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Lament for a Lebanese cleric

He tried to calm things down

The death of a Shia ayatollah who had increasingly called for tolerance

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AMONG the hundreds of thousands who thronged the narrow streets of Beirut's Shia quarter for Grand Ayatollah Muhammad Fadlallah's funeral on July 6th, a few chanted "Death to America!" Once upon a time the pugnacious cleric might have joined in. After all, many Lebanese accused American agents of sponsoring the massive car bomb that targeted him in 1985, killing 80 people on these same streets in what was widely assumed to be revenge for the Shia suicide-bombing that had earlier killed 241 American marines in their barracks in southern Beirut.

That was in the midst of Lebanon's gruelling civil war, from 1975 to 1990. Yet Mr Fadlallah had mellowed, long before his death on July 4th at the age of 74. Once damned by Westerners as a mentor to hostage-takers and suicide-bombers, he was viewed by his own flock as the most open-minded of ayatollahs. He boldly championed women's rights. He preached the duty of Muslims to fight foreign invaders but counselled Iraqis to be patient with the Americans who had rid them of Saddam Hussein. He immediately and unequivocally condemned the 9/11 attacks on America, the first leading Muslim cleric to do so.

When *The Economist* later spoke to him, he opened the conversation by thanking Western countries for giving refuge and freedom of worship to many Muslims. Visitors to his modest office in the Dahiya, Beirut's dense, Shia-dominated southern suburb, were often surprised to find Sunni Muslims and even Christians seeking guidance from the sage.

As the senior cleric outside the Shia heartlands of Iran and Iraq, Mr Fadlallah, who was born in Iraq's holy city of Najaf but moved to Lebanon when he was 31, proved a natural pole for Arabic-speaking Shias. Followers in the West and on the Arab side of the Persian Gulf, as well as in Lebanon, generously funded his charities. He sponsored the Dawa movement, out of which emerged the political party that has dominated American-occupied Iraq, and to which its current prime minister, Nuri al-Maliki, belongs. But Mr Fadlallah's independence of mind made for increasingly twitchy relations with the Shia superpower, Iran, and its powerful and highly disciplined Lebanese protégé, Hizbullah.



Keeping faith with Fadlallah

He enthused about the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran, but never endorsed its guiding principle of *velayat-e faqih*, the guardianship of the jurist. Instead of a single ayatollah assuming the supreme leadership, he proposed an advisory council of clerics to guide policy in an Islamic state. An inspiration to Hizbullah when it was founded in the early 1980s, he resented its growing allegiance to Iran. After Israeli bombs destroyed his Beirut home and office in the 2006 war, Hizbullah rebuilt them. But Mr Fadlallah still publicly rebuked its charismatic leader, Hassan Nasrallah, for narrow sectarianism after he issued a *fatwa* calling on all Lebanese Shias to vote for his slate.

The ayatollah will be hard to replace. No one of his stature can now gently counter Hizbullah's claim to represent all Lebanese Shias or question its fealty to Iran. And there is one less ayatollah to challenge Ali Khamenei, Iran's supreme leader, in his claim to lead all the world's Shias.

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