

Murky future for Hezbollah and Lebanon?

Shadi Alaa Eddine

Beirut

In trying to understand the overall picture of the Shia community in Lebanon, most analysts claim that Lebanon's two major Shia parties – Amal and Hezbollah – are totally dominant and do not face any real opposition. Lebanese researcher Hareth Sleiman, however, refutes this conclusion, insisting that “the Shia resistance to Hezbollah has never waned.”

“The main problem is finding an alternative to Hezbollah,” said Sleiman, who is a member of the executive committee of the Democratic Renewal Movement and a professor of political science at the Lebanese University.

“Many Lebanese Shias oppose Hezbollah and constantly disagree with its choices. They never miss a chance to express their opposition without endangering themselves,” Sleiman says.

Sleiman pointed out that Hezbollah's propaganda machine has always denied the existence of any Shia opposition to its movement in Lebanon. This is, in part, why many people are unaware of the opposition. Even media outlets that pretend to oppose Hezbollah usually dismiss Shia opposition to the organisation as minor and inefficient.

■ Researcher Hareth Sleiman said that Iran will resort to using Hezbollah to counteract American pressure.

In the final analysis, political players in Lebanon find it useful to reduce all Lebanese Shias to Hezbollah. This allows them to continually extend the mandate of Nabih Berri as speaker of the Parliament. In the end, Berri, who heads the Amal Movement, simply represents a softer version of Hezbollah.

Sleiman spoke of many examples of Shia opposition to Hezbollah. Not only were most of the

participants in demonstrations against Hezbollah Shias, he said, the results of Lebanon's recent municipal elections revealed strong political opposition to Hezbollah.

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That opposition was highlighted by an event at the Saudi ambassador's residence honouring Imam Musa al-Sadr, a former Lebanese-Iranian Shia leader who disappeared in Libya in 1971. Various members of Lebanon's Shia elite were in attendance, including Sadr's daughter, Rabeb, and her family.

Sleiman also insisted that Hezbollah lacks the ability to convincingly express its views or explain its conduct to the Shia community and political elite. He interprets Hezbollah's efforts to delay elections inside the Supreme Shia Council as indicative of strong Shia opposition to Hezbollah.

Commenting on the widespread discussions in Lebanon concerning the upcoming elections and the new elections laws, Sleiman noted the absence of these discussions in Shia-populated areas. While some have attributed this to Hezbollah's and Amal's overwhelming popularity in these areas, Sleiman said it has more to do with the lack of any “real” elections in majority Shia areas. Hezbollah and Amal do not allow their opponents to monitor elections in these areas and the government has always assumed the role of spectator there.

Even if the new election law is passed, Sleiman said, there will never be any real elections in majority Shia areas as long as these elections continue to escape government control and are carried out without international monitoring.

Hezbollah and Amal militias must be prevented, by force if necessary, from meddling in these elections. Otherwise, elections



An issue of loyalty. Lebanon's Hezbollah members (not pictured) carry the movement's flags in Doueir village near Nabatieh in southern Lebanon. (Reuters)

in Shia areas will remain nothing more than a referendum, a term often used by Hezbollah and Amal to refer to elections.

With Donald Trump's election as US president, Iran is facing some tough opposition. Trump often spoke about the necessity of con-

taining Iran's influence in the Middle East and reviewing the United States' nuclear deal with the country. Sleiman said Iran will resort to using Hezbollah to counteract American pressure by creating tension along the Lebanese borders with Israel.

Sleiman said that Iran and Hezbollah's strategic choices lacked logic and common sense. He accused them of readily sacrificing the fate of all Lebanese people – the Shia Lebanese in particular – to improve Iran's leverage in negotiations. Sleiman said he was certain Hezbollah will not hesitate to create tension with Israel at Iran's request.

For Hezbollah, obeying orders from the Iranian Supreme Guide takes precedence over the interests of the Lebanese people, including the Shias.

With respect to the crisis in Syria, Sleiman said the popular view that the end is near is flawed. For him, the overall situation in Syria is far from being settled and future developments are difficult to predict. Syria President Bashar Assad, the Russians and the Iranians had been under the impression that the situation in Syria was evolving in their favour but then came the US missile strikes and the cards were reshuffled.

The strikes also revealed that eliminating the Islamic State (ISIS) and removing Assad from power were among Trump's priorities in the region.

In the same context, Sleiman said that whatever solution was adopted for the crisis in Syria, it will not bring an immediate end to the problems of Syrian refugees. It might be possible to stop all armed confrontations within a year but this will not ensure the return of refugees to Syria. Their return does not depend simply on ending hostilities but on effective reconstruction efforts, which will require an enormous amount of funds and at least five years to complete.

For Sleiman, the presence of Syrian refugees is putting Lebanon through a tough test. There is tremendous pressure on the country's infrastructure and labour market and the state does not seem ready to manage the situation in the long term.

What matter so far are security issues and preventing refugees from slipping into Europe. To protect the West, Lebanon is being transformed into an enormous refugee camp.

Shadi Alaa Eddine is a Lebanese writer.

Searching for the Lebanese Senate

Viewpoint



Makram Rabah

The Lebanese boast that their country stands out from the wider Arab region going as far, in a few circles, to deny their Arab lineage, tracing it back to a hodgepodge of ancient Semitic people who, according to legend, had a functioning democracy in 2500BC. This false sense of entitlement, however, is challenged by the modern-day reality that the Lebanese have not gone to the polls to elect a new parliament since the summer of 2009.

The Lebanese political elite, having failed to elect a president, saw it appropriate to extend their mandate until they all agree on how to divide the resources of the state as well as settle on a new electoral law. The election of Michel Aoun as president did not change much of this stand-off as the political parties still cannot reach an agreeable law.

The Free Patriotic Movement, under the direction of Gebran Bassil, Aoun's son-in-law and political successor, put forward several far-fetched electoral proposals that further polarised

the sectarian divide. The two-stage law proposed by Bassil essentially dictates each sect to vote for its legislators and thus would allow the Christian parties to elect their own members of parliament without recourse to their Muslim counterparts. Bassil also proposed a return of the Lebanese Senate.

Originally part of the 1926 constitution, the Senate was suspended a year later by the French mandatory authorities and merged with the parliament for allegedly impeding the democratic process. Simply put, in this bicameral system, the Senate represents the various sectarian groups each represented by a senator, while the parliament membership is secular and free from any religious restraint.

As innocent and constructive as this proposal might appear, the timing and the manner in which Bassil has introduced it is perhaps a red herring. By introducing the Senate as an item for discussion so close to the May 15 constitutional deadline for announcing elections, Bassil was, in fact, nipping this initiative in the bud.

Reactivating the Senate would virtually be a first step towards abolishing political sectarianism, as stipulated (Article 95) in the Taif Accord, which ended the 15 years of civil war.

However, it is no secret that Aoun and Bassil by extension have never recognised Taif. They view it as disenfranchising to the Christians and that it, therefore, should be rescinded.

More importantly, to put forth such a drastic amendment to the Lebanese governance structure requires amendments to the constitution, something requiring local consensus or regional and international resolve, which are both lacking.

If Bassil truly wants to abolish sectarianism as he claims, he ought to start by proposing a modern electoral law instead of the current exclusionist and alienating law he is peddling.

Upon proper examination, Bassil or anyone keen for the Senate can have recourse to the pre-existing table of dialogue, which was created in 2006 and includes representatives, or virtually senators, of all the sectarian groups. This quasi-senate does not require constitutional amendments but merely an open invitation from Aoun, who would subsequently lead it.

The underlining constitutional premise of the Senate, an assembly of wise people, is to monitor and reassess the work of the lower house and in the case of Lebanon potentially serve to abolish political sectarianism. Successful reform, however, does not only

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require action but rather good intentions, as these moral undertones are an essential element for the Lebanese factions to shed their fears and come together if they truly hope to break the current deadlock.

At the Free Patriotic Movement headquarters in Beirut, the main meeting room is adorned by a quote from Michel Chiha, the father of the constitution and a patron of Lebanon's so-called Phoenician legacy “to eliminate a sect in Lebanon is trying to eliminate Lebanon.” Consequently, it might be wise, or perhaps pressing, that Bassil practises what he preaches and goes ahead with a consensual electoral law that would ensure timely elections and set the stage for constitutional reform in the not-so-distant future.

Anything beyond the aforementioned would be a reckless act that would make Lebanon's democratic legacy a thing of the past, as of May 15, the date of the next parliament session, all sides involved should exhibit wisdom and foresight or face a bleaker future that no senate would salvage.

Makram Rabah is a lecturer at the American University of Beirut and author of “A Campus at War: Student Politics at the American University of Beirut, 1967-1975”.

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