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There is no religious duty in political matters

NOW talks to Shiite cleric Sayyed Hani Fahs.



The peaceful protest against the authoritarian rule of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad has increasingly become a war pitting Shiites and Sunnis against each other.

NOW talks to Lebanese Shiite cleric Sayyed Hani Fahs about the threats of a larger conflict which could engulf much of the surrounding region. Fahs, who is a member of the Supreme Shiite Council in Lebanon, and whose work is known to promote dialogue and co-existence, accuses the Syrian regime and Iran of escalating the sectarian animosity to justify their (and Hezbollah's) crackdown on the people's rebellion.

Earlier in the Syrian revolution, Fahs, among many other Shiite intellectuals, praised the Syrian revolution and called upon Shiites to dissociate themselves. Today, Fahs reaffirms his belief and calls on Iran to revisit its strategy which is threatening the very existence of Shiites in the region.

NOW: Many argue that the Arab Spring did not manage to highlight the diversity of opinions among the region's Shiites [Lebanon included] except maybe in Bahrain. Why is that so?

Fahs: Why rush the Arab Spring? The Arabs are facing centuries of overdue events. If sickness has lasted for so long, then convalescence will be long too. As for the Shiites, a movement opposing dominance has been around for more than twenty years, and it is still acting courageously against a backdrop of failure and chaos in the region. Arab countries have failed to unite and have relinquished Palestine, Lebanon, and Iraq, allowing Iranian-sponsored resistance to emerge as a means for Iran to consolidate its influence over Sunnis and Shiites alike. The [protest] movement in Bahrain is not a result of the Arab Spring; it is due to the regime's abstention from initiating reforms and due to Iran's exploitation of the country's Shiites. Shiite objection rhetoric in Lebanon – though growing unchecked – is still loud and courageous. It is solid, realistic, moderate, and confident about its ideas...

NOW: You supported the Syrian revolution from the outset. How do you evaluate it today as fighting is taking an increasingly sectarian turn?

Fahs: We have warned about the hurdles of sectarianism in Syria. The regime is seeking diligently, with Iran's assistance, to trigger and exploit a sectarian war in order to claim that tyranny is better than freedom that leads to chaos. However, forty years of tyranny and a century of failed modernism and marginalization of Islam have also led (in Syria and elsewhere) to the proliferation of

elements tainted with fanaticism, and a drive to reproduce more tyranny through chaos and rampant freedom. It is necessary to wait. In any case, people have already tasted the sweetness of bringing down the tyrant and this is enough to bring about correction.

NOW: In addition to Hezbollah, Shiite fighters from Iran and Iraq have joined the battle in Syria to defend religious shrines. Is a war of this type justified religiously?

Fahs: There is no need to underestimate the religious and social value of religious shrines to say that Iran and its affiliates are exaggerating the claims of preserving them. However, the sanctity of man comes from Allah and based on the Prophet's *hadith*. The sanctity of man – whether Christian, Buddhist, Shiite or Sunni – is dearer to Allah than the sanctity of shrines, even that of the Qaaba. So far, there has been no aggression against shrines. With regard to the profanation of the tomb of the Prophet's companion Hajer bin Oudai near Damascus, our sources from Najaf confirm that the [Syrian] regime did it to fuel sectarian tensions. What is at stake in Syria is Bashar al-Assad's authority, which the Shiites should understand is neither religious nor spiritual.

NOW: Iran and Hezbollah's intervention in Syria took a religious turn, asserting that the fall of the regime will have disastrous doctrinal repercussions on Shiites. Is it true?

Fahs: Iran is no religious state – it is a national Iranian state with Farsi culture, Islamic loyalty, and Shiite flavor. Islam and Shiism in this case are at the service of the Iranian state. The fall of the Syrian regime will impact the Iranian regime which has involved its Shiites in a deep and dangerous crisis. No Shiite, Sunni, Arab, Islamic, or international effort was available to give precedence to the interests of the Iranian people, and to ensure the peaceful transfer of power to them. As for the doctrinal repercussions, these will affect the Shiite jurists who will revert to the separation between religion and politics, between religion and the state, between the guardianship of the Jurist and the guardianship of the nation or the people.

NOW: Shiites are being told that the fall of Assad will speed up the Mahdi's return and that it is [their] “religious commission” to condemn the revolution. What do you say about that?

Fahs: More often in history, the *Mahdi* issue is blatantly exploited by the Shiites in general, and sometimes even by the Sunnis [i.e. political Islam], both of whom transform doctrinal matters into myths to justify its ambitions and illusions of dominance and

hegemony. As for religious duty in political matters, people do not receive any such commission as they have political rights they express freely.

NOW: How does the assumption, whereby modern wars are the final realization of old sectarian feuds, affect political Islam and dialogue between religions and sects?

Fahs: The future cannot be built over the confrontational past because things have changed. Europe went through 500 years of religious wars before the European Union was built by severing ties with the past. If we do not sever ties with the conflict-ridden past, be it on the nationalist, religious, or sectarian levels, we would be condemning our future. Karbala is a great memory, but it is only a memory. This source of values in terms of sacrifices cannot and should not remain confined to the meaning of sacrificing one's life. The sacrifices required by the values of Karbala are science, knowledge, development, national unity... and life.

NOW: Iran is using the war in Syria to reaffirm its influence over Shiite movements and groups in the region. What is the key danger behind that?

Fahs: Iran has old imperialistic ambitions and believes it has a chance to achieve them due to Arab and European weakness and U.S. hesitation. It seeks a position of influence in the region rather than a role to play. The former would imply its involvement with other states, whereas Iran actually wants to seize control over them. The main danger is that Iran is trying to build on the weakness, dependency, and corruption of regimes to create political, socioeconomic, cultural, and religious settlements for itself. In my opinion, this is impossible to achieve. The Arab Spring is a revolution against all kinds of tyranny, be it soft or hard, slow or pressing.

NOW: it is believed that Iran and Hezbollah's fighting in Syria endangers Shiites in the region. What should Shiite and Sunni clerics do to avoid a broader Sunni-Shiite war?

Fahs: Shiite and Sunni clerics contributing to strife and building their glory upon it must stop sowing hatred. They should relinquish religious and sectarian parties (which undermine politics and religion) and return to their mosques to bring people together rather than apart. Shiite or Sunni sheikhs should know that if they unite their communities around fanaticism, neither will be spared. Any strife between Sunnis and Shiites will expand to all Sunnis and Shiites in the region. The Shiites and Sunnis respectively harbor more contradictions inside the same sect than those pitting them against one another. So, they should stop ridiculing us – we have

not forgotten the inter-Shiite and inter-Sunni massacres and atrocities.

NOW: Post-Assir, should we expect Hezbollah to fight fiercer battles?

Fahs: I have not, and will not, comment on the Assir issue. I believe that Hezbollah is more intelligent than the Iranians and more patient than the Russians, and it knows how to involve both to its benefit. But I fear that Hezbollah's military arrogance has reached an extent as to urge it to fight a wider war in all of Syria. What will we do with its victory then, or with its defeat? By Allah, we cannot bear such a disaster.

NOW: After Rowhani's election as Iran's new president, should we expect a change of policy toward Hezbollah and Syria? And if so, why?

Fahs: Some change must happen, including the relationship with the West, Arabs, Hezbollah and Syria, as much as the economy, politics, and nuclear issues. But it would be unreasonable to expect Hezbollah's demise under Rowhani – change must be relative to the Iranian people's need for reform, which Rowhani's election represents. Furthermore, I am convinced the Iranians have no interest in the survival of Bashar al-Assad or his regime... They are fighting in Syria in order to emerge as a party to the solution and to have something to bargain with. They came to say 'We are here, talk to us, we are part of the regional solution,' and this purpose has been achieved to a certain extent.