

Lebanon Between Berri and Siniora



Siniora, who speaks today for a majority of Lebanese Sunnis, who have affinities with the Sunnis of Syria, the Arabian Peninsula and parts of Africa, is seeking to seize a role using the power of others, rather than his own. (Photo: Marwan Tahtah)

By: Ibrahim al-Amin ^[1]

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These days, some people are offering Lebanon's Shia the option of merging into a reality connected to Western plans for our country. Their premise – and they include thinkers and intellectuals as well as politicians – is that developments in Syria will turn out as events in North Africa did, and that Lebanon's Shia will therefore suffer if they do not start taking steps to distance themselves from Syria and Iran.

This has been said by Samir Geagea, and also Saad al-Hariri and Walid Jumblatt, and it has been written by the intellectual of the Lebanese liberals, Hazem Saghiyeh.

Coincidentally, it was also the advice proffered by the commander of al-Qaeda in Greater Syria, Majed al-Majed, a few days ago.

The thread linking all the above is their belief that it will not be long before the Syrian and

Iranian fronts collapse, along with Iraq's new regime, and by extension Hezbollah and the dominant Shia duo in Lebanon.

They forget that they said the same thing when Rafik al-Hariri came to Lebanon just as the US was launching its regional peace process in 1992, only to find that matters turned out differently from what they expected.

Berri is harking back to earlier Lebanese political maxims, which had the wrong result when they were applied in the wrong context.

On the eve of 2000, they reverted to demanding that the resistance stop hounding occupation troops in the South, because Israel had decided to pull them out. Then in May 2000, they demanded that it lay down its arms, because liberation had been achieved. "We've had enough," they said. "OK, you beat Israel. We salute you. But please, go back home."

This group was re-energized in the aftermath of 9/11, believing that the American global war on terror would bulldoze the resistance away unless it made life easier for itself and everyone else by backing down beforehand.

They still did not give up or see reason. They went through the same routine after the invasion of Iraq, this time assuming that the political ascendancy of the Shia in Iraq would be the best lure. The authority of Najaf would eclipse that of Qom, and the Arab identity of the Iraqi Shia combined with the new Iraq would make them as US-friendly as other Arabs. Dissenters would then find themselves isolated, unless the Lebanese resistance were to accept the reality of the situation and submit or surrender to it.

Then we saw the same spectacle unfold again. In 2006, when Israel was waging a vicious war, these people were its partners, whether by inciting or providing political or other support. They did not even spare their "free Shia" supporters from playing this dirty role as revealed in *WikiLeaks* embassy cables. Before the victorious southerners had returned to their homes, they were meeting and concluding that the resistance had become a burden, and that it must be gotten rid of.

Today, this same folly is being repeated and the same song replayed, with the idea that what is happening in Syria will inevitably bring the Lebanese resistance within a step or two of death, whether by murder or suicide. So these kind people have decided to give it a chance to save itself.

This forecast warrants a comparison between two major Lebanese figures, which could in turn help explain profound changes taking place in our region – such as the quest to cease treating Israel as an enemy, except in statements, and transfer the label to others, our own compatriots, in the unprecedented heat of the supposed Sunni-Shia conflict.

The comparison is between Nabih Berri and Fouad Siniora.

Berri surpasses other post-civil war Lebanese politicians in his skill at political simulation. He is good at always finding the right spin when presenting the relationship of his group – which in this case, until further notice, is the Lebanese Shia as a whole – with the Lebanese state. In his most recent incantation he said: "We are Shia by identity, Sunnis by inclination, and ultimately Lebanese."

In simple translation, Berri was addressing the rebellious Sunnis in Mesopotamia, the frightened ones in the Arabian Peninsula, and those dreaming of changes in the wake of the turnaround in

North Africa. He was telling them: You are the owners of the land – the inclination that prevails in our world is your inclination, and if you think anyone is playing a role that is too big for them, know that they are only seeking stability for this kingdom.

Yet Berri said that in his representative capacity from a position of being at the forefront, on the local and Arab levels, of what is supposed to be Arabs' principal battle, and a Sunni concern: the confrontation of Israel. He also represents, in regional terms, a fierce battle against the US and the West who permit no independence from their domineering power. He further represents, at present, the side that is capable of achieving progress towards a just regional settlement free of hegemony or subjugation.

Berri is harking back to earlier Lebanese political maxims, which had the wrong result when they were applied in the wrong context. It is as when Charles Malek, Fouad Boutros, or Ghassan Tueini presented the credentials of political Maronitism, each obtaining the position of the consulted sect's delegate to the ruling sect. But the real problem is when Siniora harks back.

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He is currently repeating the July 2006 mistake. He has placed his bet (or rather the bet of those he represents) on the downfall of the regime in Syria. He expects that to deal a body-blow to the "axis of evil stretching from Iran to Gaza," which would encourage the Palestinians to fully withdraw from it, while Iraq plunges into a new wave of civil war that brings down the regime there, leaving Iran besieged behind its borders and the Lebanese resistance isolated.

He is in no mood to heed advice or reconsider. What he has done is defer to the discourse of the Lebanese Front, and accept the de facto leadership of Samir Geagea over the entire March 14 coalition. It's not all done with money, but with ideas, mechanisms and discourse.

Siniora, too, is repeating the past mistakes of others by agreeing to the role of spokesman for their political ideas. He has a demand which Raymond Edde died before he could see fulfilled. Siniora, along with those he represents, has reverted to the game of the champion of Lebanese neutrality by urging the "deployment of international police all around Lebanon – South, North and East." This was Edde's counter-proposal to the Left's advocacy of supporting the Palestinian revolution, and was for him also a way of restraining the Lebanese Front, who wanted a direct relationship with Israel.

Siniora now wants UNIFIL forces deployed along the length of Lebanon's eastern and northern borders with Syria. In a momentary lapse into stupidity, one might think the Future Movement's spokesman wants to prevent the smuggling of weapons and gunmen to the armed Syrian opposition. But rational people know that this demand – like the demand to expel the Syrian ambassador, and the campaign against Foreign Minister Adnan Mansour as he was about to assume the chairmanship of the council of Arab League foreign ministers – has a different objective, related to developments in Lebanon itself as well as on the Syria's borders. As with UNSCR 1701, the aim is turn the step into an additional means of putting pressure on the resistance.

Ibrahim al-Amin is editor-in-chief of Al-Akhbar.

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