Palestinian neighbors—including those in Fadlallah’s own Nabaa quarter—had also armed themselves.

Sayyid Musa al-Sadr could never give Shi’ites a straightforward answer to their own Palestinian question. While he felt the pull of solidarity, he dreaded the inclusion of the Shi’ites in the ring of suffering that surrounded the Palestinians. After all, peace had prevailed for a generation along the frontier between Lebanon and Israel. The south had been transformed into a battleground only after the emergence of an armed Palestinian resistance, which used the region as a platform for attacks against Israel. Not a few Shi’ites shared the view, widespread in Lebanon, that the Palestinians were pursuing their war of liberation at Lebanon’s expense and bore responsibility for the hellish Israeli reprisals upon the villages of the south. Sayyid Musa sympathized with Palestinian aspirations because the Palestinians had been dispossessed, but

did not believe that the Shi'ites, alone among all Arabs, should bear the burden of their struggle. As he said in private conversation in 1973, "Our sympathy no longer extends to actions which expose our people to additional misery and deprivation."

Fadlallah understood the dilemma differently. Formed in the Arab world of the 1950s, he knew the language of Arab unity, Arab liberation, and Arab socialism. The whole enterprise of the younger generation of Najaf clerics had been the appropriation of that language and its translation into the categories of Islam. Najaf's poets also had vied with one another in spinning words on Palestine. Fadlallah shared the Arab nationalist conviction that Israel was the instrument of a wider Western plot to dominate the Arab and Muslim worlds. The conflict to the south was not a problem between Jews and Arabs in Palestine, but between two blocs contending for the world. The Shi'ites, Fadlallah warned, could not opt out of this conflict, for they too were slated for victimization. "The problem of the South is part of the Palestinian problem," he said in a lecture delivered in Bint Jubayl in 1972. "The claim of politicians and some others, that the departure of the Palestinian fedayeen from the region will solve the problem, is talk for the sake of talk, anachronistic words, a temporary anesthetic." Israel did not strike the south only in reaction to Palestinian attacks. Israel coveted the south and wished to possess it. Israel had taken territory in each of the previous three wars, declared Fadlallah, and would provoke yet another war to gain more. Fadlallah understood the Shi'ite fear of taking a stand against Israel. "Israel frightened the entire Islamic world and appeared as the invincible element in 1967," he later said. "The Islamic world, and especially the Arab world, experienced such a psychological defeat that if any of us heard the word 'Israel' he trembled in fear, as many of us did with regard to the agents of Israel." So to embolden his listeners, Fadlallah conjured up another fear—of eventual displacement, by an Israel which would grow like a cancer unless it was excised.

This argument set Fadlallah apart from Sayyid Musa al-Sadr. Its premises lay deep in the discourse of pan-Arabism, which Sayyid Musa never fully mastered. For Sayyid Musa, the salvation of the Shi'ites lay in Lebanon's recognition of their place in the mosaic. He appealed to those who clung to their Shi'ism and preserved their faith in Lebanon. But Fadlallah spoke to the young Shi'ites who were beyond the reach of Sayyid Musa, those who scoffed not only at Shi'ism but at Lebanon, and who believed that by espousing causes larger than both they might lose themselves in the revolutionary mass. Seeing no reason to cling to a sectarian Shi'ism, they instead offered their services to the leftist militias and the Palestinian organizations. To the young Shi'ites yearning to identify with anything but Shi'ism, Fadlallah offered the alternative of an ecumenical Islam. Embrace the cause of Palestine, he urged, but do so in the spirit and name of

Islam.

This did not mean that Fadlallah endorsed the wild fury of the Palestinian attacks on Israel. The Shi'ites, the Palestinians, and the Arabs as a whole, had to face the limitations imposed by their situation. The people had to overcome the effects of the feudal order and the quarreling Arab regimes, in order to challenge an Israel supported by the greatest power in the West, the United States.

The problem is what we are able to do, on the basis of the forces we can muster on the local level at a given moment in time. Emotion might push you towards thinking about revolting against your situation, but this alone will not bring you any result on the road to a solution. Perhaps an individual, in certain emotional states and in certain situations, may feel the urge to destroy himself and all that is around him. This might be a way to release rage and suppression through an explosion, but this has never solved a problem.

This emotionalism was the bane of the Arab world. The Arabs primed themselves to expect a quick fix, and avoided long-term planning, while the aggressors unfolded their multistage plan “to gain control of our country and our resources, and then remove us from our homelands under the slogan ‘a land without a people for a people without a land.’” The Arabs had to set aside their daydreams and begin by taking a profound look at the enemy’s future plans, on the basis of present and past experience. “We should then plan our political, economic, and military life accordingly.” Fadlallah was too cautious to spell out a precise plan of action. He spoke instead of the necessity of individual transformation from within. “It is the individual who will grasp the gun, who will fly the plane. Tell me, by God, how will the individual advance this fateful cause, unless he possesses profound faith and moral fortitude, so that he will not yield to temptation?” Fadlallah proclaimed Islam a theology of liberation at a moment when Arab revolutionaries and intellectuals denounced it as the paramount obstacle to an effective Arab challenge to Israel.

But Fadlallah's message did not resonate beyond a few Beirut neighborhoods. Sayyid Musa al-Sadr's voice carried much further, because he spoke directly to the strong sense of Shi'ite particularity which still gripped the community. Both men wore the same turban, but the differences were profound. The physically towering Sadr possessed an informal dignity that reflected the self-confidence of someone of the most noble descent. He relied heavily upon that pedigree, for when he spoke, his Persianized Arabic betrayed his foreign roots. Fadlallah was short and stocky, and could be readily mistaken for an acolyte. But his effortless and flowing Arabic proclaimed him the most Arab of Arabs.



Fadlallah (left) and Musa Sadr (second from right)

The Shi'ites showed their preference. Sayyid Musa's deportment, lineage, winning manner, and message of hope captured the imagination and won the loyalty of many of Lebanon's Shi'ites. That Sadr spoke accented Arabic hardly mattered. Bereft of self-confidence, the Shi'ites of Lebanon were eager to defer to outside authority. Still strongly Shi'ite in identity, they were not embarrassed to look for leadership beyond the Arab world, to the seat of contemporary Shi'ite culture in Iran. Fadlallah had a much narrower appeal, which did not extend far past his own neighborhood. He won favor particularly with Shi'ites who shared his reading of the Palestinian problem as fateful for the Shi'ite community itself. Among these followers, young Shi'ites who had joined Palestinian organizations, and even risen to positions of some prominence, looked to Fadlallah as the cleric whose words most perfectly justified their presence in Palestinian ranks.

But they were too few. Fadlallah remained in the shadows, while Sayyid Musa became the Imam Sadr, hailed by many of Lebanon's Shi'ites as leader and savior. Fadlallah used his time to cultivate his support at the most local level, and to bolster his scholarly credentials. Later, when asked what he did during these years, Fadlallah said that he spent them laying "foundations" and sharing the suffering of the poor. He also wrote his first full-length book, about methods of propagating Islam in the Qur'an, and he began work on a second, about the relationship of Islam to the use of force. The theme would soon prove timely as Lebanon began its descent into civil war.

A Logic of Power

The battle began in 1975, and in the following year the Maronite-dominated Phalangist militia began a campaign to excise the Palestinians from their armed redoubts in the eastern part of Beirut. Nabaa, it turned out, rested squarely upon Lebanon's fault line. An earthquake now began which would leave Beirut a divided city, the two halves separated by a vast chasm. The dilemma which had faced the Shi'ites of the South suddenly confronted many in Beirut. The Phalangist militia laid siege to the Palestinians in Nabaa, blockading and shelling the shantytown. In 1976 the Shi'ites found themselves caught between two ruthless opponents and subject to Palestinian demands for solidarity. Some Shi'ites would have fought for their homes alongside the Palestinians, but Sayyid Musa al-Sadr feared for the fate of the community and struck a deal with the Phalangist militia that allowed safe passage of the Shi'ites out of the neighborhood. Upon their departure, the Phalangist militia overran Nabaa, crushing the remnants of Palestinian resistance.

Among those Shi'ites who favored resistance, the evacuation agreement reached by Sayyid Musa smacked of defeatism and betrayal. If Fadlallah shared this view, he did not voice it publicly. He left Nabaa with perhaps a hundred thousand others, abandoning the labor of a decade. However, he claimed to have done so outside the framework of the demeaning capitulation negotiated by Sayyid Musa. Fadlallah would not return to Nabaa. Later he received a telephone message from Amin Gemayel, the Phalangist commander who had taken Nabaa and who would later be president of Lebanon. Fadlallah knew that the overture concerned the possibility of reopening a clinic which he had sponsored in the quarter. He did not return the call.

As the shells fell during the long siege of Nabaa, Fadlallah wrote a book, mostly by candlelight. *Islam and the Logic of Power* constituted Fadlallah's most systematic polemic in favor of the empowerment of Islam. When Fadlallah wrote it, the militarization of the Shi'ite community was underway; Sayyid Musa al-Sadr and his followers had taken the first steps toward the arming and training of the Shi'ite militia known as Amal. Yet the founders of Amal narrowly conceived their purpose as the defense of Shi'ite interests and lives in a Lebanon gone mad with sectarian violence. Sayyid Musa argued that the Shi'ites must no longer allow themselves to be victimized, that they must arm themselves, as did all of Lebanon's other communities. Amal promised to guarantee Shi'ite survival among the wolves—and little more.

Fadlallah's book made the very different argument that the acquisition of power must serve not the ends of a sect, but those of all Islam in its confrontation with error, disbelief, and imperialism. Shi'ites must act, Fadlallah said, because Islam was endangered by the threat of an aggressive imperialism; Lebanon's strife was really a flash point in the global confrontation between Islam and

imperialism. And so Fadlallah differed with Sayyid Musa over the uses to which emerging Shi'ite power should be put. Sayyid Musa saw the armed Shi'ite as a defender of his sect, which sought parity with other sects. Fadlallah saw the armed Shi'ite as an asset of Islam in a comprehensive confrontation with unbelief.

For many Shi'ites, Fadlallah's vision seemed to fly in the face of common sense. They thought Lebanon's Shi'ites would be fortunate to match the power of Lebanon's other sects. Was it not sheer fantasy to imagine the dispossessed and deprived Shi'ites of Lebanon mounting a defense of all Islam? In his book, Fadlallah said it was not. The power imperialism enjoyed over Islam was temporary and could be defeated, because it rested upon unbelief and exploitation. The Muslims did not have the same instruments of oppression and war that imperialism wielded, but power did not reside only in quantitative advantage or physical force. Strikes, demonstrations, civil disobedience, preaching—these too were forms of power. The precondition to such empowerment was a setting aside of fear; this in turn required that Muslims believe in the truth of their cause and have faith that martyrdom brings reward in the hereafter. Once they believed, they themselves would stir fear in the breasts of their most powerful adversaries.

At the same time, Fadlallah warned against such wanton and reckless violence as had backed the Palestinians into their pitiful corner. Legitimate and effective violence could only proceed from belief wedded to sober calculation. It had to be conceived as part of an overall plan of liberation. He repeated the warning first made in his Bint Jubayl lectures, against the surrender to emotion and impulse that underlined Palestinian violence. Fadlallah knew there were Shi'ites inspired by the Palestinians' theatrical acts of violence. But he regarded many of the actions of the Palestinian resistance as spasms of unguided emotion that produced nothing and signaled weakness.

In *Islam and the Logic of Power*, the dynamic tension in Fadlallah's thought found full expression. With one voice, he worked to convince the weak and doubting that they could acquire power through sacrifice. With another voice, he sought to restrain the zealous and harness their willingness for sacrifice to a carefully considered plan of action. His ideal of virtue was the achievement of a perfect balance between these two voices—a seamless harmony, in politics as in poetry. This required an inner philosophical balance—between persuasion and violence, logic and emotion, sacrifice and ambition, belief and skepticism. By the time Nabaa fell, Fadlallah had struck that balance. The self-master could now master others.

Starting Anew

After the debacle of Nabaa, Fadlallah briefly retreated to Bint Jubayl in the south, where he fell back upon the patronage of his mother's powerful clan and the support of his father. The natives of Bint Jubayl who had fled Nabaa did the same. The town's swelled from thirteen thousand to twenty-four thousand. Families took in destitute relations, and the houses filled to overflowing. Some two hundred families with no place to stay lived in the schools, which had emptied for summer vacation. Many families slept out in the open. The new arrivals depended completely upon their brethren for food, and prices skyrocketed. A six-month delay in the payment for the tobacco crop by the state monopoly created a terrible shortage of cash. Only the charity of Bint Jubayl's native sons in distant Michigan and West Africa saved the town from hunger. These Shi'ites, including Fadlallah, had become some of the first refugees of Lebanon's civil war.

The loss of his congregation was a personal and professional setback to Fadlallah. He might have started again in Bint Jubayl, but he lacked the temperament of a provincial cleric, and knew that his message of power did not resonate among the hills of the south. More important, Bint Jubayl began to empty as the war between Israelis and Palestinians overflowed into its streets. In October 1976, after a series of incidents, Israeli shells fell in the midst of a market-day crowd, killing seven people. A mass exodus began, carrying almost the entire population to Beirut's southern suburbs, the Dahiya. Fadlallah again joined the wandering flock, eventually settling in the crumbling Bi'r al-'Abd neighborhood, and began to raise a congregation. Good fortune shined when a wealthy Shi'ite émigré provided him with funds to expand an existing mosque. The Imam al-Rida mosque was a modern and spacious structure with a high ceiling and a balcony in the rear. A wall of glass admitted light. The place of worship was a much more confident structure than the self-effacing husayniyyas of the Dahiya, and its outspoken style perfectly suited its new denizen.

In making this new beginning, Fadlallah had the benefit of some additional support. Ayatollah Muhsin al-Hakim had died in Najaf in 1970, and most Lebanese Shi'ites chose to recognize the religious rulings of Ayatollah Abu al-Qasim Kho'i as binding. At that time, both Fadlallah and Sayyid Musa al-Sadr pledged their allegiance to Kho'i, whose seminary in Najaf was supported by donations from Lebanon and elsewhere in the Shi'ite world. But priorities shifted following the outbreak of the civil war in Lebanon, as increasing numbers of Shi'ites lost their homes and many children were orphaned. Now Kho'i asked that Lebanese Shi'ite clerics establish a committee to create charitable institutions in Lebanon, to be supported with funds collected in Kho'i's name. and he named Fadlallah his representative in Lebanon. Who better to understand the suffering of orphans and others driven from their homes than a

guardian who also had lost everything? The appointment made Fadlallah the trustee for the sizable contributions made to Kho'i's Lebanese accounts. In Kho'i's name, Fadlallah established a large charitable institution (*mabarra*) in the neighborhood of al-Duha, which grew to include an orphanage, school, and mosque. In its first year, the school enrolled 275 students; a photograph from the summer of 1978 shows Fadlallah surrounded by youngsters, graduates of the school's first Qur'an recital class. In subsequent years, the activities of the institution broadened to include courses for teachers of orphans. Fadlallah's relationship with Kho'i gave him a base from which to rebuild his influence, this time among the inhabitants of the hard-pressed Dahiya.

At the same time, Fadlallah greatly benefited from the return to Lebanon of a group of able young theological students from Najaf. Serious disorders broke out in Najaf in 1977, and the Iraqi regime tightened its grip on the seminaries by expelling many of the foreign students, including more than a hundred Lebanese Shi'ites. A few proceeded to Qom in Iran, but learning in the religious seminaries there had been disrupted by the escalating confrontation with the Shah's regime. Many aspiring clerics preferred to return to Lebanon, where a number of new seminaries absorbed them as teachers and students. Some appear as teachers in that same photograph of the Qur'an recital class in Fadlallah's school. Others found their place in the Islamic Law Institute Fadlallah had founded in Nabaa, which had since moved to Bi'r Hasan in the Dahiya. Fadlallah now had his own protégés, whom he could reward with positions in his expanding enterprises.

Yet another development worked to Fadlallah's advantage in making his message audible. In 1978, Sayyid Musa al-Sadr disappeared while on a trip to Libya. He was quite probably murdered there, but his precise fate has never been determined. Fadlallah had his differences with Sayyid Musa but would not air them openly. "Sayyid Musa al-Sadr was a friend and a schoolmate long before he arrived in Lebanon," Fadlallah later recalled. "I was with him for four years in Najaf, during our studies. When we did not agree on particular points or methods, this did not affect our friendship." Public airing of disagreement would have breached the etiquette of collegiality that governed Najaf's seminaries. It also would have been impolitic, given Sayyid Musa's undeniable popularity. "We hope Sadr will return," Fadlallah declared during one of the feverish rounds of rumor about Sayyid Musa's imminent return, "although there might be differences of opinion between him and us." Fadlallah never went further in speaking about those differences. Yet he must have understood that his own voice could not be heard above the noisy preoccupation with the doings and sayings of the spell-binding Imam Sadr. The disappearance of Sayyid Musa, tragedy though it was, opened a gate of opportunity for Fadlallah and his message.

Revolution of Islam, Party of God

Then the “earthquake” struck. This was Fadlallah’s own metaphor for the Islamic revolution that swept Iran, creating the sensation that the ground had moved under the pillars of power and his own feet. The epicenter lay in Iran, but the shock jolted the most remote corners of Islam and affected Lebanon’s Shi’ites immediately. Until Iran’s revolution, the ideal of the Islamic state had been a remote abstraction, discussed only in the theoretical studies of clerics. Now men who had spent their lives in the seminaries of Qom and Najaf were swept to power on a wave of popular revolutionary fervor. In proclaiming an Islamic state, they summoned fellow Shi’ite clerics in the wider world to acclaim their revolution and apply its lessons to their own countries. Many came to Lebanon as emissaries of Imam Khomeini, to preach the new dispensation. To the poor, they began to dispense money.

The revolution and the arrival of Iranian emissaries compelled Lebanon’s leading Shi’ite clerics to choose between the battered idea of confessional Lebanon and the stirring slogan of an Islamic state. Lebanon’s foremost Shi’ite clerics sought the good will of Islamic Iran and made formal obeisance to the Imam Khomeini, but balked at the prospect of jeopardizing the formal recognition of the Lebanese state for their institutions, first won for them by Sayyid Musa. Under his leadership, they had been petitioners of the Lebanese government, demanding no less—and no more—than their rightful share of office and privilege. A demand for an Islamic state would sever their link to the confessional system, and compel disavowal of the institutional recognition accorded them by the state. Titles still meant a great deal to leading Shi’ite clerics such as the Acting Chairman of the Supreme Islamic Shi’ite Council, Shaykh Muhammad Mahdi Shams al-Din, and the Shi’ite Mufti of Lebanon, Shaykh ‘Abd al-Amir Qabalan. They presided over an elaborate hierarchy of ritual and legal functionaries, whose status and income were derived from the established Shi’ite institutions of Lebanon. They naturally hesitated to forfeit tangible assets for the promise of a millennium.

But Fadlallah did not hold any title in the Shi’ite clerical establishment. Like any cleric of his standing, he was a member of the Supreme Islamic Shi’ite Council. He even claimed to have been “one of those who worked to find a consensus among the various Shi’ite scholars regarding the issue of the Council” when it was first created, mediating between Sayyid Musa and “others who differed from him.” But Fadlallah played no role there: “I said I would not elect and would not nominate myself to be elected,” since his philosophy was “different from the formula of religious councils.” Fadlallah claimed instead that his allegiances crossed the frontiers of Lebanon, binding him to an ecumenical and universal Islam.

And many Shi'ites now felt the same way. Fadlallah had seen the spontaneous Shi'ite demonstrations that filled the streets of West Beirut in April 1979, demanding an Islamic state in Lebanon. These demonstrators answered to none of the established leaders, and might be drawn to his flame if he could provide Arabic captions to the mute icons of the Imam Khomeini now plastering the walls of the Dahiya. So while the coyness of Lebanon's Shi'ite establishment exasperated the many official and semiofficial emissaries who began to arrive from Iran, Fadlallah rushed headlong into their embrace, proclaiming the moral debt of all Muslims to Iran's revolution and hailed its crucial role in the reawakening of Islamic consciousness among Lebanon's Shi'ites. He cheered the revolution as "the great dream of all those whose life is labor for Islam," and praised the early purging of revolutionaries compromised by the Western-inspired notion of "Islamic democracy." The revolution bore within it a universal message valid throughout all time: "It cannot be limited to a specific place except on a temporary basis." The spread of the revolution was the duty of every individual, the society, and the state.

Fadlallah even sanctioned the controversial holding of American diplomats hostage in Tehran by students claiming to follow the "line of the Imam Khomeini." He noted the criticism "by some in the [Islamic] movement" that the hostage-taking was done without planning as to its aims, and that it constituted an "emotional student reaction to the American threat." Given Fadlallah's aversion to the blind expression of rage, he probably shared this criticism. Yet he also understood the role of rage in the consolidation of a movement or state. Raw emotion could be controlled and harnessed to higher purpose. And so behind the hostage-taking in Iran, Fadlallah saw a purpose: "I am inclined to say that the leadership was not far removed from all the planning done by those students who claimed to follow the line of the Imam. In light of this, I think that the issue of the hostages was submitted to Islamic planning, in order to deepen the independent content of the revolution in the consciousness of the nation." In other words, Khomeini himself had sanctioned the move, in order to promote the consolidation of the revolution. His authority justified the means.

Finally, Fadlallah delighted Iran's emissaries by leading the charge against Iraq's presence in Lebanon. The long years of repression the Shi'ite clerics had suffered at the hands of the Iraqi regime now reached their culmination. The regime moved against the Shi'ite seminaries in Najaf and elsewhere, making membership in Al-Da'wa punishable by death and arresting Sayyid Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr, who it secretly put to death. In September 1980, Iraq invaded Iran, in a bid to undermine the foundations of the revolution made by the clerics. During late 1980 and early 1981, Beirut became an arena of small-scale clashes between pro-Iraqi and pro-Iranian elements, as the embassies of both countries replicated the war waged on their common frontier. Fadlallah played

an admitted role in the campaign against the Iraqi regime in Lebanon and soon found himself targeted by persons “backed by the Iraqi Ba’th Party, as the result of my opposition to the system of government in Iraq.” In November 1980 armed assailants in a passing car sprayed Fadlallah’s car with gunfire. A bullet even struck his turban, but he emerged unscathed. There were several more attempts on his life over the next two years, and Fadlallah began to surround himself with bodyguards.

In the end, the distant earthquake of Iran’s revolution began to topple the buildings of Beirut. In December 1981 Iraq’s opponents in Lebanon leveled the Iraqi embassy in Beirut with a car bomb, killing the ambassador and many of the staff. Iraq, hopelessly exposed and outgunned in Lebanon, allowed its influence in that country to wane. The Lebanese Shi’ite struggle against the Iraqi regime was a sideshow, one of the countless little wars waged on Lebanon’s soil. Yet its outcome gratified Iran’s emissaries, as did Fadlallah’s continued preaching against the regime of Saddam Husayn. After the failed assassination attempt against him in 1980, he received a personal visit in his home from the speaker of Iran’s parliament, ‘Ali-Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani—a demonstrative gesture of gratitude to the still-obscure cleric.

Fadlallah’s endorsements of the revolution and his condemnations of its enemies, all pronounced in a flawless Arabic, were music to the ears of Iran’s emissaries. The triumph of the revolution moved Lebanese Shi’ites, but it had occurred on the other side of a linguistic and cultural divide. Its message needed to be translated and interpreted for a Lebanese Shi’ite audience. The despised of the villages and slums might be won by the symbolism of mute posters of Khomeini, or swayed by the material favors handed out by Iran’s representatives. Not so the newly literate and educated classes—avid consumers of words in Lebanon’s emporium of ideas. They were potentially receptive to the message, for they had grown to maturity in a civil war, and knew Lebanon as little more than a broken abstraction. Many longed for a voice to lift them out of the rubble and reconcile the claims of Shi’ite identity with their revolutionary ideals. But emissaries from afar could not fathom the depths of their dilemma, let alone resolve it. Nor could they employ Arabic with the finesse needed to sway the educated young, who demanded a particularly Lebanese sophistication in the style and content of a message.

Fadlallah understood the problem perfectly. For over a decade he had worked with the disillusioned young, refining his message of Islam to respond to each new wave of millenarian fad and ideological fashion. He had a particular way with Shi’ite students in the city’s several universities, who constituted an untapped resource for the cause of Islam. Fadlallah reached out to them partly through the Lebanese Union of Muslim Students (*al-Ittihad al-Lubnani lil-talaba*

al-Muslimin). This organization was created with the support of clerics in the early 1970s to counter the temptations of secular ideologies among Shi'ite university students. The Union began by organizing conferences, seminars, and a weekly lecture series in its own hall and reading room in the quarter of Al-Ghubayri, in the Dahiya. But it reached a far wider audience through publication of an intellectual journal, *Al-Muntalaq*, which first appeared in 1978. Fadlallah's name figured only occasionally in the journal in its first two years of publication, but his sermons and articles appeared with greater frequency after 1980, and finally as the lead pieces in nearly every issue. *Al-Muntalaq* proved important to Fadlallah in reaching students who frequented libraries rather more than mosques. But as Fadlallah became better known, he also began to speak on campus, in the very citadels of secular education, including the inner sanctum, the Assembly Hall at the American University of Beirut. Iran's emissaries, who well understood the value of educated cadres, grew ever more anxious to harness Fadlallah's talent of persuasion to their revolutionary juggernaut.

Mutual need lay at the foundation of this partnership between Fadlallah and Iran's emissaries. The cleric brought with him his own following and a willingness to work to awaken the latent potential of Islam in Lebanon; the emissaries allowed Fadlallah free and unencumbered use of their symbols and provided him with material support. Fadlallah did not owe his daily bread to Iranian bursars, and in an oft-repeated challenge he defied "any intelligence agency in the world to prove that I have a financial or semi-financial relationship with any state in the world, including Iran." Fadlallah did have his own resources, assuring him a degree of financial independence unique among the clerics rallied by Iran's agents. But the claim was misleading. Iran supported institutions under his control and offered him an array of important services, from personal security to airline travel. And above all, it offered him a kind of franchise for invoking the name of the revolution.

Fadlallah's franchise, however, was never exclusive. He had to share it with Iran's men on the scene, other Lebanese Shi'ite clerics, and zealous strongmen who volunteered their services as militiamen for Iran. Fadlallah lost an important battle very early in the day when he privately opposed Iran's creation of a distinct organization to bring these disparate souls together in a disciplined framework. Most Shi'ites were affiliated with Amal, and the creation of another Shi'ite organization would split the Shi'ite camp, since many Shi'ites would not or could not join a new party. Far better, Fadlallah argued, to preach the cause of Islam in an attempt to transform Amal from within than create a competing organization. Fadlallah raised his objection as a matter of principle, positing a choice between building a clandestine party to seize power—a select "party of God"—or appealing to a mass following through the open call of Islam. Islam, he proclaimed, "is a movement open to all, whereas a movement of a party

carefully selects the people who are devoted to its idea, adhere to its teachings, and live fully as members. This requires that the party distinguish between those who meet the conditions of membership, who are then acknowledged, and those who do not, who are rejected. This contradicts the nature of religious adherence.” Furthermore, in Iran, the masses, not a party, made the revolution. “The many Islamic parties in the Islamic world have never achieved a comparable result.”

But by this time, Iran’s diplomats in Lebanon and Syria had despaired of gaining a firm hold over Amal. They could break off branches, but the trunk of the movement remained firmly rooted in the ground marked off by Sayyid Musa. Fadlallah understood the determination of Iran’s emissaries and finally acquiesced in the fateful decision to establish a separate party,



Fadlallah joins Hezbollah’s Subhi Tufayli (l) and Hasan Nasrallah (r)

reluctantly permitting his own closest followers to join the newly created Hizbullah. But he did so with a sense of resignation: “It is not necessary that party organization be the only technique for advancing the revolution or acquiring power, for life does not hold within it only one method for bringing about progressive change. But no one can deny the value of the party in this regard, in the successful experiences of many of the states in the Eastern and Western worlds.” Hizbullah had a role to play, provided it did not seek “to abolish the traditional way of presenting Islam as religion and neglect general action for promoting Islam at the community level, in mosques and public fora.” Fadlallah thus insisted that the new party respect his own role and that of others, who summoned men and women to a belief which no party could impose.

Yet Fadlallah preferred to remain formally outside the bounds of Hizbullah. Anticipating that Hizbullah’s creation would fragment the Shi’ites of Lebanon, he sought to build a personal constituency on both sides of the incipient fissure and even across the long-standing divide between Shi’ites and Sunnis. Fadlallah thus repeatedly denied any formal connection to Hizbullah:

The claim that I am the leader of Hizbullah is baseless and untrue. I am not the leader of any organization or party. It seems that when they could not find any prominent figure to pin this

label on, and when they observed that I was active in the Islamic field, they decided to settle on me. It could be that many of those who are considered to be part of Hizbullah live with us in the mosque and they might have confidence in me. Who is the leader of Hizbullah? Obviously, he is the one who has influence. So, when they cannot see anybody on the scene, no spokesman, no prominent political figure speaking out for Hizbullah, they try to nail it on a specific person, whose name is then linked to every incident.

It was a typically evasive statement. By the time Fadlallah made it, his mosque had become the great meeting ground of Hizbullah. His remarks were reported at length in Hizbullah's weekly newspaper, which eventually accorded him a regular interview in every issue. The movement's followers already hailed him as "the Sayyid," for they too sought to fix their gaze upon a single visible leader who would voice their aspirations. But the denial of formal position was not a bluff. Since Fadlallah did not wish to be narrowly identified with Hizbullah, Iran's emissaries felt free to withhold information from him and exclude him from the movement's inner councils. If Fadlallah preferred to remain at arm's length from Hizbullah, then Hizbullah's patrons would double that length. Fadlallah and Iran's emissaries consulted, of course, and carefully coordinated their actions and statements when they found themselves in agreement. But when they disagreed, they went their separate ways, Fadlallah stating one thing and Hizbullah often doing quite another.

Fadlallah thus preserved his independence, but at the cost of a certain intimacy with the process of decision making in Hizbullah. For Fadlallah, this was just as well, for he had already argued the necessity of resorting to force in desperate circumstances. If he were ever linked to actual decisions to employ force, he might have to bear the consequences. The safest course was to stand slightly aside—to use all his powers of suggestion, yet allow others to take and bear responsibility for operative decisions. It was not all dissimulation when he declared: "I am not responsible for the behavior of any armed or unarmed group that operates in the arena. Whoever errs, I criticize his error even if he is one of ours, and whoever is correct, I appreciate his correctness even if he is a communist." This desire to maintain a formal distance led Fadlallah to deny not only the title of leader, but even the less decisive designation of spiritual guide. Fadlallah once refused an interview to a leading news agency because it would not promise to omit the ubiquitous tag. The ever-cautious Fadlallah preferred to elude all definition, since no definition did him justice, and most could do him considerable harm. In Hizbullah he was simply known as "the Sayyid."

Yet it was inevitable that Fadlallah would become identified in Lebanon and abroad as mentor of Hizbullah. And this was not so inaccurate as to be a libel. True, he did not serve as mentor to all in Hizbullah and he also had admirers beyond Hizbullah. Yet the despised and aggrieved who filled the ranks of the movement did look first to Fadlallah to interpret their own predicament. And at times he did serve Iran's emissaries and Hizbullah's clerics as adviser, jurist, strategist, tactician, spokesman, and mediator. Despite the irregular boundaries of his influence and the complexity of his role, the fact remained that his fortunes and fate were inseparable from those of Hizbullah. Partnership had evolved into mutual dependence; as the man and the movement embracing, they began a dizzying ascent to success.

Out of Obscurity

The "earthquake" of Iran's revolution was followed by the "holocaust" of the Israeli invasion in 1982. As Israeli forces rolled through the south and then into the Dahiya and West Beirut, Fadlallah experienced his most trying moments since the siege of Nabaa. His position had drawn him closer than any Shi'ite cleric to the Palestinian cause, at a time when many Shi'ites gave up even the pretence of solidarity with the Palestinians. The Palestinians by their arrogance had lost their claim to Shi'ite sympathy; the Shi'ites now refused the bill for the spiraling cycle of violence between Israelis and Palestinians. During the months prior to the Israeli invasion, Shi'ite resentment against Palestinian hegemony in the south had grown so intense that Amal took up arms against the Palestine Liberation Organization in the south and Beirut. And Shi'ites remained bystanders when Israel took to the roads and the skies of Lebanon in the summer of 1982 to finish off the PLO.

Fadlallah's message of solidarity with the Palestinians fell upon deaf ears. Indeed, most Shi'ites dared to hope that Israel would save Lebanon in spite of itself, and restore peace and security to a liberated south. Israel's conduct in Lebanon ultimately betrayed that hope, but many of Lebanon's Shi'ites then fixed their gaze upon the United States, which appeared as peace broker and eased both the Palestine Liberation Organization and Israel out of Beirut. The United States and France now seemed ready to commit their moral and material force to the solution of Lebanon's strife. Their troops stood sentry just outside the Dahiya.

While hopes ran feverishly high in the Shi'ite community, Fadlallah remained silent. He waited for disillusionment to seep under the new order—and it was not long in coming. As the United States became a party to Lebanon's feud, throwing its support behind the claims of Christian privilege and Israeli security, more Shi'ites turned against it. In March 1983, Islamic Jihad, the clandestine

arm of Hizbullah, took the initiative against the “American occupation army,” with a grenade attack against a Marine patrol. In April 1983, the same group claimed credit for an immense explosion that gutted the U.S. Embassy in West Beirut, killing seventeen Americans. Now the time had come to expose the American role for what it was.

Only a few blocks from the Marines, Fadlallah began to explain the “secret of secrets” behind the American presence. The United States had not “saved” Lebanon from Israel; rather, it had prompted Israel to extend its invasion “beyond what the Israeli plan called for,” in an attempt to “create new realities in the arena, to secure political gains for the purpose of complete control over the region.” Now the plan had reached its sinister culmination. Battered by “the mad Israeli shelling,” the people of Beirut placed their trust in America.

They panted after any alleviation or pause in the siege, which had deprived the people of water, food, and medications. America then began to take up the role of a mediator, working to secure a supply of fuel or food or water, then guaranteeing the exit of the Palestinians, then bringing around the Israelis a bit, then assuring the withdrawal of foreign forces. So began the panting after America, which worked to multiply the panting, to create a psychological situation favorable to its policies. . . . The people began to recite “Praise be to America” for protecting them and providing them with a magical solution, delivered by a beautiful white stallion at the break of dawn.

All illusion, said Fadlallah. Submission to America meant servility to that very power which guaranteed Israel’s existence and used Israel to pursue its selfish ends. For Fadlallah, the Israeli invasion and its American aftermath confirmed his concept of the essential unity of imperialism. Now the eyes of others were opening to his truth. “We believe that the future holds surprises,” he announced in an article published in the middle of 1983. “There is no alternative to a bitter and difficult jihad, borne from within by the power of effort, patience and sacrifice—and the spirit of martyrdom.”

It was that spirit which inspired the two “self-martyring operations” directed against American Marines and French paratroopers on one morning in October 1983. In both instances, nameless youths drove explosive-laden trucks into the barracks housing the foreign forces, blasting apart themselves and their enemies in two combined acts of sacrifice and self-sacrifice. The two bombings claimed over three hundred lives, and would eventually persuade the United

States and France that the cost of patrolling the Dahiya was far more than they could bear. But the mass destruction initially provoked a feverish American and French quest for a culpable individual—a quest that irrevocably altered Fadlallah’s life. For within days of the attacks, the intelligence service of the Phalangist party put out the information that Fadlallah had blessed the two “self-martyrs” on the eve of their operation. A story to this effect appeared in the *Washington Post* and Fadlallah achieved worldwide notoriety overnight.

The accusation could not be proved or disproved, and no irrefutable evidence ever came to light establishing Fadlallah’s direct involvement in the two attacks. But it hardly mattered. If the accusation gained sufficient credence in Washington and Paris, or if demands for vengeance overrode considerations of evidence, Fadlallah would become a hunted man. In the past, his influence had rested upon his mastery of words and his aura of credibility. Now his very life depended upon them. And so Fadlallah began a campaign to sow the seeds of reasonable doubt in the minds of foreigners charged with assessing responsibility for the attacks. The task would not be easy, for the master of the word spoke no language other than Arabic.

A meeting was arranged between Fadlallah and a journalist from the *Washington Post*, his first encounter with the international press. Perhaps he hoped the newspaper would retract the story, but he soon learned otherwise: “I told the reporter from the *Washington Post*: ‘Perhaps I’ll file suit against you.’ He answered: ‘We maintained our journalistic credibility, because we said that the information sources that published the accusations were the Phalangists.’” Fadlallah’s denials would have to carry their own weight. And he made them: he professed to be mystified by the charges; he did not believe in the method of suicide bombings; he was in his apartment on the morning of the attack. The denials were enhanced by their surroundings. His American interviewer found him living in a “dank tenement,” a “shabby seventh-floor walkup in the slums.” The “ambitious but obscure holy man” possessed “scant resources to counter the charges” against him, and unnamed diplomatic sources were quoted as doubting whether Fadlallah or his followers had “the skill or the resources to handle such an operation alone.”

Once this seed of doubt was sown, Fadlallah nurtured it with further denials. “In my situation, could I have visited the Marines barracks, planned the operation, met the persons that prepared themselves for it, and blessed them like the Pope blesses the faithful?” His involvement was not only a logistical improbability, but a moral one as well. He announced that he had “reservations about resorting to suicidal tactics in political action,” based upon his reading of Islamic law. From his pulpit, in his first Friday sermon after the attacks, Fadlallah told his audience that he had warned the young men against

“exploding the situation,” for “we do not believe that our war against America or France will end this way.” He urged economic and cultural resistance to imperialism, but insisted that “we are against political assassination, and we do not agree with these explosions and assassinations, because you have no monopoly on such means; others possess them as well.” Respectable friends also stepped forward on his behalf. Delegations flocked to his home to denounce the very mention of his name in connection with the attacks. A group of engineers paid him a visit. So, too, did a delegation of Muslim students from the Lebanese University, the Arab University of Beirut, and the American University of Beirut. In short order, Fadlallah succeeded in throwing off the worst suspicions of the Americans and French, who increasingly looked beyond Beirut for the masterminds of the disaster—to the Bekaa, Damascus, and ultimately Tehran.

Yet the dodge was more artful still, for Fadlallah proceeded to sanction the bombings after the fact. Just as he understood the need to put a distance between himself and the attacks, he also understood the tremendous popular gratification derived from the fearsome blows dealt by the powerless to the powerful. He repeatedly proclaimed to the world that he did not play any personal role in the attacks; but he also proclaimed that the deeds deserved to be applauded. The justification was simple. The whole plan of introducing foreign forces “was a deceptive façade hiding the intention to convert Lebanon into a strategic base for U.S. political influence in the region.” The driving out of foreign forces represented a legitimate act of resistance, even if the method was controversial—“acceptable to some, unacceptable to others, or conditionally accepted or rejected by still some other groups.”

The deaths of the bombers, not the deaths of the intruders, posed the only moral dilemma. The fact that they perished with the enemy hinted deeply at suicide and sacrifice, and both belonged to the realm of unholy violence, well beyond the perimeters of Islamic law. Such acts could be validated only if they were admitted by learned opinion as sacred acts of jihad. And here, too, Fadlallah provided justification. If the aim of such a “self-martyr” was “to have a political impact on an enemy whom it is impossible to fight by conventional means, then his sacrifice can be part of a jihad. Such an undertaking differs little from that of a soldier who fights and knows that in the end he will be killed. The two situations lead to death; except that one fits in with the conventional procedures of war, and the other does not.” Since the Muslims had no conventional means to wage their war successfully, necessity demanded that they act outside the conventions created by the powerful:

| *The oppressed nations do not have the technology and*

destructive weapons America and Europe have. They must thus fight with special means of their own. . . . [We] recognize the right of nations to use every unconventional method to fight these aggressor nations, and do not regard what oppressed Muslims of the world do with primitive and unconventional means to confront aggressor powers as terrorism. We view this as religiously lawful warfare against the world's imperialist and domineering powers.

Fadlallah denied he had told anyone to “blow yourself up”—he never neglected to establish his own distance from the attacks—but affirmed that “the Muslims believe that you struggle by transforming yourself into a living bomb like you struggle with a gun in your hand. There is no difference between dying with a gun in your hand or exploding yourself.”

Yet the artful evasion went still further. For if “self-martyrdom” was justified from a legal point of view, why did Fadlallah not issue a fatwa—an opinion based on Islamic law—sanctioning the acts? Here Fadlallah’s judgement was molded by the conflicting considerations of personal immunity and personal prestige. Acts committed on the basis of fatwas given in Lebanon would directly link clerics like himself to specific acts or techniques of violence. The wall of plausible deniability would collapse, opening them to vengeful reprisal. As he well knew, “assassination is a two-edged sword: If you can assassinate others, then others can assassinate you.” And so Fadlallah refrained from formalizing his endorsement of the bombings in a legal ruling. “I can say that I have not issued any fatwa since the beginning of these operations and up to now,” he declared, justifying prudence by principle. “On the contrary, I am one of those who stood against all this commotion for fatwas. Despite the positive points which come out of this action, I believe that there are many negative points.” A fatwa would have forced him to weigh those points in a systematic way, which would have made his position dangerously clear. Anyway, an explicit ruling would have been redundant. According to Hizbullah’s clerics, Khomeini himself had issued the necessary fatwa—from the safe distance of Iran.

Nevertheless, Fadlallah did not wish the absence of his fatwa to be interpreted as a legal repudiation of “self-martyrdom,” or as an admission that he did not have sufficient authority to write one. He made it known that while he had not issued a fatwa, this did not mean that his reservations applied to all circumstances. “I have received young persons, men and women, who have asked me to provide fatwas authorizing them to launch military operations in which they cannot escape death. When I refuse because they do not meet all the conditions, they beg me to reverse my decision, as if they were asking a

favor of me.” This implied that Fadlallah’s refusal to rule did not arise from a repudiation of “self-martyrdom,” but only from the unsuitability of candidates. And while Fadlallah consistently denied that he had authorized “self-martyrdom,” he consistently implied that he had the authority to do so if he wished. “Sometimes you may find some situations where you have to take risks,” he said years later, “when reality requires a shock, delivered with violence, so you can call upon all those things buried within, and expand all the horizons around you—as, for example, in the self-martyrdom operations, which some called suicide operations.” While Khomeini may have taken the decision, it was Fadlallah who wound up taking the risk, and he found his reward in a subtle claim to comparable authority.

Justifying the attacks as religiously valid while withholding formal religious validation amounted to an intellectual tightrope act. Yet Fadlallah performed brilliantly, scattering dust in the eyes of his enemies and stardust in the eyes of his admirers. All became entangled in his words. Fadlallah now had no intention of sinking back into the relative obscurity he had known prior to the attacks. The collapse of the American and French barracks had drawn the attention of the world to the Dahiya. The helicopters of American vice-president George Bush and French president François Mitterrand had touched down within view, to survey the scenes of disaster. An opportunity presented itself. People who had known little or nothing of Fadlallah suddenly were interested in hearing about his vision of Islam, his understanding of Lebanon’s predicament, his thoughts on terrorism and imperialism. Fadlallah could claim his place in the theatre of Beirut, provided he was prepared to talk.

Fadlallah was not only ready but eager; once he started talking, he never stopped. He was perfectly cast for the role of oracle, interpreting the anger and despair of the Shi’ite community to itself and the world. When Fadlallah was named in connection with the bombings, reports claimed that Lebanese security knew so little about him that “it has been searching libraries of local newspapers for photographs of him.” It would not have had to look far, for the gist of Fadlallah’s sermons appeared occasionally in the influential daily *Al-Nahar*, along with his photograph. He was never as obscure as his Lebanese enemies pretended. But nothing in Fadlallah’s long years of toil had prepared Lebanon for his swift emergence as a political force and media star. Soon there would hardly be a person in Lebanon who had not seen his photograph and heard or read his words.

This was largely Fadlallah’s own doing. His easy accessibility, so unlike the remoteness of Iran’s reticent emissaries and Hizbullah’s suspicious clerics and strongmen, brought a steady stream of journalists to his door. To enhance the effect of these encounters, Fadlallah instituted routines which established an

aura of dignity and authority. He set up a front office, which scrutinized all requests to see him. Arriving interviewers might be searched and kept waiting in an anteroom, where they would be served tea. Here, women who did not come in full chador were usually required to don a scarf, provided by the house. Fadlallah received his guests in a sparsely furnished sitting room, lit by neon. An appropriately Persian rug provided the decor. On a side table or the wall there reposed a large portrait of Khomeini, who brooded over the proceedings. Bodyguards armed with machine pistols were never far away. Then, from deep within his armchair, Fadlallah would speak—always to a tape recorder, lest he be misquoted.

His interviews once were described as “lucid, substantive, and detailed expositions.” Often they were intricate and brilliant pieces of analysis, which reflected a keen estimate of the forces at play, not only in Lebanon but in the region and the world. But Fadlallah was lucid only when lucidity served a purpose. Often it did not, and his elusiveness could drive journalists to distraction. Fadlallah perfected two methods of evasion. When it suited him, he delivered long and winding monologues in response to the simplest question, wearing down the resistance of the most persistent journalists. At other times he spoke in Delphic telegraphy, demonstrated in this characteristic exchange:

Interviewer: Do you believe the Hizbullah in Lebanon could eventually be friendly toward the United States?

Fadlallah: My belief is that the situation is becoming gray.

Interviewer: But are you optimistic?

Fadlallah: I am realistic. I look for optimistic signs in reality.

Interviewer: What does that mean?

Fadlallah: When the issue is gray, you do not see clearly.

Such exchanges, which seemed as though they had been pulled through the looking glass, made perfect sense within the self-imposed rules that governed Fadlallah’s public performances, and which permitted him to appear to know everything and nothing at the same time. A journalist once asked him whether he was the “spiritual guide” of Hizbullah and the Islamic student movement. “I am all of these and none of them at the same time,” he replied. “This astonishing man knows how to cultivate his myth,” wrote one journalist. “Imperturbable, he would be above the fray, yet no detail escapes him a

veritable enigma.” “Although he does not speak openly and frankly,” wrote another, “he alludes to what he wants to say, and points indirectly to those he wants to accuse of something. With Master Fadlallah one has to read between the lines to find the truth.” But the space between the lines left ample room for more than one truth, and no interviewer ever parted with a journalistic scoop on tape. Fadlallah could not be led by the tongue.

Resistance Leader

Although Fadlallah parleyed with the journalists, he devoted the better part of his time to encouraging Shi'ite resistance to the Israeli occupation of the south. While its forces had left Beirut, Israel still sought a formal security agreement with the government of Lebanon, in return for further withdrawal. As the prospect of indefinite and onerous occupation loomed larger, the Shi'ite inhabitants of the south resorted first to civil disobedience and then to violent resistance. Fadlallah turned his efforts toward blocking the implementation of a security agreement, encouraging the struggle against Israel and claiming the resistance for Islam.

Fadlallah's stand against any negotiated agreement with Israel drew partly upon his understanding of Islamic principle. Time and again, he drove home the point of Israel's absolute and unalterable illegitimacy from the point of view of Islam. Israel rested upon dispossession and usurpation; moreover, the dispossessed were Muslims, and the usurped land was sacred to Islam. Israel could not be viewed “as a state with the right to security and peace just like any other state in the region. We cannot see Israel as a legal presence, considering that it is a conglomeration of people who came from all parts of the world to live in Palestine on the ruins of another people.” No process could confer legitimacy on Israel. The United Nations could not do so; the PLO could not do so, and indeed, “even if the Jews should suddenly become Muslims, we would ask them to leave Palestine, which was usurped by them.” “We as Muslims, if we wish to be in keeping with our faith, cannot for a moment recognize Israel's legality, just as we cannot deem alcohol or adultery to be legal.” In Palestine, as in South Africa, a minority had come to dominate the majority by force. But the situation in Palestine was worse, since the Israelis, unlike the whites of South Africa, had driven out the greater part of the majority group and Israel treated those Palestinians who remained in Palestine as “fourth- or fifth-class citizens in comparison to the Jews.”

Theft of the land constituted the first count against Israel. And to those in Lebanon prepared to forgive Israel its original sin—committed, after all, against Palestinians—in exchange for a negotiated settlement that would restore tranquility to the south, he submitted a second charge, that Israel was inherently

expansionist. Few had believed Fadlallah when he had argued, in his Bint Jubayl lectures, before Israel's systematic incursions into Lebanon, that Israel coveted the south. But now the south was occupied, and Israel had no clear plans to leave. Claiming vindication, Fadlallah returned to his argument that the Shi'ites were next in line to be dispossessed by an expanding Israel, and that no agreement could prevent it. Peace with Israel was impossible, since "peace for Israel represents only a transitional stage preparatory to jumping to another stage" in pursuit of its "ambitions to extend from the Euphrates to the Nile." Muslims had to understand that Israel did not simply seek to displace the Palestinians; it was "not merely a group that established a state at the expense of a people. It is a group which wants to establish Jewish culture at the expense of Islamic culture or what some call Arab culture." The very purpose of Israel was to bring "all the Jews in the world to this region, to make it the nucleus for spreading their economic and cultural domination." From Israel's expanded territorial base, the Jews would then proceed to their ultimate objective: the complete subordination and eradication of Islam. "We find that the struggle against the Jewish state, in which the Muslims are engaged, is a continuation of the old struggle of the Muslims against the Jews' conspiracy against Islam." There existed a "world Jewish movement working to deprive Islam of its positions of actual power—spiritually, on the question of Jerusalem; geographically, on the question of Palestine; politically, by bringing pressures to block Islam's movement at more than one place; and economically, in an effort to control Islam's economic potential and resources, in production and consumption." In this light, only the naïve could believe that Israel would be satisfied with an agreement over the south. Regardless of the terms of any security arrangement, Israel would "find justifications for reviving this problem in the future," in order to continue its further expansion.

The third count in Fadlallah's indictment cited Israel's role in the service of American imperialism. The "connection" between Israel and the United States was "aimed at turning the entire region here into a U.S.-Israeli zone of influence, as required by the strategic, political, and economic interests of the United States." The relationship, according to Fadlallah, functioned in this manner: "America acts diplomatically and tells Israel to move militarily. . . . America suggests peace and leaves Israel to suggest war, so that if anyone rebels against the American peace, he is threatened with an Israeli war." Although the United States had greater interests in the Arab world, that world was unstable. Israel served to keep it in line, assuring America's access to oil. Thus it was a fantasy for Arabs to believe they could drive a wedge between Israel and the United States. "We believe there is no difference between the United States and Israel; the latter is a mere extension of the former. The United States is ready to fight the whole world to defend Israel's existence and

security. The two countries are working in complete harmony, and the United States is certainly not inclined to exert pressure on Israel.” As long as Israel existed, it would continue to act in the interests of imperialism, to dominate and oppress the region as a whole.

Fadlallah offered only one answer: the strategy of jihad, which “insists that the presence of Israel in Palestine is illegal and that it is an imperialist base which represents a great danger to the Arab and Islamic worlds. It must, therefore, be removed from the map completely. This is what the slogan of liberating Jerusalem represents, since Jerusalem is the Islamic symbol for all of Palestine.” Following the eventual dismantlement of Israel, Jews who were indigenous to Palestine could remain, but those who had come from elsewhere—the Soviet Union, the United States, Iraq, Yemen, wherever—would have to leave.

In this panoramic perspective, negotiation with Israel over the south was worse than useless. The only solution was to “confront the problem by converting ourselves into a society of war. We must not view the question as merely incursions on the South, but must rather consider the whole Israeli presence as illegitimate.” But what could Lebanon’s pathetic Shi’ites, who possessed no nuclear weapons, jets, or artillery, do about a conspiracy on so massive a scale? Fadlallah heard people say that there was no point in resisting Israel, which had defeated so many Arab armies, both collectively and individually. To resist would be akin to “stoning a mountain.” Better to speak the language of diplomacy with Israel, and get the United States to somehow satisfy Israel and bring about a withdrawal. Fadlallah answered by claiming to have uncovered Israel’s weak point. Israel was unprepared spiritually to make the sacrifices demanded by its own ambitions and its American-assigned role. Israel’s resolve in Lebanon could be undermined by Israeli casualties that even primitive resistance could inflict. To force Israel out, Lebanon’s Shi’ites did not need sophisticated weapons or strategic parity. They needed only to banish their fear.

This was the message Fadlallah carried in an endless round of speaking throughout the Shi’ite community. Fridays were reserved for preaching from his own pulpit in the Imam al-Rida Mosque in Bi’r al-‘Abd, sermons recorded by the audiotape vendors. But during the week Fadlallah often spoke several times a day, from mosque pulpits and lecterns, and in the open air through microphones and bullhorns. Consider the range of audiences he addressed during ten days in November 1984, at the height of his campaign:

- As the week begins, Fadlallah presides over a rally in his own mosque to protest Lebanon’s negotiation of a security agreement with Israel. The Shi’ite crowd is young and eager to demonstrate its anger and resolve. A banner with

the Star of David is spread on the portal of the mosque, to be trampled by those entering and leaving. Fadlallah is seated with a group of clerics; he speaks last, condemning any measure that might be construed as recognition of Israel.

- A few days later, Fadlallah addresses an evening lecture at the invitation of the Islamic Committee for Prisoners of Ansar. The occasion is a year since the death of four detainees held by Israel in the Ansar prison camp in the south. The setting is a well-lit university lecture hall on the campus of the Arab University of Beirut. An audience of intent students is seated behind the clerics who fill the front row. A few photographs of Khomeini temporarily adorn the walls for the occasion, but this is no rally. Fadlallah again speaks against a security agreement with Israel, but dwells at length on America's behind-the-scene role. Despite the occasion, the students are more preoccupied with America than with Israel, and want to know about the precise relationship of the Israeli occupation to American imperialism. Fadlallah obliges: Henry Kissinger fomented Lebanon's civil war, he tells them; Israel's entry into Beirut was "more an American than an Israeli affair."

- But a week later he omits this theme in addressing a gathering in the mosque attached to the Islamic seminary in Baalbek. The event is organized by the Islamic Resistance, Hezbollah's arm in the struggle against Israel, and it is from here that the fighters go forth to operations in the south. The audience and Fadlallah are seated in an intimate circle on the floor. In the circle are turbaned clerics, rural notables in white headdresses, and bearded young militiamen in flak jackets. The walls are plastered with banners, posters, and photographs of young men killed in battle. Among the speakers is a renowned commander of the Islamic Resistance, who later will be killed in an Israeli raid. The Islamic Resistance has little time for theory, and Fadlallah does not distract them with the discourse on American imperialism that he has just employed at the university. With this front-line audience he emphasizes that it is Israel that is pitted against Islam, and he urges them to rise up against the occupation of the land.

Many of the occasions on which Fadlallah spoke were contrived for the purposes of mass mobilization. But he did not neglect the opportunities provided by the Shi'ite religious calendar. 'Ashura, the day of mourning for the martyrdom of the Imam Husayn at Karbala, outstripped all of these commemorations in releasing the pent-up ritual fervor. There were some whose zeal for ritual self-flagellation on 'Ashura landed them in hospital, especially in Nabatiyya in the south, where the practice had the longest tradition in Lebanon. Fadlallah now sought to harness this spirit of self-immolation to the cause of resistance to Israel. On the occasion of 'Ashura in 1985, he called upon self-flagellants to desist from the practice and join the Islamic Resistance:

Do you want to suffer with Husayn? Then the setting is ready: the Karbala of the South. You can be wounded and inflict wounds, kill and be killed, and feel the spiritual joy that Husayn lived when he accepted the blood of his son, and the spiritual joy of Husayn when he accepted his own blood and wounds. The believing resisters in the border zone are the true self-flagellants, not the self-flagellants of Nabatiyya. Those who flog themselves with swords, they are our fighting youth. Those who are detained in [the Israeli detention camp in] al-Khiyam, arrested by Israel in the region of Bint Jubayl, they are the ones who feel the suffering of Husayn and Zaynab. Those who suffer beatings on their chests and heads in a way that liberates, these are the ones who mark 'Ashura, in their prison cells.

Fadlallah not only knew how to speak the modern rhetoric of resistance, but possessed a complete mastery of the peculiarly Shi'ite symbols of martyrdom, which he invoked whenever the calendar of religious observance made it advantageous to do so.

Fadlallah not only called for struggle, but also sought to fashion the strategies and even the tactics of the Islamic Resistance whenever these had implications for his reading of Islamic law. He therefore sanctioned the tactics of "self-martyrdom," which, having been used successfully against the United States and France in Beirut, were being employed in the south against Israel. "What is the difference between setting out for battle knowing you will die *after* killing ten [of the enemy], and setting out to the field to kill ten and knowing you will die *while* killing them?" The artist of fine distinction saw no real distinction at all. After an initial spate of successes, however, it soon became clear that this ten-to-one ratio could not be guaranteed. As Israeli forces took prudent countermeasures, such operations became less effective, producing few, if any, Israeli casualties. Still, there were those in the Islamic Resistance who felt that such operations had value, in that they demonstrated a willingness to sacrifice young men on the alter of the struggle. Fadlallah strongly opposed this transformation of a failing military tactic into a sacrificial rite. Already in the spring of 1985, he openly expressed doubts. "The self-martyring operation is not permitted unless it can convulse the enemy," Fadlallah declared. "The believer cannot blow himself up unless the results will equal or exceed the [loss] of the believer's soul. Self-martyring operations are not fatal accidents but legal obligations governed by rules, and the believers cannot transgress the rules of God." By late 1985, he did not hesitate to opine that the day of the "self-martyrs" had passed. Fadlallah deemed past operations against Israeli forces "successful in that they significantly harmed the Israelis. But the present

circumstances do not favor such operations anymore, and attacks that only inflict limited casualties (on the enemy) and destroy one building should not be encouraged, if the price is the death of the person who carries them out.” It was a view which largely carried the day, and demonstrated Fadlallah’s determination not only to fuel the Islamic Resistance, but to guide it.

Fadlallah’s own daunting persistence and his seemingly limitless energy did a great deal to fire the Islamic Resistance. He remained in constant touch with the clerics and commanders who led the fight, and inspired them with the words they used to gather recruits. Gradually the Islamic Resistance began to claim success, wearing down Israeli forces through ambushes, roadside bombs, and the threat of suicide bombs. Fadlallah described the process by which the weak demoralized the strong:

The Israeli soldier who could not be defeated was now killed, with an explosive charge here, and a bullet there. People were suddenly filled with power, and that power could be employed in new ways. It could not be expressed in the classical means of warfare, because the implements were lacking. But it employed small force and a war of nerves, which the enemy could not confront with its tanks and airplanes. It appeared in every place, and in more than one way. Thus our people in the South discovered their power, and could defeat Israel and all the forces of tyranny.

Fadlallah’s contribution to the growing resistance to Israel could not be isolated and measured with any precision. Yet no one in Hizbullah could match his sheer ability to conceptualize conflict. For many of those in the Islamic Resistance, he had become an infallible moral and political compass.

The struggle of the Islamic Resistance in Lebanon was meant to “make confrontation with Israel possible in the future on the grounds that Israel is not an irresistible power even if it is supported by the United States.” Yet Fadlallah never deceived himself or others about the meaning of the successes of the Islamic Resistance in the South. Even as he argued that Israel coveted the south, he understood that Israel was vulnerable in south Lebanon in part because its consensus ended at the border, and that from the moment Israel entered Lebanon, Israelis began to look for a way out—a timetable, a security plan, guarantees. There was thus “a difference between the liberation of Palestine and the liberation of South Lebanon as far as the method of operation is concerned.” The obstacles on the road from the border to Jerusalem would

be far greater; Israel would stiffen over the defense of its heartland. The liberation of Palestine, where a tenacious Israel had struck root, required the emergence of an Islamic resistance in Palestine itself, as well as a broad “Arab-Islamic plan for confrontation.” Without such a plan, operations against Israel from Lebanon would become “mere acts of self-martyrdom. That is why we think differently about the post-Israeli withdrawal phase, differently from the way of the resistance in South Lebanon.”

The ultimate liberation would take much more time. Just how much more became a point of disagreement between Fadlallah and Iran’s emissaries, who feared that promising too remote a redemption might create despair. The Iranian agents believed what they preached—that Iran’s revolution had switched Muslim history to fast-forward—but Fadlallah was more concerned with encouraging persistence, viewing hopes of quick victory as the perennial bane of the Arabs. At times, Fadlallah’s ambiguity accommodated those short of patience: “When we say that Israel will cease to exist, this does not mean tomorrow or the day after.” But usually he spoke of years, decades, generations, even centuries. Israel’s elimination could not be achieved in “one, two, or ten years,” but might require “one hundred years if necessary.” Or perhaps fifty years, “just as the Jews sought to reach Jerusalem, even if it took fifty years.” Fadlallah did not wish to “take from the public its dream and aspiration of destroying Israel”—a dream he shared—but the liberation of Jerusalem would be done “only in future generations.” “In this connection,” he admitted, “we think of great periods of time.” There was now “no strategy in the operational sense for the liberation of Jerusalem.”

Fadlallah did not expect to enter the promised land. Instead he sought to purify the young generation and steer them from the worship of false gods, so that they or their children might regain lost Jerusalem. And because Fadlallah did not become intoxicated by the early gains of the Islamic Resistance, he did not become discouraged once Israel dug in its heels in 1985, establishing a security zone in the south. He continued to preach against Israel with an even resolve. But as the Islamic struggle against Israel entered a stalemate, Fadlallah’s audiences began to pay closer attention to his vision of Lebanon itself.

Balm of Lebanon

How did Fadlallah envision the Lebanon left behind by Israel’s retreat, and how precisely did he expect Islam to resolve the country’s deadlock? It was difficult to say. No clouds obstructed his discourse against Israel, for the conflict in the south represented a battle of absolutes. But the rest of Lebanon—free of foreign intruders but contested, often militarily, by indigenous forces—was a different matter. Among the parties whose claims on the hopelessly small

country had to be reconciled were Shi'ite Muslims, Sunni Muslims, Maronite Christians, Greek Orthodox Christians, Armenians, and Druzes. In addressing the question of Lebanon, Fadlallah brought his talent for advocacy brilliantly into play. It was obvious, he declared, that neither the existing confessional system nor any other confessional formula could ever reconcile the claims of these different religious groups. But they could all be accommodated with equity through the implementation of a comprehensive Islamic political, social, and legal order. Islam, declared Fadlallah, constituted a framework in which all Lebanese could live in harmony, regardless of their religious affiliation.

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Yet when pressed to explain how Islam would achieve this, Fadlallah let ambiguity reign. At times, he seemed to predicate Islamic redemption on the dissolution of Lebanon itself. Fadlallah believed Lebanon's borders were arbitrarily tailored "by great powers. . . . as the result of a political deal" to create a bastion from which the West could continue to dominate the surrounding Muslim world. Thus Lebanon, an entity that existed only to satisfy external political interests, need not be preserved. Fadlallah held out the ultimate promise of Lebanon's disappearance: "If the political situation in the region changes, not only is Lebanon unlikely to survive; neither will many other entities in the region." In this respect, Lebanon as an idea did not differ significantly from Israel as an idea. Both were foisted on the Muslims from the outside; both were destined to disappear. This was certainly the analysis adopted by Iran's emissaries, who promised Lebanon's disappearance into a "great Islamic state."

But Fadlallah did not believe Lebanon's demise was imminent. Too many obstacles, within the country and beyond its frontiers, stood in the path of its absorption into a great Islamic polity. The likelihood that such a polity might ever emerge was slim; in Fadlallah's view, "modern developments with which the Muslims now live . . . have made the single world state irrelevant from the point of view of objective possibilities." Iran's emissaries had sought to create the illusion that parts of Lebanon had been incorporated into Iran, but illusion was one thing, reality another. The best that Lebanon might hope for was the separate implementation of an Islamic state.

Yet even this limited goal could not be achieved immediately, for confessionalism constituted the hard soil of Lebanon, and the idea of an Islamic state was a vulnerable transplant. While Iran's emissaries dwelt upon the similarities between Iran and Lebanon, Fadlallah saw profound differences, which arose primarily from Lebanon's confessional diversity. In Iran, there was "a population composed of Muslims only, which accepts the line of Islam, and a regime that had become an obstacle in the way of Islamic rule. The only

solution was to fight this regime.” But such homogeneity did not obtain in Lebanon, and, Fadlallah acknowledged, “sometimes there are obstacles that a revolution cannot eliminate.”

The first obstacle lay in the fact that the Muslims of Lebanon were not of one school but were divided between Sunnis and Shi'ites. And among the Sunnis, there were many with a vested interest in the existing confessional formula. Their fortunes, which had declined since the outbreak of the civil war, plummeted following the expulsion of their Palestinian allies in 1982. Now the rising demographic and political tide of Shi'ism threatened to sweep away their supremacy over the Shi'ites. They had profited from their mediation between the surrounding Sunni Arab world and the West, in commerce, education, and the professions. Shi'ites could see this themselves: most of the prospering industries and warehouses in the Dahiya were owned by Sunnis. The confessional system also guaranteed Sunnis a share of the state that their numbers could no longer justify. For example, twenty seats in parliament were reserved for Sunnis and only nineteen for Shi'ites, although Shi'ites had come to outnumber Sunnis two to one. Now assertive Shi'ites began to argue that the primacy of the Sunni community on the Muslim side of the confessional equation had no legitimacy. But the idea of an Islamic state could never win a majority if the Muslims split, and unity could only be achieved by alleviating Sunni anxieties. As Fadlallah noted, “the majority of the armed elements within West Beirut are Shi'ites, and there is no real Sunni armed presence. When people who are unarmed are faced with armed people, especially when infractions and violations of the law occur, they are bound to feel insecure.”

Fadlallah therefore set out to dispel the growing mistrust between Shi'ites and Sunnis. The first step was to admit that the problem existed, to avoid the denial that prevented dialogue. The inner sectarianism of Islam, he announced, had left “a profound effect on the emotional content of the view held by Muslims of one another.” It had now reached the point of gross exaggeration, where Muslim openly accused Muslim of unbelief and polytheism. Instead of seeing sectarian differences as matters of marginal disagreement over law or the interpretation of theological “details,” Muslims had come to regard them as fundamental differences in belief. “The sectarian reality has divided Muslim societies into two, Sunni and Shi'ite, in which each takes stands independent from the other and finds that its interests differ from the interests of the other.” Fadlallah offered no precise solution to these differences. But while others magnified them, he sought to minimize them. They were not theological but philosophical, he declared; they could be transformed into “an intellectual problem, to be examined by researchers in a scholarly way so as to reach a solution.”

While Fadlallah offered no ecumenical magical formula, his ecumenical style did build a measure of Sunni trust. His own discourse was remarkably free of Shi'ite symbolism. He did employ a Shi'ite rhetoric on the anniversaries and commemorations set by the Shi'ite religious calendar, and before exclusively Shi'ite audiences. Such rhetoric, he explained, was intended only to motivate people. Given a choice between an allusion to the Qur'an or to the Imam Husayn, he usually chose the former; it was often difficult to tell from the texts of his regular sermons that they were spoken by a Shi'ite cleric. He also appeared in person before Sunni audiences, in order to give his assurances the weight of his personality. In a typical instance, Fadlallah lectured before alumni of a prestigious Sunni school; the audience comprised lawyers, doctors, engineers, a former prime minister, parliamentary deputies, and the head of Beirut's chamber of commerce. A photograph shows an audience of respectable older men of means, mustached, white-haired or bald, arms folded across their jackets and ties. These were the pillars of the Sunni professional and commercial establishment, who felt most threatened by the encroachment of the masses of Shi'ite poor on West Beirut. Fadlallah read his prepared remarks from a seat on the dais. In measured tones and without passion, he worked to assuage their fears, speaking about the need for the unity of Shi'ites and Sunnis and the common ground on which they stood.

Such performances were augmented by personal efforts to defuse sectarian powder kegs. Members of the Lebanese Sunni elite, who had built personal fortunes from their Saudi connections, shuddered when Lebanese Shi'ites sacked and burned the Saudi consulate in Beirut in 1984, in protest against a Saudi refusal to issue them pilgrimage visas. Fadlallah was quick to condemn the violence: "We regard this as an act of mischief, and believe it might have been the result of misplaced zeal." That same year, he sought to prevent the extension into West Beirut of the Shi'ite 'Ashura processions from the Dahiya into West Beirut. While the commemoration of Imam Husayn's martyrdom played an essential role in the ritual universe of Hizbullah, its recalling of the opening of the chasm within Islam borrows the potential for sectarian strife.

The understanding Fadlallah promoted was fragile, and the mistrust between Sunnis and Shi'ites simmered. But Fadlallah had the best chance of any Shi'ite cleric to emerge as linchpin of any coalition the two communities might form, as guide to Shi'ites and Sunnis alike. "My views have had an impact in Lebanon, among Sunnis as well as Shi'ites," he Fadlallah in an unusually boastful moment. "I do not work on a Lebanese level alone but also at the level of the Islamic world. We have excellent relations with the Hizbullah group and with most of the Amal members, as well as with Islamic non-Shi'ite groups and the Sunnis in Tripoli and Beirut."

But Fadlallah could never be certain that any Sunnis—even those impressed by his ecumenism—would follow him down the road to an Islamic state. They saw how Iran’s revolutionary constitution had declared Twelver Shi’ism to be the religion of state, despite the presence of a large Sunni minority. Were not the Sunnis better off remaining one confession among many, rather than a minority in a predominantly Shi’ite Islamic state? Again, Fadlallah sought to banish one fear by evoking a greater one. Certainly Muslims had their differences, but their shared belief, law, culture, resources, and security, were threatened by unbelief. That threat demanded that the Muslims “strive for the establishment of a state, *any state*, which will counter these threats from the position of Islamic thought.” The great Shi’ite clerics and the leaders of Sunni movements had to find a formula which would guarantee the freedom of believers in such a state, by drawing upon the Qur’an as its constitution. The state would have to locate the common ground shared by the schools of Islam and tolerate the long-standing differences among them. For the alternative to an Islamic state was “subjugation to unbelieving tyranny, which will extend its injustice to Islam as a whole, and to all Muslims.” Unbelief would establish its rule, its law, its complete control. “And that would not be agreeable to any Islamic logic, opinion, or school.” To accommodate Lebanon’s Sunnis, the implementation of an Islamic state in Lebanon would have to differ fundamentally from its implementation in Iran. Concessions would have to be made to Lebanon’s diversity.

But that diversity hardly ended with Lebanon’s Sunnis. Fadlallah knew that Lebanon’s Christians would resist any attempt to substitute the rule of Islam for the tattered confessional order that guaranteed their privileges, which were even more extensive than those of the Sunnis. Fadlallah also understood that they had an identity and an ethos of their own, largely formed in opposition to Islam, and he had seen them at their most tenacious and ruthless in Nabaa. Unlike many of Iran’s emissaries, Fadlallah never underestimated the Christians of Lebanon. Like the invading Jews, they were unbelievers; but unlike the Jews, they were rooted in the soil of Lebanon and would not flee in the face of car bombs and ambushes. They would simply return the same with a vengeance. As he once put it, “Lebanon is a country in which both Muslims and Christians live. Neither can remove the other; that is why we must stop losing ourselves in conjecture.”

Fadlallah’s straightforward advice to his adherents was not to tangle with the Christians, if such entanglement could be avoided. As Israel retreated, he urged that Shi’ite rage against the Christians be displaced onto the Israelis, with the argument that Israel represented the “head,” and Lebanon’s Christians constituted the “tail.” Once he was asked whether liberation of all Beirut from the Christians should not take precedence over the liberation of the south. “Confront Israel and leave the ‘tail’ aside. For if you defeat Israel, if you chop off

the 'head,' where will the 'tail' be?" This was an astute shift of grievance, since the Islamic Resistance could not break the resolve of Lebanon's Christians. But it could break the overextended Israelis, who were already looking for every possible exit from the Lebanese labyrinth.

Yet Fadlallah believed that the Christians, and especially the Maronites, were growing weaker. The Maronites had been a European project, at a time when Europe pursued a policy of cultivating minorities. But America, the heir of Europe, had penetrated the entire Islamic world and had no need of a small minority at odds with America's more numerous Muslim friends in the region. Fadlallah believed that in the long term, this made Lebanon's Christians insecure—and susceptible to persuasion. The Christians could not yet be forced into submission, but perhaps they could be cajoled, coaxed, seduced. Fadlallah understood that they were afraid, and that fear stiffened their will. But if that fear could be alleviated, might not their will be eroded?

Thus began Fadlallah's remote dialogue with Lebanon's Christians—conducted at first through the Lebanese media. Fadlallah went out of his way to grant interviews to the newspapers and magazines which were published and widely read by Christians. The journalists for these publications inevitably pressed Fadlallah on the status of Christians in any future Islamic state. Right through the Ottoman period, they had lived under Islam as protected inferiors, bound by the provisions of a pact, or *dhimma*, which they remembered as a discriminatory system of subjugation, a kind of religious apartheid. Fadlallah still upheld the *dhimma* as an ideal arrangement between Muslim majority and Christian minority, and argued that on close examination, it was not "the oppressive or inhumane system that some people imagine it to be." But he suggested an alternative: a treaty, or *mu'ahada*, between majority and minority. The prophet Muhammad, on coming to Medina, had concluded precisely this kind of treaty with the Jews. Unlike the *dhimma*, which was a concession by the Islamic state, the *mu'ahada* was a bilateral contract. The Islamic state could conclude such a treaty with any kind of minority—with Christians and Jews, obviously, but also, for example, with Kurds or Turks. Such a treaty would guarantee cultural rights and respect for customs and traditions, while leaving politics to the Islamic state. Pressed still further, Fadlallah could envision an additional pact, or *mithaq*, between the state and its religious minorities. Such an agreement, while negotiated within the broad lines of Islam, would open all state offices to members of the religious minority. "Because of the Muslim majority in Lebanon," he announced, "the president should be a Muslim." But at the same time, "if the president is a Muslim, but a supporter of infidel regimes and arrogant powers, in our view he is not acceptable." The president would have to be both a Muslim and an Islamist. In late 1987 a handbill circulated in West Beirut naming Fadlallah as a candidate for the presidency of Lebanon.

Fadlallah saw no reason why a man of religion could not hold such an office, but he denied any connection with the handbill and denounced the floating of his name as an attempt to harm him. With the presidency still reserved for a Maronite, he could hardly do otherwise.

Fadlallah thus offered a comprehensive Islamic solution, but he assured Christians that he did not seek to impose it by force. He distanced himself from the demand of Iran's emissaries that the "regime" be toppled. The people of Lebanon, he averred, had the right to decide their own future. Any solution would have to be acceptable to a majority. It was Fadlallah who prevailed upon the drafters of Hizbullah's programmatic "open letter" of February 1985 to include a passage that called for "allowing all of our people to decide their fate and choose the form of government they want with complete freedom." Muslims were duty-bound to present the alternative of Islam, not to impose it. Fadlallah did not imagine he could persuade all of Lebanon's Christians, but he did seek to build a reservoir of Christian trust, which might be tapped later to build a multiconfessional majority in favor of an Islamic state.

His growing reputation certainly piqued Christian interest, and Fadlallah held discussions with a long list of Christian figures whom he met in Damascus. His interlocutors included the patriarchs of the Greek Orthodox, Greek Catholic, and Syrian Orthodox churches, as well as the papal nuncio in Damascus and the cardinal who presided over the Vatican's Secretariat for Non-Christians. "I never felt there was any problem during our talks," claimed Fadlallah. "It was as though I was conversing with Muslim scholars." In Lebanon itself, however, no religious dialogue took place, and Fadlallah admitted that politics posed "serious obstacles to any attempt at a frank discussion." Still, this did not prevent him from conducting a monologue. One Christmas he gave a lengthy interview devoted to Muslim-Christian relations, arguing that "fundamentalist Islam" was far closer to Christianity than Lebanon's "confessional Islam." One Easter he gave a mosque sermon commemorating "the sufferings of Jesus," one of Islam's prophets, even though "we may not concur with Christians on certain details of theology." As with Sunnis, so with Christians, Fadlallah sought to talk the differences away.

And if, despite Fadlallah's efforts, the majority of Lebanese still rejected the creation of an Islamic state? In these circumstances, Fadlallah did not rule out a compromise solution. Above all, Fadlallah sought social and economic justice for the oppressed. Perhaps Lebanon's diversity made it impossible to create a state led by a Muslim and based on Islamic law. That was no reason to despair. "If we as Muslims fail to achieve an Islamic state for everyone, we should not stop in our tracks. Instead, we must call for a humane state for everyone." Such a state could never be just in an Islamic sense, but it could be humane,

provided it alleviated the distress of the despised and downtrodden. To those who insisted on a Muslim head of state, Fadlallah noted that were other states headed by Muslim kings, princes, and presidents, “who steal the funds of the Muslims, and the treasury of the nation and its future.” To those who demanded the implementation of Islamic law, Fadlallah pointed out that this did not automatically guarantee justice. In a veiled allusion to Saudi Arabia, Fadlallah decried Arab regimes that practiced theft and then cut off the hand of the thief, practiced fornication and then stoned the adulterer.

Fadlallah continued to talk about the necessity of an Islamic state, but he actively pursued more attainable objectives. And if Fadlallah sometimes asked for more than was reasonable, it was usually in order to get something reasonable. Demand Jerusalem, but settle (for now) for the south; demand an Islamic state, then settle (for now) for a “humane” state. In his plea for the despised, Fadlallah remained both pragmatic and principled. Of course there were Christians and Sunnis who viewed his vision as a piece of deceit, meant to lure them to a feast where they would constitute the main course. But Fadlallah concealed nothing. He expected them to sacrifice privilege—political, social, economic—in return for the protection afforded by his Islam. They could accept his offer now, or gamble losing everything in a future upheaval by a less forgiving Islam. Thanks largely to Fadlallah’s subtle advocacy—and implicit threat—the idea of an Islamic state provoked a lively intellectual debate, among adherents of all confessions.

Critics and Assassins

To many of Iran’s emissaries, Fadlallah’s apparent bargaining away of high principles seemed unconscionable. They would have preferred that Fadlallah simply repeat their slogans, not interpret them, and they lost no opportunity to bring pressure to bear on this maddeningly obstinate client. They leaned on him in Damascus when he paid obligatory visits to the Iranian ambassador. They demanded that he fall in line during his visits to Tehran, where he attended conferences and met with leading figures, and sometimes with Khomeini. According to Sayyid Sadiq al-Musawi, the most hardline of Hizbullah’s leaders, Khomeini refused to meet with Fadlallah for three years because of Fadlallah’s refusal to demand an Islamic state.

But Fadlallah remained absolutely unshaken in his conviction that he alone knew how to promote the alternative of Islam in Lebanon. During his sojourns in Tehran, he lobbied hard against the claim that Lebanon stood on the brink of Islamic revolution. His technique was to cast doubt on the competence of Iran’s own emissaries. “There are some Iranian scholars and some officials who are perhaps not fully aware of the situation in Lebanon,” he announced following

one trip to Tehran. The words implicitly indicted Iran's emissaries for concealing the truth from decision makers in Iran. The emissaries, in turn, questioned Fadlallah's devotion to the common cause, and his views became the subject of some suspicion. "There were a few of the leading clerics in Iran whom we venerate, who had concluded that we had abandoned the slogan of Islamic rule in Lebanon in a fundamental way." To them, Fadlallah patiently explained his own concept of change. "We believe in exporting the revolution, but there is a difference between exporting the revolution as 'one unit' and exporting it as 'parts.' We believe that the nature of the actual circumstances necessitates its export as 'parts,' since only this will bring us actual results." The process, he maintained, was limited by the power of the "exporting" state and "the objective and actual circumstances" of the "importing" country, some of which could only be changed "with the passage of time." Dismissing the upbeat reports of emissaries, Fadlallah told his interlocutors in Tehran that conditions for the rule of Islam "do not exist in the Lebanese reality at the present stage, and in the immediate stages to follow."

Fadlallah made this argument persuasively. He quickly built a constituency in Tehran, where some in high places regarded him as a more reliable guide to the intricacies of the Lebanese sideshow than their own emissaries. Certainly the force of his argument won him a following, but he strengthened his hand by his own keen appreciation of the factionalism within the revolution's leadership. He saw the signs of division in the conduct of Iran's emissaries, and carefully took measure of the rivalries which divided the revolution. He soon understood that a group of revolutionaries with impeccable credentials—realistic, patient, calculating, and averse to adventurism—had gathered around the speaker of the Majlis, 'Ali Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani. They became Fadlallah's quarry, and he eventually claimed to have won them to his own views: "During my recent meeting with the Iranian decision-making officials I sensed that they are not at present thinking about an Islamic republic in Lebanon, not in the Iranian model. At present they believe that the Lebanese problem should be solved through democracy or democracy of the majority because Lebanon cannot bear any more suffering." In truth, Iran's decision makers were divided, but Fadlallah had won the confidence of Rafsanjani, his pillar of support in the shifting sands of Iranian factional politics. Rafsanjani's own mastery of Iranian power politics reassured Fadlallah that he had made a sagacious choice. As early as 1986, Fadlallah declared Rafsanjani "undoubtedly the thinking head of the state," for having vanquished Mehdi Hashemi, one of Iran's most adventurous emissaries and a dangerous domestic opponent. On the same occasion, Fadlallah also gave his backing to Rafsanjani's trading of American hostages for American arms—dealing criticized by Iranian hard-liners. Under Rafsanjani, Iran's "struggle against imperialism" would continue, "but in a studied and rational

manner”—precisely the manner championed by Fadlallah himself.

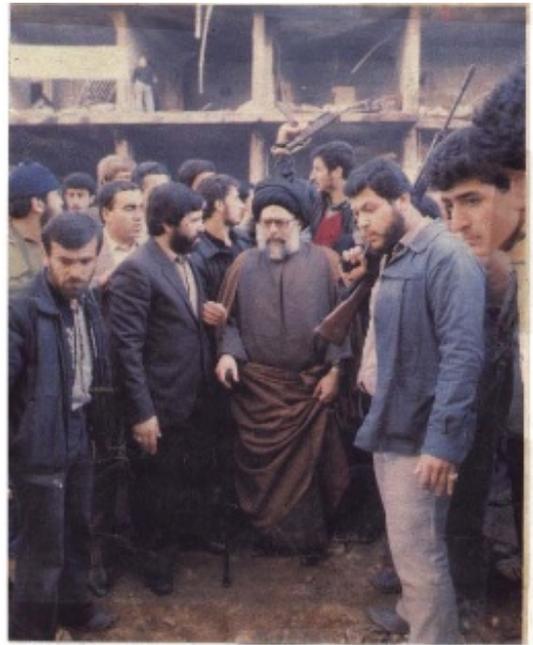
Fadlallah held up his hard-won autonomy as a badge of integrity. He did not fail to acknowledge his debt to Iran’s revolution; even while trumpeting his freedom to think and act, he allowed that “in all circumstances,” Iran’s revolution represented “the pillar of all the pure Islamic movements in the world. We believe we should support it with all our might so that it will gain strength sufficient to defeat all the forces of evil in the world.” But he invariably stiffened his neck while bowing, always insisting that “I am not an agent for anybody’s policy. I am simply trying to implement my policy, which is based on Islam and which complements all the Islamic world’s forces.” He also refused to apologize for the excesses of the Iranian revolution: Iran had achieved only “70 percent of justice,” he estimated. None of Iran’s emissaries ever found a way to bring Fadlallah to heel; he possessed too much of that wiliness known in Persian as *zerangi*, a guile he raised to the level of a political art. Depending upon their temperament, the emissaries could only shrug or simmer at his declarations of independence. “We have the freedom to have our own views on special Lebanese affairs when speaking to Iranian brothers and others,” Fadlallah boldly declared to anyone who asked. “We have our own views even in international issues, methods of political work, and the lines of political thought.” Fadlallah earned that freedom through his exacting command of language, combined with an acute feel for the requirements of survival in a sea of zeal, ambition, violence and intrigue.

Still, as Fadlallah’s visibility increased, he loomed larger in the imagination of Hizbullah’s adversaries. Arrangements for his personal security grew ever more elaborate as he became the subject of death threats. Had he been concerned only for his safety, he might have allowed Iran’s emissaries to coax him to the Bekaa Valley. But there he would have been cut off from his reservoirs of support and the media, and would have become utterly dependent upon Iran. He chose to remain in the Dahiya, where the risks he ran grew with his reputation. In March 1985, an attempt against his life almost succeeded; its effect, however was to deepen the popular veneration of Fadlallah as a man in the service of divine mission. A car bomb intended for Fadlallah claimed eighty lives, including the residents of apartment buildings demolished by gas lines which exploded. Over 250 persons were injured. It was a familiar Beirut nightmare come to life: buckled concrete, dismembered limbs, howling ambulances, dazed passersby. The Dahiya had never known a moment of such intense collective grief and emotion, expressed in an outpouring of sentiment during the funerals of the dead. Fadlallah, bullhorn in hand, presided over the service for those victims who were buried in a communal grave in the Rawdat al-Shahidayn cemetery.

Fadlallah immediately appreciated the necessity of transforming the horror into a step towards the consolidation of the movement. Properly interpreted, the deaths could be given meaning that would partially redeem lost lives. He began immediately by laying responsibility for the bombing upon the United States. Fadlallah had no solid evidence, but none was required, and it was of paramount importance that the deed confirm the malevolence of imperialism. A banner stretched across a demolished building, which read “Made in USA,” graphically represented Fadlallah’s claim.

Later the *Washington Post* claimed to have traced the bombing to an American

“counterterrorism” initiative gone awry. Fadlallah did not hold up the report as vindication, for the same newspaper might print a damaging charge against him tomorrow, as it had done in the past. But the supposed corroboration, repeated in Lebanon’s press, worked to buttress his claim.



Fadlallah surveys scene of 1985 assassination attempt

At the same time, Fadlallah was concerned that some in Hizbullah might strike out indiscriminately against Americans. While it served his purpose that the United States be blamed, violence against innocent Americans would lose for Hizbullah the higher moral ground gained through the sacrifice of its own innocents. So Fadlallah immediately urged that there be no revenge. “The people will not react in an emotional way,” he declared, “but in a comprehensive plan to bring down imperialist policy. We must know that we are not against the American people; in America there are many who do not agree with the policy of their government. . . . We will not unjustly treat Americans who are distant from the apparatus of espionage and destruction.” Fadlallah demanded not vengeance, but a renewed resolve to defeat imperialism.

It was a difficult distinction to maintain amid the passions of the bereaved Dahiya. And ultimately the demand for vengeance had to be appeased. Yet it was done in Fadlallah’s way, not through victimization of innocents, but through the application of Islamic law. Hizbullah soon announced that it had arrested eleven Lebanese for their alleged role in the bombing and, a year after the bombing, released their videotaped confessions and announced their execution. The secret trials and executions were a brilliant maneuver. They appeased the demand for vengeance, which otherwise might have escaped control. They proclaimed that Hizbullah’s intelligence service could solve that crime that baffled the Lebanese police. And they established the efficacy of

Islamic law in creating an island of justice amid injustice. Fadlallah claimed not to have intervened himself, but he declared that “those who investigated and judged were faithful elements.” The process, while clandestine, undoubtedly inspired the confidence of the inhabitants of the Dahiya, whatever outsiders may have thought of it.

Fadlallah’s narrow escape also enhanced his own aura, especially among those whom he could not reach by preaching alone. Fadlallah’s constituency among students and intellectuals knew that his escape was a matter of coincidence, and he did not present himself as the beneficiary of a miracle. But the meaning of his survival was self-evident to the despised poor of the Dahiya and beyond, who could not always follow the thread of his intricate preaching and elliptical writings. If they had cause to doubt his special grace, it was confirmed for them now. Nowhere was this more evident than among those who had lost family members in the bombing. “Praise be to God that the Sayyid was preserved,” said one man whose daughter was killed in the explosion. “He would have been lost to all the Muslims. Praise be to God that the carnage ended as it did, and not otherwise.”

The near loss of Fadlallah also served to underline his indispensability, even among those who disapproved of his independent spirit. Without him Hizbullah would have no voice, so the movement had to assume responsibility for his protection. The increasingly stringent security which surrounded him enhanced his stature, and made his arrival at any location a memorable event. His motorcade of Mercedes limousines swept him through the rubble-strewn streets of the Dahiya and West Beirut, and along crumbling roads to the Bekaa and the south. The smoke-tinted windows made it impossible for potential assailants to know which of the armor-plated automobiles carried Fadlallah. When he would arrive at a destination, his many bearded bodyguards, armed with automatic rifles and pistols, would take up positions around his door. Then he would emerge: a stout man in an *‘aba*, a full-sleeved dark cloak; a graying beard; the black turban of a sayyid; and a walking stick. On one occasion in 1987, he made a condolence call in West Beirut with an escort of ten cars and forty armed bodyguards.

The closing off of his street no longer sufficed. He moved from his run-down apartment block to a spacious residence in the formerly Christian quarter of Harat Hurayk in the Dahiya, a little more than a mile from his mosque. The complex was surrounded by a ten-foot wall and two dozen guards. The move could not guarantee his safety, for shells fell on the house during clashes between Hizbullah and Amal in 1988, and again during shelling from the eastern side of the city in 1989. The approaches to his mosque also remained dangerous: late in 1989, Hizbullah announced it had discovered a parked car

rigged with a hundred kilograms of dynamite along the route. And betrayal also remained a possibility, as dark rumors surfaced about a foiled plot by persons in his own entourage, who had planted a bomb in his mosque.

The growth of his new enterprises provided the most tangible evidence of Fadlallah's new prominence. The increased flow of donations to his coffers allowed the expansion of his activities far beyond the care of orphans and the schooling of clerics. In 1983 he established a new bureau for social welfare to assist needy families. Within five years, it regularly provided financial and medical assistance to nearly twenty-five hundred Shi'ite families throughout Lebanon. Such operations obviously could not be run without supervision. His household eventually grew to employ several hundred persons, including front-office personnel, financial managers, bodyguards, drivers, and servants. Important positions in Fadlallah's enterprises were reserved for members of his family, who could be trusted with the large sums of money collected and spent under his auspices. A brother-in-law ran his office. A nephew ran the institutes in Beirut established by Fadlallah in the name of the Imam Kho'i. A cousin acted on his behalf in the South. With an eye toward the future, Fadlallah groomed one of his sons, 'Ali, for the role of cleric, allowing the young man to assume the pulpit during his absences. Fadlallah had learned from Lebanon's old warlords, and from the distant Khomeini himself, that as one ages, one can only trust a son.

As Fadlallah's visibility increased, he faced a growing number of deliberate attempts to discredit him and denials became an integral part of his repertoire. As always, it was impossible to determine the veracity of the many charges leveled against him. In 1987 a noted American journalist, claiming to have had conversations with the director of the Central Intelligence Agency, reported in a book that Fadlallah had been approached by the Saudis after the failed assassination attempt and offered two million dollars if "he would act as their early warning system for terrorist attacks on Saudi and American facilities." Fadlallah was said to have agreed, although he preferred to receive the payment in food, medicine, and education expenses for some of his followers. "It was easier to bribe him than to kill him," the Saudi ambassador to Washington reportedly commented. Fadlallah vigorously denied the charge of corruption: "I challenge anyone or any side who can prove that such aid was provided to us." His office called the report a "cheap trick" to discredit him. To buttress the claim that Fadlallah had sold out to the Americans, another report noted that one of his eleven children had been admitted to the United States for study, which was indeed the case. Fadlallah did not bother to answer this accusation: the presence of a son in an American university only confirmed his stature as a master of all possibilities. He needed not only one son who could preach in his stead, but another who could interpret the real America as

experienced through Wayne State University. This was all the more important now that Fadlallah could not visit the United States on lecture tours, as he had done before winning American notoriety. But the charge that Fadlallah had been compromised by American money would not stick. When the offending book appeared in Arabic translation, the charges against Fadlallah were omitted.

Fadlallah's placement of family members in positions of trust also gave rise to rumors of corruption. In 1990, Fadlallah's brother-in-law and sons were accused by Amal sources of speculating in foreign currency, and even of dominating that market in West Beirut and the Dahiya. Millions of dollars were supposedly smuggled abroad. Local money changers allegedly complained to the police that Fadlallah's operatives had pressured them to reverse a (temporary) decline in the value of the American dollar vis-à-vis the Lebanese pound. At the same time, members of Fadlallah's family were reportedly buying up extensive properties in the Dahiya. But the corruption charges had no more effect than the accusations of complicity in violence. Was Fadlallah dangerous and corrupt? Moderate and principled? People believed what they wished—and clearly many Shi'ites wished him well.

Fadlallah faced a more subtle but substantial challenge in the form of Shaykh Muhammad Mahdi Shams al-Din, the white-bearded man who headed the Supreme Islamic Shi'ite Council. This position, at the summit of the Shi'ite clerical establishment, assured him of control of substantial funds and powers of appointment. Whenever Iran's emissaries sought new avenues of influence or felt frustrated by Fadlallah, they began to talk with Shams al-Din. He also visited Iran, where he presented himself as that Shi'ite cleric who enjoyed the widest respect throughout the Shi'ite community.

This was precisely the claim made by Fadlallah, and persistent reports spoke of personal conflict between the two men. Fadlallah invariably denied the rivalry; it was ignoble to argue publicly with a colleague-in-turban. But Fadlallah publicly discounted the Supreme Islamic Shi'ite Council, Shams al-Din's lever of influence in the community. The council, Fadlallah remarked, enjoyed "a certain degree" of representative authority, since it included clerics, Shi'ite members of parliament, and heads of various associations, but it did not control "all the political cards." Fadlallah delivered the jab diplomatically: "With all due respect to the leadership of the Shi'ite Council, we believe that the composition of the Council is not such as to inspire Islamic Shi'ite trust." Such talk so strained the relationship between the two leaders that mediators often had to work to reconcile them. Fadlallah would then meet with Shams al-Din, declare that the two were not rivals, and affirm that the scope of their differences was confined to "tactics." That hardly did justice to the depth of their disagreements, so complicated by the emotional residue of their childhood bond. But neither did it

fairly reflect the depth of their attachment, which sometimes surfaced in dramatic ways. When Fadlallah's father died in 1984, it was Shams al-Din who spoke the eulogy; when the body was returned to Najaf and Fadlallah accepted condolences at Beirut's airport, Shams al-Din stood at his side. They were brothers in all but name—and so long as Shams al-Din claimed an equal share of the legacy, Fadlallah's ambition could not fly.

Hijackers and Hostages

The emergence of the formidable Fadlallah had been sudden and unexpected. But the speed of his ascent also brought him quickly to his limits. Because Fadlallah had preserved a distance between himself and Hizbullah, his words could not always bear the full weight of their supposed significance. In fact, there were decision makers in Hizbullah who did not regard him as the ultimate authority on the proper conduct of Islam's struggle, and who even acted in direct contradiction to his teachings.

A challenge to his moral authority came in June 1985, three months after the attempt on his life. In a move that riveted the attention of the world, Hizbullah strongmen organized the hijacking of a TWA airliner to Beirut, and demanded the release of Lebanese Shi'ites held in an Israeli prison. Fadlallah had sensed the growing despair among the families of Shi'ites detained by Israel, and only weeks before the hijacking had publicly urged that an effort be made to take Israeli soldiers hostage in the south. On that occasion, he had declared it more important to capture Israeli soldiers than to kill them, in order to force the release of the Shi'ite detainees. But in the prevailing circumstances, this was a very tall order to fill, and Hizbullah's impatient strongmen moved instead against a soft civilian target. As the hijacking unfolded, Hizbullah openly expressed its solidarity with the hijackers: "We stand with them in defense of the weak and oppressed. We announce that the political dimension of the detention of hostages is much more important than the humanitarian aspect which America has raised against the hijackers." Hizbullah even organized an airport demonstration in their support. The hooded hijackers, surrounded by a group of Hizbullah's cleric, led the demonstrators in chants. One wing of the demonstration first assembled in the open square in front of Fadlallah's mosque.

Fadlallah's name inevitably surfaced. It was reported that one of the hijackers came from his entourage of bodyguards; this Fadlallah denied. But then he was pressed for his verdict on the admissibility of hijacking. Did he subscribe to the declared position of Hizbullah in support of the hijacking? On the one hand, Fadlallah understood the "tight spot" in which those who had hijacked the plane found themselves. Word had come out that the Shi'ite detainees were being

badly treated, and this had “created unrest among the detainees’ families”; anxious for the safe return of their relatives, they “felt helpless to do anything to Israel that would make possible the release.” Theirs too was a humanitarian cause. And in retrospect, the hijacking had “many positive results.” It unified the ranks of the believers, directed world attention to the problem of Shi’ite detainees in Israel, and opened the eyes of some Americans to Israel’s perfidy.

Nevertheless, hijacking’s “negative angles are more numerous,” Fadlallah told his Friday prayer congregation. “We must not be enthusiastic about this method. There is no basis for our trying to put means of transportation in the world at the mercy of political slogans. Today you are a hijacker and tomorrow you are the one who is hijacked.” Nor was his objection limited to the fear of retribution. He had moral objections as well. Were the passengers on these aircraft “to be called criminals because they are citizens of countries who have interfered with us in certain cases?” Fadlallah declared that “hijackings do not solve anything and do not wipe out American policy. . . . We are against hijackings as a means of political action. I am among those who believe that means of transport—of air, sea or land—should be safeguarded and not tampered with.”

Fadlallah’s careful calculation was not in harmony either with the hijackers or with Hizbullah’s clerics, who had endorsed the action. Ultimately, it was Rafsanjani who proved decisive in bringing the TWA hijacking to an end and securing the release of Shi’ite detainees. Fadlallah’s arguments, while they complemented Rafsanjani’s efforts, did not suffice to break the deadlock. Nor did they prevent a recurrence of such episodes, for the TWA hijacking had worked. Hijacking would be used by Hizbullah’s strongmen for several years to come, and only the absolute refusal of air controllers in Beirut to allow hijacked planes to land there prevented the TWA episode from being repeated in Fadlallah’s backyard. The resort to hijacking, in clear repudiation of Fadlallah’s logic, defined the limits of his influence too clearly for his comfort.

Apart from the hijackings, Fadlallah’s suasion faced a perpetual challenge posed by the systematic taking of foreign hostages. Most of them were taken between 1984 and 1987, by groups bearing the names Islamic Jihad Organization, Revolutionary Justice Organization, and Islamic Jihad for the Liberation of Palestine. In the seizure of the American embassy in Tehran, Fadlallah had witnessed how vented passion, producing immoral acts, might advance a moral cause. His logic had led him to accept the holding of American hostages in Tehran. But in the different circumstances of Lebanon, his calculation yielded a different verdict. Certainly, Fadlallah understood the motives of Iran’s emissaries and the Hizbullah strongmen, who together conspired in the taking of the hostages; when hostages were held for the

release of Hizbullah's prisoners elsewhere, he held, efforts to free them could not be described as terrorism. Had the Americans then responded in "a practical way," by accepting an exchange "according to the Lebanese practice," Fadlallah believed the hostage holding "would have ended and its file would have been closed without further suffering." Instead the United States lost its composure, exploiting the hostage holding to declare a "war on terrorism." Of course not all hostages were held against the release of relatives, and some carried a political price. Fadlallah did not completely discount the value of political hostage holding, such as was sanctioned by Iran as a means to force the United States and France to alter their policies. These abductions, despite their negative aspects, also might have certain "positive results."

Yet when all was said and done, Fadlallah's opinion ran against hostage taking. His opening argument was couched in ethical terms and the moral philosophy of Islam, and drew upon the same sources as his opposition to hijacking. In his understanding, the seizure of innocent persons constituted wrongful punishment and contradicted the teachings of Islam. In support of his argument, Fadlallah consistently cited a verse from the Qur'an which said that "no burdened soul should be made to bear the burden of another"—applying it to the situation of innocent foreigners made to bear the burden of their governments' guilt. Many of the hostages not only were personally innocent, but were "participants in cultural, medical and social institutions" that benefited Muslims. Nor was Fadlallah moved by the argument that the hostage taking defended the movement from the plots of foreign intelligence services. "With the kidnapping of foreigners, we lost much medical, scientific, and technical expertise. Some will say, 'There were spies among them.' True. But among ourselves there are thousands of spies. What of those who serve Israeli intelligence in the South, are they not from among us?" "We know that foreign embassies deal in intelligence, as do many of the journalists. But we do not believe that kidnapping will achieve the goal it seeks, but rather will produce negative results. We can fight espionage in other ways." Fadlallah was particularly resentful of the abduction of journalists, since his own burgeoning reputation owed so much to the ready access he granted to the press. Even if some were spies, they were sorely needed by the movement; therefore, he concluded, "we believe we should help journalists in their task to inform, whatever the negative aspects may be."

Fadlallah thus rejected the practice of political hostage taking as "inhumane and irreligious." As he tersely put it on one occasion, "We have actually not understood the nature of the Islamic thought of the Islamic Jihad Organization." At first many hoped against hope that his influence, and that his power of persuasion, would prevail. Families of hostages, mediators, and Western ambassadors beat a path to his door. For a time it was flattering, as petitioners

besieged his office and beseeched him for favors. He even took up the cause of a few hostages who could lay a special claim upon his conscience. One was the French sociologist Michel Seurat, a highly regarded student of Islam and ardent supporter of the Palestinian cause who was kidnapped by the Islamic Jihad Organization in 1985. “Countless are the people who have already intervened on your husband’s behalf,” Fadlallah told Seurat’s Syrian wife during her audience. “You know I have done everything possible to try to find him.” No hostage could count on greater support among leading Shi’ite figures, and Fadlallah even signed a petition of Muslim leaders protesting Seurat’s “unjustified detention” and calling for his “prompt release.” Another hostage who had a claim upon him was Terry Anderson, an American and chief Middle East correspondent of the Associated Press, who was seized by the Islamic Jihad Organization in March 1985—“a day after he had interviewed me,” acknowledged Fadlallah. Anderson’s sister wrote to Fadlallah; he replied, expressing his sympathy and regret and affirming that he was doing all in his power to secure Anderson’s release. In 1989, Fadlallah claimed to have appealed directly for the release of hostages over fifty times.

Fadlallah hoped his writ would run, that his preaching would “create a psychological situation that would bring pressure to bear on the kidnappers via the masses.” And among adherents of Hizbullah who venerated Fadlallah, especially the university students, he did succeed in fostering a sense that the holding of hostages was wrong. But this did not suffice, and those who actually held the hostages, in consultation with Iran’s emissaries, were completely unmoved by his moral and practical calculations. Fadlallah had to admit as much. “I wish that I could influence the people involved,” he said. “I can confirm that I have done a great deal of work in this direction, but I have come across many closed paths.” Elsewhere he explained, “I stumbled against a wall because there is a mysterious force behind this practice.” That force prevented the release of Seurat even when he fell so ill that his continued detention meant death, and it made the incarceration of Anderson the longest of any hostage.



Terry Waite (left) meets with Fadlallah before his own abduction.

It was not only the reputation of Islam that suffered. The continued hostage holding fueled doubts about Fadlallah’s own credibility and the extent of his moral influence. Some believed he was simply lying; Seurat’s wife bitterly

concluded he was “involved in the kidnapping, up to his neck.” In one sense, he did conspire with the hostage holders: although his sources would have kept him current with the doings of the hostage holders, he kept his information to himself. Fadlallah would not threaten betrayal simply because his powers of suasion had failed. In return, the hostage holders did what they could to shore up his reputation, sometimes crediting him for staying their hands when they backed down from threats to kill hostages. These were token gestures, since cool calculation, not deference to Fadlallah, dictated the cycle of ultimatums. But in a typical instance, a group holding French hostages announced it had backed away from a death threat out of “appreciation and respect” for Fadlallah. Was this complicity on his part with those who held the hostages, or with those who sought their release? Mediation, by its nature, held up ambiguity as a virtue. But however others interpreted his role, Fadlallah did not regard himself as a party to the hostage takings. Sincerity shone through his statement that “I would not have any self-respect if I had anything to do with them.”

The exquisite anomalies of this role defeated the analytical abilities of many an observer. In a characteristic instance, a foreign journalist dismissed Fadlallah as “little more than a façade,” an actor reciting lines in a play directed by the hostage holders. Quite the opposite: Fadlallah wrote his own script, forcing the hostage holders to make their own case in videotapes, telephone calls, and letters to the press. Occasionally he followed the cue of his ally Rafsanjani, who preferred to name the price for the exercise of his own influence indirectly. Fadlallah often obliged, issuing pronouncements on what the West should do next, incidentally getting his name in headlines and his photograph in *Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, and *Time* magazine. As always, the publicity was welcome. He also had a hand in the back-channel transmission of negotiating positions, for he constituted a link in one of several winding chains of mediation between foreign governments and the hostage holders. He could communicate confidentially with the hostage holders, Iran’s leaders and emissaries, and diplomats from mediating governments, especially that of Algeria. It was sometimes suggested that he exacted tribute for such services, but no one seemed to know this for a fact. In any event, Fadlallah did not actively seek this role, and sometimes he dodged it, as in 1990 when former American president Jimmy Carter reportedly expressed an interest in meeting him. “I rejected this proposal,” said Fadlallah, “because the subjects raised by Jimmy Carter are unrelated to me, especially the question of the hostages.” The really crucial negotiations circumvented him, and when credit was shared out for the successful release of hostages, it always went to governments and full-time mediators. The last French hostages were freed in 1988; the last Americans and British, in 1991; and the last Germans, in 1992. The carefully choreographed releases, which excluded Fadlallah altogether, brought the

boundaries of his influence into striking relief. Or did they? In the end, his view prevailed. The debate he prompted had put the hostage holders in the moral docket before the only constituency that mattered: Muslim believers in the primacy of Islamic law. It is possible that hostage taking would have been practiced even more extensively had this debate never taken place, although no one could say this for certain.

Syria in Lebanon

One thing, however, was certain: Syria garnered most of the credit for the releases, confirming its return to the Lebanese chessboard. Syria's military intervention in Lebanon began in 1976, and since then Syrian President Hafiz al-Assad had worked painstakingly to bring Lebanon into the orbit of Damascus. In 1982, Israel's invasion and America's deployment had disrupted Syria's plans; Syria reacted by opening Lebanon's back door to Iran's emissaries, who were invited to inspire resistance against the foreigners. Iranian Revolutionary Guards, money, weapons—everything on which Hizbullah depended passed through Syria. Damascus became the indispensable link in the import-export trade in Islamic revolution, and the partnership produced dramatic success.

But secular Syria had its own vision for Lebanon, and it did not include an Islamic state. Indeed, Syria had a bloody record in dealing with Islamic movements, having pounded its own Islamic opposition to dust earlier in 1982 and shelled the Islamic movement in Tripoli into submission in 1985. Wasn't the Arab nationalist, Ba'athist creed of Syria intrinsically opposed to Islam? Now Syria seemed bent on gaining a hold upon all of Lebanon, including the strongholds of Shi'ism. Syria would collect the spoils from Islam's victory over Israel and the West. Why not resist the return of Syria, before it had a chance to entrench itself? Many turned to Fadlallah for an answer.

Once again, his answer demonstrated a finely-honed realism. Fadlallah did not deny that the ultimate aims of Syria and Hizbullah diverged. But it would be disastrous if they quarreled over those aims when they both still faced the imminent danger of Israeli domination. Yes, Israel appeared to be in retreat, but appearances deceived. Israel would not abandon its attempt to dominate Lebanon, and without Syria's steadfastness, the country would be at Israel's mercy—and Iran would be powerless to save it. "Syria plays a positive role which benefits us," Fadlallah concluded in 1985. "It protects Lebanese Muslims and spares them forced cooperation with Israel." Fadlallah's description of Syria as protector of the Muslims must have grated on many ears in Hizbullah, but this was a truth far too dangerous to ignore. "If relations with Syria were negative," warned Fadlallah, "the Muslims would have been squeezed into the Israeli corner." Fadlallah did not become a supplicant at Syria's door, preferring

to leave mundane dealings with Damascus to the functionaries of Hizbullah. But as Syrian agents and forces infiltrated Beirut, Fadlallah received more courtesy calls from Ghazi Kan'an, the head of Syrian military intelligence in Lebanon. More rarely, Fadlallah met personally with Asad in Damascus. The Syrians knew the limits of Fadlallah's influence, but they could rely on him to communicate the message of cooperation precisely and persuasively, from the pulpit and behind the scenes.

To make that cooperation palatable, Fadlallah took a conciliatory view of Arab nationalism, the declared creed of Ba'athist Syria. Most of Hizbullah's clerics railed against Arab nationalism as secular self-worship, inspired by foreign example and bankrupted by the 1967 Arab-Israeli war. Not so Fadlallah. Islamic activism and Arab nationalism both sought to liberate Palestine and shake off great-power domination, he argued. Arabism could serve as an acceptable basis of identity, provided it also inspired action against imperialism. Fadlallah rejected only that variety of Arab nationalism which drew upon Marxism and socialism, and which dismissed Islam as something that issued from Muhammad rather than God. These smooth words of ideological ecumenism, which deliberately obscured the conflict between Islam and Arabism, eased Fadlallah's efforts to recruit supporters from the diminished ranks of the Arab nationalists. But above all, they served to lubricate the relationship between Hizbullah and Syria.

Fadlallah also played a crucial role in the management of several crises that tested the broad understanding between Syria and Hizbullah. The most serious occurred in February 1987: Syria decided to extend its hold to West Beirut, symbol of Lebanon's disorder, where fighting then raged between Amal and the Palestinians. Some seven thousand Syrian troops entered West Beirut in force and issued an ultimatum to all of the armed factions—including Hizbullah—to evacuate their bases there. But something went awry, and, in a violent clash, Syrian troops killed twenty-three members of Hizbullah, whom they alleged had resisted the takeover of their barracks. The Dahiya filled with rage; some fifty thousand persons attended the funerals of the dead, shouting, "Death to Kan'an!"

Fadlallah made the claim of Hizbullah: "Not one shot was fired at the Syrians. It was a cold-blooded massacre." But instead of calling for revenge, he demanded the trial of those Syrian troops who had committed the outrage. This was an artful dodge, since it suggested that the painful episode could be attributed to undisciplined soldiers. It was unthinkable, of course, that the Syrians would allow any of their soldiers to stand trial. But they played along with Fadlallah, admitting in an elliptical way that an "error" had occurred. So rare were Syrian admissions of error in Lebanon that this had the immediate effect of mollifying

Hizbullah. Assad then received Hizbullah's leaders in Damascus in a gesture of reconciliation, and Fadlallah announced that "the incident is closed." But its lessons were not forgotten. Hizbullah had learned not to test Syrian resolve, and Fadlallah had again shown his unfailing skill as a navigator of treacherous waters. "We take a strategic view of relations with Syria," he said a few months later. "Naturally, differences do occur, but we believe these matters can be brought under control in a mature and conscientious manner." There would be no more uncontrolled "differences" with Syria.

Yet Fadlallah still found an ingenious way to assert the movement's independence from Syria. Many in Hizbullah routinely denounced Lebanon as a "geometric box," created by imperialism, for imperialism. But for Fadlallah, such talk merely played into the hands of those who favored annexation to Syria, and he began to enumerate the merits of an independent Lebanon. Granted, the West may have used Lebanon as a launching pad for imported ideologies and political schemes. But in Beirut's tower of Babel, the voice of Islam could also speak. If Lebanon became a virtual province of Syria, the Islamic movement might be strangled in its infancy. So while Fadlallah advocated cooperation with Syria against Israel, he became the most paradoxical defender of Lebanese independence. Once asked about the possibility of future union between Lebanon and Syria, Fadlallah replied that ties between the two countries "should be distinctive and realistic." In the code of Lebanese political discourse, this was a reply of great precision. By "distinctive," Fadlallah meant that Syria and Lebanon should be bound by a special relationship; by "realistic," he meant that the two states should remain separate entities. He then projected this view upon the Syrians themselves: "I do not think that there is a Syrian decision to remain in Lebanon forever, or that Syria wants to annex parts of Lebanon, because Syria has no need to do so, and because it is unrealistic in the conditions that now prevail in the region."

And this, in Fadlallah's view, was very much for the better. As the prospects for Lebanon's revival grew, Fadlallah began to explain to Hizbullah the country's many advantages. "If Lebanon were overthrown, the Arab region would be deprived of one of its very few democracies," he warned. "Lebanon's cultural wealth and variety give it an ability to influence its environment which exceeds that of any other country in this region, and its openness to the outside world is greater than that of any other Arab country. All this would be lost if Lebanon disappeared." So, too, would Lebanon's potential as an amplifier for the message of Islam. Unlike other countries in the region, Lebanon had a free press and freedom to organize. "This gives the Islamists in Lebanon the opportunity to continue their political activities freely." True, Lebanon's heterogeneity made an Islamic republic impossible in the near term. "But the Lebanese Islamists can support Islamist movements in other countries," where

the obstacles on the road to power were fewer. Lebanon's variety and openness, counted by many in Hizbullah as vices, suddenly flowered into virtues in Fadlallah's fertile mind.

Fadlallah still had to pay deference to the idea that America ran Lebanon: "In our view, Lebanon is governed by America, even in the smallest details, even in regard to administrative, political and economic affairs." But even if Lebanon did serve an American interest, its continued existence also served its inhabitants. As the Lebanese civil war wound down, Fadlallah sounded increasingly like a Lebanese patriot. He drew "hope from the fact that even after fifteen or sixteen years of conflict, Lebanon as a state is still present on the ground. Not even all these terrible convulsions have been able to erase Lebanon from the map. This must tell us something about the essential strength of the nation." It was a stunning shift. Before and during the war, Fadlallah had preached that foreign intrigue perpetuated Lebanon. Now he announced that Lebanon had survived the war because its own people had willed it—and that they were right. Here was Fadlallah once again steering the ship of Islam through storm and strait—the master navigator, who knew just when to tack his sail.

The Shi'ite Fitna

Much more treacherous waters separated Hizbullah from Amal. Fadlallah had always understood the potential for Shi'ite strife in the establishment of Hizbullah. To win men and women away from Amal, Hizbullah had stirred up old resentments that split Shi'ite families, neighborhoods, villages and towns. Hizbullah preached resistance to foreigners, but it also played upon distrust of neighbors. The massive influx of arms, provided to Amal by Syria and to Hizbullah by Iran, added new volatility to old feuds. And after Israel withdrew to its self-declared "security zone," the two movements began to contest the south, the center of gravity of Lebanese Shi'ism. On more and more occasions, in local settings, small-scale violence erupted, in the form of gunfire and kidnapping between Hizbullah and Amal.

The conflict percolated upward in August and September 1987. Nabih Birri, head of the Amal movement, came to Tyre in the south to address a rally marking the ninth anniversary of Musa al-Sadr's disappearance. There Birri let loose a barb at the clerics who led Hizbullah: "It is not enough to put on a turban, like a religious man, so as to become a theologian. . . . There are only five religious leaders authorized to lay down the law in Lebanon," one from each confessional community. He did not have to spell it out: everyone knew of the Shi'ite clerics, the state recognized only the fatwas of Shaykh 'Abd al-Amir Qabalan, officially recognized as the Shi'ite mufti of Lebanon. Qabalan also happened to be a zealous supporter of Amal and a sharp critic of Iran. Birri's

remarks, for all their apparent subtlety, represented a frontal assault on Fadlallah's immunity. Fadlallah bit back: Birri's words, he said, would be taken as "a sign for those who thrive on fanaticism to give free reign to their attacks and insults against all the wearers of the turban." The exchange drew lines that could not be crossed. Fadlallah was asked a month later if he and Birri had met to hammer out their differences. Fadlallah replied that Birri was too busy to do so, and so was he.

The situation deteriorated dramatically in February 1988, when Hizbullah abducted Lieutenant Colonel William Higgins, a U.S. Marine Corps officer and deputy commander of the United Nations Truce Supervision Organization (UNTSO) in the south. Higgins was seized as he returned from a meeting with a local Amal chief in Tyre. Hizbullah claimed that Higgins was a CIA spy, and Fadlallah sanctioned his kidnapping, arguing that "there is a difference between his abduction and the abduction of a plain civilian." But the kidnapping had been done in defiance of Amal, on its own ground in the south. Angry Amal militiamen stormed Hizbullah's southern centers searching for Higgins, and a Shi'ite civil war seemed imminent. Yet Fadlallah steadfastly maintained that fighting would not break out. "The day will never come when Shi'ites fight one another," he declared. Those who predicted fighting did not understand the Shi'ite community, its many mechanisms of mediation, and its strong taboo against shedding Shi'ite blood. Was he sure Hizbullah and Amal would not fight? "I'm one hundred percent sure," he replied.

Fadlallah was wrong. In April, the south exploded in battles between the two Shi'ite factions—clashes of such ferocity that they matched any past battle waged between Shi'ite and non-Shi'ite. Hizbullah and Amal slid into *fitna*—internal strife, the antithesis of sacred war—pitting brother against brother in violence that threatened to gut the Shi'ite community. Fadlallah groped for an explanation, at first attributing the fighting to "agents of darkness who have transformed red lines into green lights." But no one who witnessed the sheer cruelty of the warring sides believed that foreigners had fomented the conflict. Fadlallah eventually admitted that the strife did "not necessarily reflect direct American inspiration," and originated in "local disputes." Shi'ites were not a race unto themselves, he concluded ruefully; they had been infected by the same passions as other Lebanese.

The fighting soon swept the Dahiya as well, and continued with varying intensity for more than two years, claiming the lives of over a thousand Shi'ites. The weekly newspapers of the two movements repeatedly published photographs of the bullet-torn bodies of the dead. For Fadlallah, the fighting, whatever its outcome, represented a defeat for the Islamic trend. It was also a personal setback. Where were Fadlallah's famous powers of persuasion, and his

supposed following in Amal? Fadlallah did preach passionately from his pulpit against the fighting, and he issued several general appeals for an end to the strife. He made his strongest appeal in May 1988, when the killing swept across the Dahiya: “The continuation of these destructive battles, which kill innocent civilians, children, women, and elderly, is inadmissible. Many youths are falling —youths we want as a force to fight Israel. The residential areas are not a battlefield. You are free to fight among yourselves, but you are not free to fight among civilians. Stop this mad and futile carnage.” But he frankly admitted that his appeals had no effect. And Fadlallah did not test his influence by issuing formal fatwas against internecine killing. Doing so in these circumstances, he said, was not a “practical matter.” Trying to position himself above the fray, Fadlallah denounced the “reckless, crazy war,” and counseled Hizbullah to end it quickly. But he also asserted that Hizbullah did not start it. Amal responded by multiplying the personal attacks against Fadlallah, especially in its press. Although Fadlallah called for dialogue, he became so enraged that he refused to meet with Birri when Iran tried to bring them together in Tehran. But Fadlallah was careful not to descend into the morass of charges and countercharges that accompanied the Shi’ite civil war. That would have been undignified; he would not reply to “insults.” He answered his critics in the dignified manner of a man above politics, by receiving delegations of admirers who arrived from all over Shi’ite Lebanon to show their support for him.

The successive rounds of fighting ended in mediated cease-fires, and finally an in agreement negotiated by Syria and Iran in late 1990. But the scars remained. In 1993, Fadlallah claimed that “extensive cooperation and coordination” had been established between the Hizbullah and Amal. But he also admitted that “some time is needed before all the residual negative sentiments that surfaced due to the conflict can be erased.” Vengeance was the deepest of these sentiments, and it became the ever-present shadow of the Shi’ites. Fadlallah, for all his persuasive powers, could do little to banish it, for it bypassed minds and appealed directly to wounded hearts.

Islam and World Order

The world did not stand still while Shi’ite battled Shi’ite. Old ideologies buckled under the weight of economics, old conflicts moved toward resolution. The Iran-Iraq war ended in 1988. The Eastern bloc collapsed in 1989. The Berlin Wall fell in 1990. The Soviet Union dissolved in 1991. Hizbullah turned to Fadlallah to decipher the meaning of these events, and he obliged, offering intricate commentary that fascinated the journalists, even when he proved to be wrong.

He certainly seemed to be wrong about the Iran-Iraq war. “One journalist has said that this war will continue another twenty years,” he announced in October

1987. “I share his opinion.” In fact, the war lasted only nine more months, until the cease-fire of July 1988. But Fadlallah did not intend his remark to be read as a prediction. He wanted to suggest the futility of the war, at a time when many in Hizbullah still awaited an imminent Iranian offensive that would carry Islam to victory. They were shocked when Iran accepted a cease-fire, but Fadlallah quickly praised the decision as an act of sober calculation. To his mind, it was time for Iran to advance to the more important business of building a workable Islamic order at home. “The previous phase was one of war and building the Revolution,” he announced. “The current phase is one of peace and rebuilding the country.” Fadlallah’s idea of revolutionary *phases* was itself revolutionary. Most of the clerics in Hizbullah explained the course of Iran’s revolution and their own struggle by some analogy to the early history of Islam. Their victories were analogous to the Prophet Muhammad’s triumphs, their setbacks evoked the suffering of the Imam Husayn. But Fadlallah preferred analogies to the great ideological revolutions of modern times, as though he were addressing a class in comparative revolution. From that perspective, a revolution was bound to shed its early zeal. “Like all revolutions, including the French Revolution, the Islamic Revolution did not have a realistic line at first,” he lectured his listeners. “At that time, it served to create a state, it produced a mobilization, a new religious way of thinking and living, with the aim of winning Muslim autonomy and independence from the superpowers. [But] the new phase which should now be reached is the normalization of relations with the rest of the world.” To speak of the Islamic revolution like any other revolution—as human history, not divine plan—suggested that Fadlallah, as political philosopher, perhaps owed less to Muhammad than to Marx, more to Hegel than to Husayn.

But could Khomeini make the transition to the next phase? Khomeini’s fatwa of February 1989 against Salman Rushdie, the Indian-born British author of *The Satanic Verses*, threw up a sudden, massive obstacle to any “normalization” between Iran and the West. The zealots of Hizbullah entered a state of ecstasy, filling the streets of Beirut and Baalbek, where they burned British flags and threatened Rushdie with death. Fadlallah, who had just returned from three weeks in Iran and a meeting with Khomeini, defended the fatwa—after a fashion. “The Imam Khomeini did not err in his ruling [*hukm*] on Rushdie, either in its form or its timing.” But Fadlallah skirted Khomeini’s demand for the death of the author. The fatwa, he announced, had the desired effect of influencing publishing houses against the book. But beyond that, it did not matter whether Rushdie was executed or not. “The issue is not whether this man is killed or isn’t, whether the decree is carried out or isn’t.” It did not even matter that Rushdie was an apostate, for there were plenty of apostates in the world. It only mattered that the West used Rushdie’s book “to infiltrate its ideas of human

rights into the Islamic world.” Islam had a different concept of human rights, which entailed a respect for free debate but not for the defamation of the sacred. The fatwa thus represented an act of self-defense and would remind the West to respect the feelings of one billion Muslims. In the meantime, Fadlallah argued that the West should not allow the fatwa to block improved relations with Iran, since Khomeini issued it as the leader of all the world’s Muslims, not as the leader of Iran.

In fact, Fadlallah’s position on Rushdie smacked of casuistry. Fadlallah would never have issued a call for the death of the novelist, but neither did he dare to contradict Khomeini. And so, for once, Fadlallah visibly squirmed. He had made an art of escaping from intellectual cul-de-sacs, but Khomeini’s unambiguous text left too little room for an elegant getaway. In the end, the Rushdie affair demonstrated that as long as Khomeini lived, Fadlallah could be pinned down by surprises from Iran, and suddenly compelled to defend the judgment of a higher Shi’ite authority. After Khomeini’s death in 1989, it almost seemed as though a weight had been lifted from Fadlallah’s shoulders. “It is necessary to employ new and different methods from those employed while [Khomeini] lived,” said Fadlallah, only six months later.

Fadlallah preferred the soft line. There were some in the West, including intellectuals and analysts, who longed for a reconciliation with Iran, and were even prepared to make apologies for movements like Hizbullah. They had to be cultivated with words of moderation, not fiery fatwas. This could best be done by avoiding wholesale condemnations of the West and sticking to criticisms of specific American policies. If the Islamic movement showed a friendly face, this would bolster all those in the West who favored the appeasement of its political demands. For their benefit, Fadlallah wrote several articles for foreign consumption, all couched in his most conciliatory tone. “We are not against the American people,” he wrote in an article prepared especially for an American audience. “On the contrary, we have many friends in the U.S., and consider its inhabitants a naturally good, tolerant people. Yet we oppose the U.S. administration’s policy, which has been the root cause of many of our problems and those of the American people.” Such statements won Fadlallah even more admirers abroad, especially among Americans who already opposed the Middle East policies of their government. “I do not take a negative view of relations with the big powers,” he stressed. “We, as a community that is part of this world, should have positive relations with all the world’s countries.” Those relations could be improved if the West simply understood that Muslims had interests too: “We appreciate that the U.S. and other countries have their interests in the world. We have no wish to jeopardize their interests, but it is our right not to allow their interests to destroy our interests.” This seemed reasonable enough, and the Western testimonials to Fadlallah’s “moderation” began to mount.

But to his Muslim audiences, Fadlallah provided a very different vision. A decade after Iran's revolution and Hizbullah's heroic sacrifices, the Americans seemed stronger than ever. The collapse of the Soviet Union left the United States as the sole great power, and its influence over the Middle East grew exponentially. Far from turning the tide against America, the famous bomb attacks in Beirut now looked like minor skirmishes. After Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990, the United States showed its real power, quickly crushing an Iraqi army that Iran had failed to defeat in eight years of war. The victorious American president, who as vice-president had visited the smoldering ruins of the marines barracks in Beirut, announced that the United States would build a "new world order." "The U.S. is engulfing the world through its media," observed Fadlallah, "saying that it is master of the world." There were some, even Islamists, who talked despairingly of the need to come to an accommodation with the "reality" of American power. Fadlallah made it perfectly clear that he did not count himself among them.

"We believe that reports about the multifaceted and unrivaled strength of the United States are greatly exaggerated," he declared. While America loomed large in the world, "its shadow is greater than its substance. It possesses great military power, but that power is not supported by commensurate political or economic strength." Like the Soviet Union, the United States faced economic crisis, compounded by domestic divisions of race which exploded from time to time. There were differences between the Soviet Union and the United States, but in the final analysis they were both swollen politically and militarily, and diseases wracked their bodies politic. "We therefore believe that the fall of global arrogance is possible," Fadlallah concluded. "Here and there we see the chinks in the armor of the United States, and we can penetrate these chinks and enlarge them."

But rising up against a great power required the building of Islam's own potential. That potential was immense. "We are powerful," declared Fadlallah,

but we do not know how to mold our power, how to amass it. We are powerful, but we squander our power with our own hands, and we give the enemy power. As Muslims in the world, we are powerful in our natural resources, powerful in our numbers, powerful in our capabilities, powerful in our geographic situation —but we strive to weaken ourselves.

What would it take to realize the potential of Islam? Strength of spirit—wedded, so Fadlallah imagined, to the tangible power conferred by arms. Fadlallah

believed that Islam eventually would acquire enough of them to qualify as a great power in its own right. “We might not have the actual power the U.S. has,” Fadlallah admitted. “But we had the power previously and we have now the foundations to develop that power in the future. We might wait 20, 30, or 40 years before we will be able to attain that power.” This could only be read as an argument for an Islamic nuclear capability, and Fadlallah left little doubt that he favored it. “We see that many states have nuclear weapons, and it poses no great problem,” Fadlallah complained. “But when it is reported that an Islamic country wants nuclear weapons to defend itself against another state that has them, the arrogant use all their pressure and power to prevent this state from acquiring weapons that would strengthen it.” In the present situation, the United States and Israel could intimidate the Muslims with threats that the next war would be a nuclear one, an argument “intended to defeat us before we even enter battle.” To stand up to such intimidation, Muslims needed their own weapons of mass destruction. And so while Fadlallah regarded Saddam Husayn as a criminal, he still rejected the destruction of Iraq’s weapons after the Iraqi defeat: “We oppose the tyrant of Iraq, but Iraq’s weapons are not the tyrant’s property, they belong to the Iraqi people.” The destruction of these weapons had drained the power of the Muslims; they now had to find ways to restore, and extend, their power.

It was obvious that Fadlallah regarded “normalization” and proliferation as complementary, not contradictory. “Normalization” would create political conditions in which Islam, led by Iran, could make, buy, or steal the keys to the power still locked in the atom. (There was ample precedent for such a pattern of acquisition, as when the United States, on the mere promise of normalization, sold arms to Khomeini.) And proliferation would finally create a true normalization—a balance of power between Islam and the West, superseding the abnormal state in which “global arrogance” commanded millions of times the destructive power of the combined forces of Islam. Fadlallah’s idea of Islamic empowerment therefore went far beyond any simple modification of American policy in the Middle East. In the longer term of a generation or two, he envisioned a fundamental shift of world power in favor of Islam. “Power is not the eternal destiny of the powerful,” he reminded his followers. “Weakness is not the eternal destiny of the weak.” The weak would obtain that power if, deep within themselves, they kept alive the spirit of rejecting “global arrogance.”

Fadlallah had become the foremost philosopher of power in contemporary Islam. Beneath the soft line of normalization, he nurtured the vision of Islam’s return to its proper status as a world power. If Islam were to avoid being destroyed, it would have to defend itself; if it were to realize its destiny, it would have to dominate others. The West could not be allowed to end history now, or create a “new world order” resting on a gross disequilibrium in its favor. The

West's own vision had to be resisted—and the first test would be the West's attempt to “normalize” the abnormality known as Israel.

The Threat of Peace

While Fadlallah explained the great world issues of the day, he kept one ear firmly to the ground of Lebanon. In the confrontation with “global arrogance,” Lebanon's Muslims had the clearly defined task of driving Israel from Lebanese territory. This did not seem to be beyond even the limited power of the Shi'ites. In 1985, Israel had withdrawn from most of south to a “security zone,” largely as a result of guerrilla attacks by the Islamic Resistance. The following year, Fadlallah clearly stated Hezbollah's next objective: “We want the Israelis to withdraw from southern Lebanon without having to recognize Israel in return, as Egypt had to do in return for withdrawal from the Sinai.” This was to be achieved by a steady war of attrition against Israeli forces and the SLA—the South Lebanon Army, a client militia created by Israel to patrol the “security zone.”

The attrition proved anything but steady. From 1988 to 1990 Shi'ites shot at Shi'ites, and the Islamic Resistance launched only sporadic attacks against the Israelis. The struggle against Israel resumed only in late 1990, after Hizbullah and Amal reached an accord. By the spring of 1991, Fadlallah declared the Islamic Resistance back on course and ready for its mission. “It is not impossible to suppose that the Islamic Resistance could inflict such losses on the enemy as to force him to pull out of the ‘zone,’ just as the Israelis withdrew from the rest of the South between 1983 and 1985 as a result of Resistance operations.” From his pulpit, Fadlallah continued to preach resistance with all the force of his persuasion. He promised the fighters of the Islamic Resistance that they, not the diplomats, would write the next page of history. And he implored the inhabitants of the security zone to reject recruitment into the SLA and rise up against occupation.

But the “security zone” held. The SLA, not Israeli forces, absorbed most of the attacks, and Israeli casualties did not mount fast enough to make a difference. Israel also rediscovered the power of artillery, raining shells down upon the villages just north of the security zone whenever they gave shelter to Islamic Resistance fighters. As a result, some in these villages charged the Islamic Resistance with callous disregard for their suffering. Other Lebanese also questioned the logic of resistance. Lebanon had previously rejected Israeli offers to withdraw from all of Lebanon in exchange for a peace treaty and security guarantees, invoking a 1978 United Nations Security Council resolution that called for a unilateral Israeli withdrawal. But when Israel rejected the resolution and dealt out retribution of fire for attacks against it, the war-weary of

Lebanon began to question the point of resistance. Would peace with Israel really be worse than occupation and retaliation by Israel? To argue that it would be, Hizbullah had to paint the blackest possible picture of Israel—at the very moment when many Arabs had begun to see Israel in its full complement of colors. The task of persuasion fell squarely on Fadlallah. Again he conjured up images of a voracious Israel—hungry not for territory but for economic domination. Israel’s peace was far more threatening than Israel’s war, for it would unleash a plague of Jews upon Lebanon’s innocent Shi’ites: “Were it not for the Resistance, you would see all the Jews swarming over the South and the Bekaa in absolute freedom, corrupting the land and its people.” Recognition of Israel would open the door a crack, and Israel would rush in. The Islamists had to oppose peace with Israel “even if they remain the last rejectionist voice.” The villages of the south were the front line of Islam in this struggle for survival, and they had to shoulder the burden. Fadlallah called upon them to sacrifice, while Hizbullah promised ever-larger sums of money to help the villages stand steadfast against Israel.

But history lurched in a different direction. In October 1991, the United States orchestrated the stunning breakthrough: Israel sat down with Arab states, including Lebanon, in direct peace negotiations. Iran quickly summoned a conference to oppose the talks, which Fadlallah attended and addressed. On this and every other opportunity, Fadlallah rushed to paint a grim picture of the likely outcome of the peace talks: “The Golan will remain occupied, the West Bank and Gaza will get municipal administration, but defense, security, and foreign affairs will all stay with the Jews.” In the end, the Palestinians would be reduced to a national minority, while Israel would receive Arab and Palestinian—perhaps even Islamic—recognition of its legitimacy. Israel then would become the policeman of the entire Arab world. The duty of the believers in these dire circumstances was clear: “We need to encircle this plan and foil it by active means, which force the recreation of the Palestine problem in the consciousness of the Islamic nation as *the* central Islamic problem.”

Yet Fadlallah did not delude himself—or his followers. Syria also sat at the negotiating table opposite Israel, discussing the possible trade of occupied land for peace. Syria did not prevent the Islamic Resistance from launching operations, but it imposed more and more restrictions, especially limiting attacks during the negotiating rounds. Now that the cadence of the talks dictated Hizbullah’s armed operations, it became impossible to sustain a guerrilla war that had any chance of driving Israel from its security zone. As one negotiating round followed another in 1992, Fadlallah’s tone gradually changed: the forcible expulsion of Israel from the south faded into the distance. “The Islamic Resistance cannot expel the occupier in its present capabilities,” he ruefully concluded, “unless God performs a miracle and shows His power. . . .

We are a people who believes in miracles, but God has instructed us to act according to His law, and not to base our life on miracles.” What seemed possible only a few years earlier now required nothing short of divine intervention.

After the election of a new Israeli government in mid-1992, the cloud of peace over Hizbullah grew even darker, and Fadlallah’s statements reflected a growing resignation. “Israel has now become an undisputed fact on the ground, indeed, one of the strongest facts on the international scene, whether we like it or not.” Syria would also come under pressure to make concessions, and “if Israel signs a peace agreement with Syria,” he warned, “peace with Lebanon will also be achieved.” Fadlallah took no solace in the fact that the Syrian-Israeli talks seemed stalemated. “The talks are moving at a snail’s pace in order to condition the Arab mentality to accept Israel through this continuous dialogue,” he observed. “This phase is one of normalization through negotiations.” Adepts who listened closely to Fadlallah might conclude that he thought peace inescapable. But Fadlallah did not despair. Hizbullah still had a vital role to play, even if Lebanon were forced to make peace with Israel:

The battle which will commence after reconciliation with Israel will be the battle against the subjugation of the Arab and Muslim person to Israel, in politics, culture, economics, and security. In the vocabulary of the Qur’an, Islamists have much of what they need to awaken the consciousness of Muslims, relying on the literal text of the Qur’an, because the Qur’an speaks about the Jews in a negative way, concerning both their historical conduct and future schemes. The Islamists must deploy their Qur’anic and Islamic legal culture to combat normalization. Fatwas should be issued against purchasing Israeli goods and receiving the Israelis. The Islamists may not enjoy complete success, because not all Muslims are committed to Islam. But this will hamper much of the effort by Israel to encircle the region and become a natural member in it.

In the past, planning for the eventuality of peace with Israel would have been considered defeatist. Now it seemed essential if Hizbullah were to survive. Fadlallah’s thought reflected his dwindling expectations regarding armed struggle, and a foreboding that the United States would succeed in cobbling together agreements between Israel and the regimes of the Arab world. When it did, Hizbullah would adopt a new strategy of political and social action against normalization—to prevent the peace between governments from becoming

peace between peoples.

Fadlallah still preached Islamic Resistance, and even backed a major escalation. In 1992, he sanctioned Hizbullah's decision to fire rockets into northern Israel in retaliation for Israeli shelling of villages. True, he had reservations about the use of rockets against civilian targets. But Hizbullah did not initiate the victimization of civilians: "Israel kills our children and elderly and shells our villages while it sits in safety. . . It must be made clear to Israel that when one of our civilians is killed by its rockets, a Jewish civilian will also be killed by one of our rockets." But eye-for-eye exchanges would never liberate the south. At best they might drain Israeli resources, and perhaps give "the delegations conducting the negotiations cards to play." Fadlallah expected that one day the Syrian and Lebanese governments would play just those cards, restraining the Islamic Resistance in return for American and Israeli concessions. In 1993, the Syrian and Lebanese governments did compel Hizbullah to stop the rocket firings against Israel, after a massive Israeli bombardment of the south; in future, Fadlallah expected they would force Hizbullah to lay down its arms altogether. But he urged Hizbullah not to despair when that day arrived. "If the Islamists freeze their military actions against Israel," he consoled them, "this will not mean they have sheathed their swords. It means they will seek every opportunity, however small, to continue the confrontation, even in a narrow margin, until the situation changes."

Only if the Islamic movement adapted to change could it survive to fight another day. Fadlallah saw this clearly and spoke it frankly. Unless God worked a miracle, the United States would force Arab regimes to make peace with Israel, and the Islamic movement would have to translate the concept of Islamic resistance into a struggle for minds. But Fadlallah also assured the believers that their victory would come—and that it would come sooner if Hizbullah threw its turban in the ring of Lebanese parliamentary politics.

Ballots for God

In Lebanon, too, an era of domestic conflict drew to an end. The political and sectarian passions that had held the country in their thrall since 1975 began to loosen their grip. People were tired of war and the arrogance of militias; they longed to rebuild their lives and make money. Syria, Saudi Arabia, and the United States all sensed the exhaustion, and in 1989 they persuaded a majority of Lebanon's surviving parliamentarians to sign an agreement in the Saudi resort town of Ta'if. The so-called Ta'if Accord envisioned the eventual creation of a nonconfessional, democratic Lebanon, free of all foreign forces. But the interim stage provided for a revamped confessional order, based on Muslim-Christian parity. Syria guaranteed implementation of the agreement, which

included the disarming of all militias, in return for a privileged standing that amounted to a shadow protectorate over Lebanon. The legitimacy of the new order was to be confirmed by general parliamentary elections, which had not been held since 1972.

Hizbullah was not a party to the agreement, and viewed it with apprehension. The movement had flourished like a weed in the untended garden of Lebanon, and its leaders shuddered at the prospect of a strong government in Beirut, backed by Syria. Furthermore, the agreement perpetuated confessionalism. How could an Islamic state ever be created if the Christian minority were guaranteed a virtual veto over the Muslim majority? Fadlallah added his voice to Hizbullah's denunciations of the accord. He portrayed it as "an American project which needed an Arab headdress and a Lebanese fez." The complex negotiations which had surrounded it were "mere theatrics." By Fadlallah's reckoning, those who met at Ta'if represented only about a quarter of the Lebanese people, and their deal had entrenched Lebanon's "corrupt confessional framework." Fadlallah saw only two positive achievements in the plan: it "cancelled" the war and put an end to calls for the country's partition.

Of course, such criticism could only go so far. Given Syria's determination to enforce the accord, Hizbullah dared not try to block its implementation. But should Hizbullah boycott the parliamentary elections it called for? Some in Hizbullah thought the movement should have nothing to do with the rehabilitated state. Others pointed out that in other Arab countries, pressures from below had pushed regimes toward half-measures of democratization, and Islamic movements had decided to participate in the resulting parliamentary elections. Some of these movements had scored impressive results, despite the fact that regimes often rigged elections against them. Now that revolution in Lebanon had failed, might not Islam reach for power through democracy? As Lebanon's own parliamentary elections drew nearer, Hizbullah agonized over its options—and turned to Fadlallah.

Fadlallah first considered general principles, contrasting the Islamic ideal with democracy and finding that the two could not be reconciled. "The idea of 'popular sovereignty' is an idea that is foreign to Islamic thought, because rule in Islam is a prerogative of God. It is God who appointed the Prophet; it is God who prescribed the general precepts for rule." Therefore, Islam could not be reconciled with a form of government that "accords the majority the right to legislate in opposition to Islamic law." No parliamentary majority, however large, could overturn the will of God, as codified in His law. "Naturally we are not democrats, in the sense that we would allow the people to legislate in contradiction to God's law."

Still, there was a role for the people to play. They had to “develop a mode for dealing with political and social questions or filling gaps in Islamic law which Islam leaves to administrative discretion.” The instrument for filling the gaps was known as *shura*, or consultation. Even the Prophet took no action of war or peace without first consulting his companions. And although God did not require him to do so, the Prophet asked the Muslims for an oath of allegiance—a vote of confidence, as it were. An Islamic system of government had to be based on such consultation. “The role of the consultative council is not to legislate,” Fadlallah stressed, “but to investigate the Islamic laws at their sources, and to examine new matters of economic and political administration in relation to general Islamic legal rules.” In Fadlallah’s view, members of the consultative council could be elected by the people, as in Iran, all the way through the office of president. These elected leaders had to act within “broad Islamic lines” and would be accountable to the people. They were not to be regarded as infallible, and would have to allow freedom for those advocating different strategies and tactics.

How much freedom? Quite a bit, Fadlallah sometimes suggested. Political pluralism promoted the development of thought, he said, and could be reconciled with Islam. Some Muslims argued that Islam had to be protected from debate, but Fadlallah pointed out that, in historical experience, the denial of pluralism produced effects opposite to those that were intended. Islam would be better served by allowing this pluralism, “within limits that will protect the Islamic line, while not infringing on the freedom of people.” At times, however, Fadlallah narrowed those limits considerably. Parties and movements were the most effective means of political organization of the people, and they would be permitted—but only if they were Islamic. Islam gives the nation “the right to choose, but this does not mean unlimited choice. Rather, it is restricted to the content of Islamic thought.”

As for non-Islamic parties and organizations, the Islamic view is that they can have no role in Islamic society or the Islamic state, because they represent an alternative to Islam in thought, law, and way of life. It is not natural that they should enjoy freedom, because that would mean granting freedom to overthrow the Islamic order, to weaken the appeal of Islam, and to allow unbelievers and the arrogant to infiltrate the Islamic nation and end its intellectual and political struggle, all by “legal” means. Islam cannot permit this on principle.

Lebanon without freedom had no meaning, Fadlallah once declared: “Freedom

is the table from which we all eat.” But he would restrict the country’s heretofore varied political diet to that of Islam.

This was the Islamic ideal. But in the real world, it was the Islamic state that did not appear on the menu. And in these dire circumstances, even democracy could be made palatable. True, observed Fadlallah, democracy was deeply flawed. But it had some positive content: respect for others, the search for objective justice, and the rejection of tyranny. There were many forms of government that were far worse. Thus, even the principled rejection of democracy by Islamists

should not prevent them from cooperating positively with democracy in states whose character has no Islamic content, if it is a matter of choosing between democracy and tyranny. Democracy should be chosen and tyranny rejected, because Islamists can then exercise their freedom to spread Islam and revive it, and rally the people around it, and so advance the cause of Islam or achieve total control by will of the majority. Islamists would have no such freedom under a dictatorial regime. This certainly does not mean recognition by the Islamists of democratic rule, either in thought or practice. It is accommodation to reality, and to the freedoms accorded to the Islamic movement (alongside non-Islamic movements) to contest one another.

Accommodation to reality? Some in Hizbullah recoiled at the very idea of joining Lebanon’s notorious political game, arguing that there was no way they could win total control. If they remained a parliamentary minority, their presence in parliament legitimated a non-Islamic state; if they gained a parliamentary majority, they would be crushed, as happened in Algeria. Better to concentrate on jihad and avoid the pollution of politicking. This view was championed by Shaykh Subhi al-Tufayli, one of the most senior clerics in Hizbullah, who enjoyed widespread support in the Bekaa Valley.

Fadlallah strongly disagreed. History demonstrated that jihad movements that had no political dimension became stepping stones for others. Without a political dimension, “we would liberate the South, for example, but others would harvest the fruit of this liberation, according to their own political plans.” And since the road of jihad was blocked, just what did his opponents propose? To “sit in their seats, waiting for the Prophet to send down angels to clear the way for them to take power here or there”? Fadlallah favored complete immersion in

politics, as the only way to break out of the growing encirclement of Islamic resistance and jihad. In the context of Lebanon, this meant full participation in the parliamentary elections. Fadlallah believed that Lebanon's national assembly provided a powerful and protected platform for carrying the message of Islam: "Parliament represents an advanced propaganda podium for the Islamists. . . . In this way, you can pass a law for Islam here, and secure a position for Islam there." A decade after Hizbullah's creation, Fadlallah urged the "party of God" to become a real political party, its clerics to become candidates. The party's platform would be the welfare of the dispossessed and rejection of peace with Israel. Party politics also meant coalition politics, and Fadlallah began to meet with a remarkably wide range of political leaders, from communists to Phalangists.

Still, Fadlallah was in no rush to the ballot box. When Syria began to press for elections for the summer of 1992, Fadlallah hesitated. "If elections are to be free of any pressure," he announced, they should be conducted only after 1994. Wary of Syrian manipulation of the polls, Fadlallah apparently presumed that Syria would allow a freer contest at a later date. But by summer he had changed his mind. If elections were postponed until the withdrawal of all foreign forces—Syrian and Israeli—they might not be held for four or five years, by which time there might be an Arab-Israeli peace accord. It would be too late for Hizbullah to fight the peace in parliament. To those in Hizbullah who asked how Lebanon possibly could have free and fair elections under Syrian domination, Fadlallah pointed out that Lebanon had never in its entire history had such elections.

This time, Fadlallah's persuasive power prevailed. Iran joined him in urging Hizbullah to contest the parliamentary elections scheduled for the summer of 1992, and the movement did just that, fielding candidates in all Shi'ite areas. Hizbullah's electoral machine mounted a slick campaign, more evocative of Tammany than Tehran. It spent money lavishly and struck pre-election deals with Amal, the Progressive Socialist Party (Druze), two Sunni Islamic parties, and several independents. Given the limitations of the electoral system, the results were impressive. Hizbullah's candidates swept Baalbek and Hirmil, and took the most votes in Nabatiyya and Tyre. All eight Hizbullah candidates were elected to the 128-member body, making Hizbullah the largest single party in a parliament formed mostly of deputies who were personally subservient to Syria. There were rival blocs of deputies who formed around one or another personality, such as Nabih Birri, but these remained unstable groupings. Hizbullah had the firmest foothold in the resurrected parliament.

Hizbullah had every reason to be pleased with the results. But no decision ever came so close to precipitating an open rift in the movement. Tufayli resigned his

position on the consultative council and returned to his home in the Bekaa Valley to sulk and grant interviews. The movement had lost touch with its militant principles, he maintained. Fadlallah never discussed the increasingly frequent reports of differences within Hizbullah, but he left no doubt about his personal view of those who clung to old slogans. "It is unrealistic to talk about achieving complete power in Lebanon," Fadlallah said bluntly after the elections. So too was the idea that the Islamists could create an Islamic republic. None of the existing parties in Lebanon could make the country in its image; for the foreseeable future, Lebanon would remain "unstable," torn among conflicting visions. Still, the Islamists were as Lebanese as anyone, and could work within Lebanon's institutions to achieve some of their objectives. It all made eminent sense. Yet paradoxically, while Fadlallah urged Hizbullah to narrow its ambition to Lebanon, he expanded his own ambition to encompass the globe.

The Grand Ayatollah

As Hizbullah took its place in the Lebanese "political club," Fadlallah positioned himself to join the pantheon of grand ayatollahs. Fadlallah never spoke of his own standing in contemporary Shi'ism. To do so would have been considered bad form, since convention demanded that a man of God always show humility. Yet on rare occasions his pride did show. "I am the one who established and set up in Lebanon 80 percent of the Islamic condition since I came to this country," he once boasted. And he pointed to followers far beyond the narrow frontiers of Lebanon: "I am concerned with the Islamic level, not the Lebanese, and I have Islamic ties in the Arab world and perhaps in Europe, America, and Africa."

This claim suggested the direction of his ambition. He did not want to be regarded as the guide, spiritual or otherwise, of Hizbullah; to hold any office conferred by the state of Lebanon; or to head the Supreme Islamic Shi'ite Council. Instead he aspired to winning recognition as one of the handful of leading Shi'ite clerics who could claim a universal following. Fadlallah was born and bred in a world where a few men, esconced at the pinnacle of Shi'ism, commanded the unlimited respect and passionate veneration of believers from London to Lucknow. Everything in Fadlallah's long preparation had positioned him to assume the mantle of a grand ayatollah. To do so, he had to play by certain traditional rules. But by his time, that tradition had been bent so far out of shape that he himself could dare to manipulate it to his own advantage.

Khomeini had also bent tradition. Before him, the leading Shi'ite clerics had exercised an authority known as *marja'iyya*, from the Arabic word for "source." A few clerics who best knew Islam's sources became sources of guidance in their own right, usually after a lifetime of study in Shi'ite seminaries. Believers

referred back to them for rulings on contested or ambiguous questions. Some of these questions might be political, but the clerics did not claim the authority to govern, only to guide. They admonished rulers to adhere to the precepts of Islam, but they did not see themselves as potential rulers. There were usually several clerics who were acknowledged widely as guides, so that the *marja'iyya* need not be concentrated in one hand. However, at times a wide consensus formed around one or another cleric, whose *marja'iyya* became virtually absolute.

It was Khomeini, during his years of exile in Najaf, who challenged the notion that clerics should leave government to others. He based himself on a saying attributed to the Prophet Muhammad which vested the clerics with another kind of authority, known as *wilaya*, or guardianship. Like all sayings, this one was open to multiple interpretations. Who precisely did the Prophet intend to place under the guardianship of clerics? Traditional Shi'ite interpretation held that the Prophet merely intended that clerics should serve as guardians for the orphaned and the insane. Khomeini, however, argued that the Prophet enjoined clerics to claim guardianship over the entire community of believers. Islam mandated not only the implementation of Islamic law, he argued, but also government by the most qualified Muslim jurist, the *faqih*. This expansion of the guardianship of the jurist, known as *wilayat al-faqih*, became Khomeini's revolutionary contribution to Shi'ite thought. He presented his views most systematically in lectures delivered during his exile in Najaf in 1970. Those Shi'ite clerics who accepted his premise became active claimants to power, denying the legitimacy of all existing governments. Khomeini personified his own doctrine. He personally led the political struggle for the overthrow of the Shah's regime, and when the revolution triumphed, he emerged as the constitutionally empowered "leader" of Iran. His foremost students left their seminaries for the highest positions in government.

Yet not all of the leading Shi'ite clerics concurred with Khomeini's expansive view of their authority. Perhaps his most worthy opponent was Fadlallah's own teacher, Kho'i, who continued to teach in Najaf. Kho'i maintained that the most a cleric might do was to supervise government from afar, to assure that it conformed with the law of Islam. Clerics had no business exercising mundane political power, as Khomeini argued. Jurists belonged in the Shi'ite seminaries, where they had a duty to preserve the inherited knowledge and learning of past generations. Kho'i himself set a personal example, refraining from any involvement in the politics of Iraq and avoiding all comment on contemporary affairs. His best-known treatises dealt with ritual purity. Kho'i's traditional stand also had many supporters, and not just in Najaf: Kho'i's foundation presided over institutes in New York, Detroit, Toronto, London, Islamabad, Bombay, and Beirut, all supported by tithes from his followers

worldwide.

By the time this debate began, Fadlallah had left Najaf for Beirut. But he could not escape the great dividing issue of contemporary Shi'ism, which soon divided Lebanon's Shi'ites as well. Khomeini's lectures appeared in a Beirut edition in 1979, and a noted Lebanese Shi'ite scholar quickly published a book that argued the opposing position. Fadlallah faced a difficult choice. He had studied under Kho'i, and officially represented the Najaf cleric in Beirut. His aged teacher presided over a far-flung empire of influence, in which Fadlallah occupied a prominent place. Yet Fadlallah's own immersion in politics bound him to Khomeini, and his identification with Iran's revolution had made him into an influential player and an international celebrity. Although his stature had grown—after 1985, his followers began to address him as Ayatollah Fadlallah—the debate over *wilaya* involved the very definition of Shi'ism, and it could only be conducted by Khomeini and Kho'i, who were some thirty-five years his seniors.

Fadlallah accepted Khomeini's general authority, but by choice, not by obligation. In his eyes, Khomeini was not the sole authority, and other clerics could inspire "high esteem." Indeed, as a matter of theoretical principle, Fadlallah did not rule out the possibility that other clerics could exercise the same kind of authority as Khomeini, in other parts of the Muslim world. Fadlallah knew the arguments for the unity of leadership, particularly the examples of the Prophet Muhammad and the Imams, who had been entitled to exclusive obedience in every corner of Islam. Fadlallah also admitted the possibility that a multiplicity of leaderships might create chaos, as different clerics might rule differently on the same matters. "But there is another view," he stated gingerly,

which holds that multiplicity in rule during the absence of the Imams is not a deviation from the theory, since the text which speaks about wilayat al-faqih does not speak about the exclusive, comprehensive dimension of guardianship, but instead speaks about a general principle that can be applied to many of the jurists, among whom these qualifications [to rule] are plentiful, so that each one of them is a deputy of the Imam.

In other words, if the Muslims of one land made a qualified person their ruler, "at the same time the Muslims of another land could agree on a different person who has the same qualities, and vest him with rule over their affairs." As to the argument that the most learned cleric was entitled to exclusive and universal

authority, Fadlallah emphasized “a weak point in this argument: the difficulty of the community in agreeing on the definition of the most learned.” Fadlallah thus concluded that “on the basis of the juristic data in our hands, we do not find any impediment to the multiplicity of states, and the multiplicity of leaderships.”

The far-reaching implications of Fadlallah’s view were self-evident. If his argument was admissible, Lebanon’s Muslims need not follow Iran’s chosen “guardian.” They were free to choose a guardian of their own, provided he combined the qualifications of a most learned jurisprudent. Indeed, the multiplicity of such authority constituted the natural order, for “in every generation there are two or three religious leaders in the Shi’ite community.” Such an argument clearly contradicted the message of Iran’s emissaries, who insisted upon total submission to Khomeini and promised Lebanon’s eventual inclusion in a vast “central Islamic state.” Some in Hizbullah were scandalized by Fadlallah’s views, and sought to refute and rebuke him publicly. Only the better judgement of Iran’s emissaries prevented an unseemly public debate over Fadlallah’s ideas.

Fadlallah thus gave himself room to maneuver on the most burning issue in contemporary Shi’ism. He put forth no comprehensive theory of his own, however, knowing that while Khomeini and Kho’i lived, they alone defined the terms of the debate. Khomeini died in 1989, at the age of eighty-six. Iran’s Assembly of Experts elected Sayyid ‘Ali Khamenei, Khomeini’s most trusted student, to succeed him as Iran’s “leader.” Khamenei had impeccable revolutionary credentials, but he was not even an ayatollah at the time of his election, at the tender age of fifty. While Fadlallah formally welcomed the choice, his supporters let it be known that their man did not regard Khamenei as his better. And Fadlallah himself was quick to point out again that there was no consensus about the meaning of *wilayat al-faqih*, especially on the point of its universality. Fadlallah clearly expected that with Khomeini’s passing, the *wilaya* of his elected successor would contract to the frontiers of Iran. He obviously welcomed that contraction.

Kho’i died in 1992, at the age of ninety-three, a virtual hostage of the Iraqi regime. This opened the wider question of the *marja’iyya*, a form of authority quite independent of the Iranian state, conferred by the informal consensus of clerics in the Shi’ite seminaries. Such a consensus soon emerged around Ayatollah Sayyid Muhammad Reza Golpayegani of Qom, also ninety-three, whose views on politics resembled those of Kho’i. Even before this, Fadlallah had begun to pay his respects to Golpayegani on his visits to Iran, positioning himself squarely in the old cleric’s camp. When Kho’i died, Fadlallah did not hesitate: Golpayegani’s name had “emerged strongly” said Fadlallah, “and we support his authority.” But Golpayegani’s advanced years assured that the

question of the *marja'iyya* would be posed again, probably in no more than a few years. Fadlallah now positioned himself to provide an original answer.

He began by leveling criticism at the state of the great Shi'ite seminaries, the traditional incubators for the *marja'iyya*. The headship of such a seminary, either in Najaf or in Qom, had been the customary credential of any great *marja'*. Fadlallah now dismissed the seminaries as irrelevant to leadership. The schools in Najaf and Qom, he complained, taught only jurisprudence and its methods (*furu'* and *usul*). They did not offer proper instruction in such basic subjects as the Qur'an, Hadith (sayings and traditions attributed to Muhammad), theology, philosophy, general Islamics, and homiletics. From an organizational point of view, the academies were four centuries behind the times and their structure no longer met contemporary needs. Persons who spent only two years in study went out into the world as clerics, "doing harm to all Islam." Others lingered on as perpetual students. Fadlallah favored a sweeping reform: admission standards, curriculum reform, examinations, and formal graduation.

In Fadlallah's view, the seminaries had specialized in the kinds of questions "which no longer have great importance in the exercise of *ijtihad*." The burning questions that faced Shi'ism were political and had to be handled by a figure versed, not only in the nuances of Islamic law, but in the complexities of world politics. Fadlallah pointed out that the remaining great ayatollahs, Khomeini's aged contemporaries, had differed with Khomeini over the active role of clerics, and were not up to the political task at hand. Future candidates for the *marja'iyya* from the seminaries were people who had never pronounced on politics. And few of their names resonated throughout Shi'ism. "It is necessary to specify new conditions for the elements that make up the personality of the *marja'*," Fadlallah concluded. This person would have to possess a commanding grip of world affairs "down to the last nuance." No longer could the role be fulfilled by a scholar who knew only the life of the seminary: "I imagine that the *marja'* would have to be open to the entire world, as Islam is open to the world. He would have to be a person aware of events as they unfold daily down to the smallest details, either through reports submitted to him or direct experience." And the *marja'* would not simply issue rulings on matters related to Islamic law. He would take political stands on every issue related to the general welfare of Islam.

Such a leader would have a global mandate. Now that Khomeini and Kho'i were gone, Fadlallah reversed his position on the "multiplicity of leadership." He knew the arguments for multiplicity—he had once made them—but now he determined that the challenge facing Shi'ism could only be met on a global scale. The tensions between Islamic schools, the relations with other religions,

the great political and social issues—these could not be dealt with by local clerics, since they affected the entire Islamic world. The multiplicity of clerical authority constituted an obstacle to a unified approach: “With all its advantages, the disadvantages are greater.”

Fadlallah envisioned a universal *marja'iyya*, established as a single institution with a permanent headquarters. It would house a collection of documents of all the rulings of the previous incumbents, so that the new *marja'* could begin precisely where his predecessor left off. He would not remain at his seat, but would travel throughout the world, to speak to people and open their minds. He would be assisted by experts who would prepare studies of specific problems. He would have representatives in various countries, who would function like ambassadors. Fadlallah then drew a remarkable parallel:

When I look for an example of how I imagine the role of the marja', I find the example of the papacy, which takes political, cultural, and social positions in accord with its comprehensive religious character. The papacy acts through representatives who deal with all the questions that arise in countries where there are Catholics or Christians, whether they concern internal affairs or relations with other Christian denominations and other religions, such as Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, and so forth.

Fadlallah's idea of the *marja'iyya* represented so sharp a break with Shi'ite tradition that he did not dare suggest it might have an Islamic precedent. The only detail he did not provide was how such a *marja'* would be selected. But perhaps it was no coincidence that the “personality” he envisioned for the *marja'* strongly resembled his own. Could any clerical candidate surpass Fadlallah in his knowledge of current affairs, his contacts in diplomacy and journalism, and his experience in dialogue? Certainly Beirut, not Qom, was a better base of operation for a leader with a global mission. And the obviously demanding role of a traveling *marja'* could only be filled by a vital man in his prime, not by a lingering nonagenarian. This transformation of the Shi'ite *marja'iyya* seemed far-fetched. But Fadlallah often proposed the unattainable in order to achieve the attainable. In this case, he seemed to aim at eventual recognition as one of Shi'ism's two or three leading lights, in a sphere of influence encompassing Lebanon and the half of the Shi'ite world that lay outside Iran. Few doubted that Fadlallah had the talent and drive to conquer this summit, and the demise of each elderly ayatollah brought him still closer. His success not only would represent a personal triumph, but would confirm the geographic redistribution of authority in Shi'ism. Najaf, groaning under the weight of the Iraqi Ba'th, had

been ravaged. Beirut, emerging from the desperate years of civil war, seemed poised to flourish. Fadlallah, a transplant from Najaf, personified the emergence of the Dahiya as the new citadel of Arab Shi'ism. He would be its acknowledged master.

A Leader in Islam

“I learned that the slogans are not the cause,” said Fadlallah of his early years, “but that the cause is reality. I learned to be pragmatic and not to drown in illusions.” Fadlallah owed his immense powers of persuasion to this quality. He allowed other clerics in Hizbullah to conjure up messianic visions of imminent redemption. His own preaching represented a steady mix of appeals for action and caution, on a long road toward the distant goal of Islamic power. That road was winding and sometimes treacherous. It offered no panoramic views of God’s kingdom; at times, the believers would have to grope forward in pitch darkness. At those moments, the hands of the despised would seize Fadlallah’s robe, imploring him to lead them. Sure of foot, he would steer them away from the precipice.

Fadlallah’s own seemingly miraculous escapes from death created the impression that a divine light guided him. Fadlallah, of course, knew otherwise. Lebanon had a way of demanding the ultimate sacrifice before yielding the ultimate reward. He had seen other men of ability and ambition perish at the apparent moment of their triumph, so he could not avoid preparing himself for the possibility that he too would become a sacrifice. At some point, in the aftermath of one or another assassination attempt, he had faced the possibility of sudden death and had chosen not to flinch. “I have readied myself for martyrdom for thirty years. God has yet to grant it to me. I say to anyone who talks in such a way as to threaten: I do not fear death, because I have placed myself on a road bounded by dangers and will never go back.” In order to lead the “rebellion against fear,” he had to suppress and banish his own fear, and above all the fear of violent, unexpected death. This he did by drawing upon inner reservoirs of vision, ambition, and faith—reservoirs whose depth could not accurately be judged from their surface appearances.

But having embarked upon a “road bounded by dangers,” it was only prudent to advance slowly and to take every possible precaution. Fadlallah would have subscribed to Churchill’s adage: “Although prepared for martyrdom, I prefer that it be postponed.” Fadlallah deliberated over every move and every utterance, for a mistaken step, a wrong word, might spell disaster. He guarded his tongue as closely as his bodyguards protected his person. And he urged the same caution upon Hizbullah as a whole. Hizbullah drew upon great tributaries of grievance, vengefulness, and ambition—the most elemental emotions. Yet

Fadlallah warned that the raging flood of fervor would spend itself unless a dam were erected to manage its waters prudently, in the service of a higher purpose. Fadlallah would be that dam. By demonstrating exemplary self-control, he sought to control others. By speaking for the despised, he hoped to guide them. By calling upon Shi'ites to reach out for power, he attempted to grasp it. By the very ambiguity of his pose, he had come to personify the ambiguity of Hizbullah.

He had also come to personify a new kind of leadership in the contemporary movements that invoked the name of Islam. Their leaders no longer appealed to tradition. They themselves had repudiated it, recreating their faith through a dialectic with the modern criticism of religion and Islam. Some did this at the University of London or the Sorbonne or the American University of Beirut, where they pursued doctorates in Western law and philosophy. But it could even be achieved in the seminaries Najaf, as Fadlallah attested: "My studies, which were supposed to be traditional, rebelled against tradition and all familiar things." These new leaders disarmed the devastating modern criticism of Islam by disowning large parts of Islam's tradition. And they attacked the West by replaying its own self-criticism, borrowed from the faculty lounges and scholarly journals of the Western academy. This postmodern polemic had a particular appeal for young Muslim students, whose egos had been battered by the very modernity they had successfully acquired.

But in the absence of tradition, what remained of Islam? For these leaders, and above all for Fadlallah, there remained Islam as a political identity, preoccupied with the pursuit of power. The absence of this power bred a deep yearning to repossess it, at almost any cost. Every tradition was submitted to one exacting criterion: did it bring Muslims closer to power? Every ritual was reexamined: did it inspire Muslims to battle? Those bits of Islam that contributed to the struggle became "true Islam." Other traditions and rituals, especially in Shi'ism, served only to heighten man's sense of intimacy with God. These were reworked, downplayed, or discarded altogether. Fadlallah, like the leaders of similar movements, thus offered Islam perhaps its last chance to regain power in the world, by an unsparing effort to mobilize every resource and symbol in its reach. Fadlallah gave every assurance that this tremendous sacrifice would propitiate God. If it did, the reward would be great indeed for the domain of Islam. If it did not, the loss sustained by the faith of Islam would be beyond measure.

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