

Future-Hezbollah dialogue kicks off

The first session is expected to set the agenda for future talks.



BEIRUT – The long awaited dialogue sessions between the Future Movement and Hezbollah kick off Tuesday evening, with the introductory meeting expected to set the agenda of items to be discussed between the political rivals.

The session, which will be hosted by Speaker Nabih Berri in his Beirut Ain al-Tineh residence, will be attended by Hezbollah’s Hussein Khalil—the aide of party chief Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah—as well as party members Hussein Hajj Hassan, the industry minister, and Hassan Fadlallah, a parliamentarian, Al-Manar reported.

Meanwhile, Future will be represented by party leader Saad Hariri’s aide, Nader Hariri, and Nohad Mashnouq, the interior minister, and MP Samir Jisr.

The talks have been in the works for over a month, with Nasrallah announcing in a speech on November 3 that he was “ready for dialogue.” The Hezbollah chief explained that the talks would serve to “preserve and neutralize the country.”

In late November, Hariri told LBC in an interview that he was in favor of dialogue and added that the talks would stress the need for a consensus presidential candidate, but not go into the names of specific candidates.

On Tuesday morning, *An-Nahar* newspaper reported that the first session would “have a general character” and would “not touch on the details” of issues that would come up in the New Year.

Al-Hayat echoed this report, saying that “the two parties will try to put on hold disagreement over points of contention such as Hezbollah’s arsenal and its participation in the fighting in Syria alongside Bashar al-Assad’s regime.”

“The talks are meant to act as a starting point to discuss procedural steps that can defuse Sunni-Shiite animosity.”

The report added that “the presidential issue will likely impose itself on the dialogue—it is expected that efforts will be made to reach an understanding on what characteristics a consensual president would have without dealing with specific candidates.”

Sources following the ongoing preparations told Al-Joumhouria that there is no talk of a comprehensive schedule with clear, numbered items is at the moment.

“A large variety of ideas have been put forward so that everyone can sit around the table and then decide the items to be dealt with in the dialogue [session].”

“Aiming to protect Lebanon”

Officials from the two parties stressed the importance of the talks in aiding the security situation in Lebanon, which is facing the growing threat of Islamist terrorism, especially along the border with Syria in the eastern Beqaa.

Hezbollah Executive Council Deputy Chairman Sheikh Nabil Qaouq said on Monday that his party's decision to hold dialogue with the Future Movement aimed at protecting Lebanon.

“We can reinforce national unity and face all the challenges through dialogue. Dialogue expresses all our convictions.”

“The moment the plan to hold a dialogue between Hezbollah and the Future Movement under the patronage of Speaker Nabih Berri was announced, a positive shock [hit] all the Lebanese people and the negative atmosphere disappeared, and the sectarian and political tension changed.”

“This decision is national par excellence. Hezbollah does not aim for predominance or oppression through dialogue, we aim at prioritizing national interests and reinforcing Lebanon in the face of challenges.”

Future Movement MP Michel Pharaon on Tuesday said the talks were necessary due to the security situation.

“There are a number of security threats along the Lebanese Syrian border, in addition to the case of the kidnapped servicemen and the situation in Aarsal, as well as the attempts of some parties to [foment] Sunni-Shiite tension,” he said in a statement.

“All this means that there has to be contact channels between Hezbollah and the Future Movement, despite all of [our] differences.”

Pharaon also said that the dialogue will not tackle the presidential impasse.

“The dialogue will surely not include topics related to cabinet [decisions] or any other details regarding the presidential elections, because the goal behind this dialogue is to form a safety net, not to provoke a certain group [Christians], which could happen if the dialogue tackled other issues.”

Meanwhile, Amal Movement MP Ali Khreiss, a deputy of Speaker Nabih Berri, said on Tuesday that dialogue between Hezbollah and the Future Movement was a very important and positive sign, despite the deep differences between the two parties, and the difficulty of reaching agreement on controversial issues.

“The dialogue will kick off to relieve sectarian and religious tension, and bring stability and accord.”