

Is the Future Movement-Hezbollah dialogue pointless?



In a handout picture released by the Lebanese photo agency Dalati and Nohra on October 27, 2008, Lebanese Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah (2-L) speaks with Lebanese parliamentary majority leader Saad Hariri (C) during their first meeting in more than two years at an undisclosed location. AFP/Dalati and Nohra

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The dialogue between the Future Movement and Hezbollah is a positive sign. The two rival parties will finally meet face to face, but it will take place without substantial regional repercussions. They do not have a set agenda, a draft settlement, or anything similar. So far, the negotiating table is the only item on the agenda.

The Future Movement and Hezbollah will sit around the dialogue table on Tuesday night in Ain al-Tineh. In the past three years, namely after the overthrow of the Saad Hariri government in 2011, the rival parties have communicated in two main ways: either through Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri, or through mutual defamation campaigns and accusations, giving the impression that they would never hold another dialogue. They met again in Prime Minister Tammam Salam's government, after the rift widened almost reaching the point of no return in the 11 months preceding its formation. Eventually, the two parties joined the government after renouncing everything they said about one another.

Just like their participation in Tammam Salam's government, the new dialogue seems to be a mere reaffirmation and reinforcement of the ongoing dispute between them. There is no agenda, no marked interest over returning to direct communication, no pressing reasons compelling them to sit together at one table as in the period prior to the 2008 Doha settlement, which was preceded by the National Dialogue held in March 2006 following the assassination of the late Prime Minister Rafik Hariri.

Thus, the two rivals are heading to an already cold dialogue. The Future Movement and Hezbollah downplayed the results and hopes pinned on the dialogue, stressing that it mainly aims to defuse Sunni-Shia tensions. However, this is not necessarily what Speaker Berri – the patron of the dialogue – expects from the resumption of communication between the two parties. Berri initially resented the leaked news about his efforts to bring the two sides together, leading to several attempts to foil the dialogue and impose preconditions. This was followed by disagreements over the agenda of the dialogue, which Berri had hoped to keep confidential to ensure consensus on its items.

There is no agenda, no marked interest over returning to direct communication, no pressing reasons compelling them to sit together at one table. So far, neither side has announced the agenda except for a statement by the Speaker saying that he included two items related to the presidential election and the electoral law in his proposed draft. Prior to that, Berri only said that divisive items will be avoided, meaning Hezbollah's participation in the Syrian war and the fate of the party's weapons. He later expressed his insistence on discussing the electoral law – although he won't be at the dialogue table – after the parliamentary committee tasked with studying the law failed to agree on a new draft law.

It is fair to say that the only expectation from the first dialogue session between the Future Movement and Hezbollah is the resumption of direct communication. Regular meetings have been held in the past two weeks between Berri's assistant, Finance Minister Ali Hassan Khalil, and Hariri's aide and cousin, Nader Hariri, who have been working on two draft agendas. Nader Hariri has also been accompanying former Prime Minister Fouad Siniora during his recent visits to Ain al-Tineh. There has been a lot of speculation about his participation in these meetings, and it was said that Nader Hariri – and not former Prime Minister Siniora – holds the secret of the absent Saad Hariri and is charged with learning about the content of the deliberations.

However, there is a different dimension to the renewed dialogue between the two sides that contradicts the aim and role of the meeting, which is to put all potential reasons for disagreement on the table.

The presidential election will not be brought up at the Ain al-Tineh dialogue for two main reasons. First, Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah said that the issue of the presidential election is to be addressed with Free Patriotic Movement leader Michel Aoun, and thus the party is not concerned with this file. Second, both sides want to avoid the impression that the Sunni and Shia sects are taking decisions on an issue which primarily concerns the Christians, in the absence of the Christian factions from both the March 8 and March 14 alliances. In addition, both sides had assured their Christian partners that they will not take unilateral decisions without mutual consensus.

Nonetheless, sources directly involved in the dialogue have made the following observations.

First, the actual agenda of the meetings between the two sides will focus on the activation of Salam's government, as the Future Movement insists, and the activation of parliament, as requested by Berri and Hezbollah. Clearly, both sides possess the power to veto and disrupt the work of both institutions – as was the case over 11 months between April 2013 and February 2014, during which the formation of Salam's government was stalled and parliament could not convene. In the same manner, they want the dialogue to provide an umbrella for them to rule and exercise their authorities during the current presidential void.

Second, an implicit dialogue is taking place beyond the declared one, in which the real issues – which exceed the aim to defuse sectarian tension and secure internal stability – are being discussed between the two sides. Following rumors in the past two weeks that the dialogue mainly involved Nader Hariri and Nasrallah's aide Hussein al-Khalil, the delegation has been expanded to include several MPs, which reduces the confidentiality of the meetings.

Third, the Future Movement's and Hezbollah's acceptance of Berri's initiative might not be as innocent and spontaneous as they have claimed. This is especially true since their response came without conditions, and thus seems to be prompted by regional gestures to resume communication and exert more effort aimed at reducing Sunni-Shia tensions on the street, which were exacerbated by the recent events in Ersal, Tripoli and Akkar.

This article is an edited translation from the Arabic Edition.