

Bekaa Salafi Leader: Wishing to Build Bridges



al-Qaeda's ideology is fundamentally at odds with tenets of Islamic sharia. (Photo: Haytham elMoussawi)

By: [Afif Diab](#) ^[1]

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Sheikh Adnan Imama speaks to *Al-Akhbar* about his opposition to sectarian strife and the extremist Salafi minority, his antipathy to “political Shiism” and Hezbollah’s position on Syria, and his gripe with Saad al-Hariri.

The founder of the Salafi current in the Bekaa Valley and one of its top theorists and leaders,

Sheikh Adnan Imama, is opposed to his followers or other Lebanese Sunnis taking up arms alongside the Syrian rebels fighting against the regime of President Bashar al-Assad.

Instead, he has been urging his “brethren” in Lebanon to support their “brethren” in Syria “in a manner that does not lead to the destabilization of Lebanon,” he tells *Al-Akhbar* in an interview.

If we encourage the Sunnis in Lebanon to take up arms to fight against the Syrian regime, that means we will be telling those who support Assad’s regime to take up arms too. “We do not want to burn Lebanon in the furnace of the Syrian revolution,” he explains. And in any case, the Syrian rebels “do not need men. They need money, and someone to provide shelter for their families and to support their cause in the media ...The harm done by the military participation of Lebanese in the Syrian revolution is far greater than the benefits.”

The sheikh knows that his religious/political judgement on this issue is contested by hardline Salafis. But he insists they constitute a small minority of the Salafi movement, and urges them “to weigh up the benefits” involved.

“If we encourage the Sunnis in Lebanon to take up arms to fight against the Syrian regime, that means we will be telling those who support Assad’s regime to take up arms too. We do not support transferring the Sunni-Shia strife from Iraq to Lebanon, nor from Syria to Lebanon,” he explains.

Imama is fiercely critical of Hezbollah’s position on Syria: “Your revolution was supposed to be the revolution of the oppressed,” he says, addressing the party. “You were supposed to be reviving the memory of Hussein, who died oppressed. Hussein represented the revolt of the oppressed against the oppressor, of right against wrong, and of blood against the sword. So why is the equation reversed in Syria? Is Bashar al-Assad oppressed?” he asks.

“We are talking about people who have been resisting with their bare chests for eight months. We warned against the arming of the Syrian revolution. We wanted it to be peaceful. But what do you expect people whose sanctities have been violated to

The sheikh does not accept the argument that Hezbollah backs the Syrian regime because it supports its resistance against Israel, rather than out of sectarian or confessional solidarity. do? You want them to respond peacefully?”

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He retorts saying “if a Sunni was committing these massacres in Syria, we would call for him to be killed, even if he was killing Alawis, Christians and Shia,” before continuing: “We are not against the Shia as Shia, but we are against political Shiism... Let Hezbollah explain this strange coincidence: Nobody supports the Syrian regime except the Shia of Iraq, Iran and Lebanon. Explain this coincidence to me. If the Syrian regime considers itself secular, why has it become sectarian in the eyes of political Shiism and Hezbollah?”

Despite his antipathy to “political Shiism,” the sheikh stresses he supports Hezbollah’s resistance against Israel. “Anyone who resists Israel is honorable, and we support anyone who resists this enemy regardless of their beliefs, even if they are Marxist,” he says. “We wish the

Lebanese would unite against this common enemy.”

But while he reiterates that “we are with Hezbollah in fighting Israel,” he expresses regret that the party “does not want us to fight Israel with it.”

Reaffirming that “our dispute is not with Hezbollah but with the Twelver doctrine of Shiism,” Imama charges that “political Shiism classifies the Salafi movement as being al-Qaeda and terrorist, and treats us in Lebanon the way al-Qaeda is treated in Iraq.” But while “there is a clash between the Salafi and Shia doctrines, this does not in any way mean that we consider them to be our enemies. If only we could build bridges of love, cooperation and contact so we can live with them in this homeland.”

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The sheikh does not spare the hardline or extremist current of the Salafi movement from his criticism, though he insists it constitutes a small minority, whereas the majority of Salafis adhere to “the centrist current which promotes Salafism correctly, does not accept extremism or fanaticism, and opposes isolating itself from society.”

The hardliners “have a membership of no more than 50 or 60 young men,” he maintains, and the impression that they have been gaining the upper hand is due to the excessive media attention they attract. “Because they committed violent acts that disrupted security, the spotlights were focused on them. The media both here and abroad highlight the phenomenon of extremism and armed groups,” he explains.

Imama deems the hardline current to be “an intruder into the Salafi movement.” The Prophet Muhammad “did not tell people ‘I call on you to kill and slaughter’,” he remarks, adding that al-Qaeda’s ideology is fundamentally at odds with tenets of Islamic sharia. “The taking up of arms must be to preserve life and achieve good, not to bring ruin, destruction and perdition to Muslims,” he says.

Asked for his verdict on the high-profile formerly London-based preacher Omar Fustuq Bakri, Imama is blunt: “Omar Fustuq Bakri does not have any followers. He is just a vocal phenomenon, who wants to say ‘I exist’.”

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He is less harsh about the Saida-based Sheikh Ahmad al-Assir. “Sheikh Ahmad’s fire has started to quell,” he observes. “We stood by Sheikh Ahmad when he spoke out for what is right,” he explains. “But regrettably he erred, and it was a big error when he cut off the road to Saida.” Imama also reveals that the Association of Muslim Scholars to which he belongs approached Assir and invited him to join them “in support of our causes,” but he refused. He describes Assir’s Tableegh Salafi group as “a closed group, which does not consider *shoura* (consultation) to be obligatory.”

In the realm of secular politics, Future Movement leader Saad al-Hariri called for Sheikh Adnan’s help to resolve a problem he encountered in the 2009 parliamentary elections when Salafis were refusing to vote from all the candidates listed on Hariri’s slate. Imama obliged with a fatwa requiring votes to be cast in favor of the entire March 14 coalition list “as it is” – on the grounds

that “it is closer to the interests of Muslims than the lists of the March 8 current, and the March 14 current does not target our religion and faith.”

This service appears not to have been appreciated by Hariri, seemingly leaving Imama aggrieved. “I visited Sheikh Saad in the past and told him ‘you represent the Sunni street today, and you must be at the level of its aspirations’,” he recounts. “Regrettably, Sheikh Saad did not live up to hopes. The Sunni street will not stand by an individual if his role retreats and he does not represent people well.”

But will Sheikh Adnan support Hariri again at the next elections? “We will support whoever serves the interests of the Sunni sect,” he says. “We have reproach for (former) prime minister Saad al-Hariri.”

This article is an edited translation from the Arabic Edition.

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